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Till death do us apart? The impact of social recognition of relationships on fidelity

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Abstract

Although relationship satisfaction has been widely explored, there is a gap in the literature on how factors such as the legal recognition of relationships, relationship orientation and gender affect intentions to engage in infidelity. This study aimed to explore the effect of the legal recognition of relationships, relationship orientation and gender on intentions to engage in infidelity, while controlling for relationship satisfaction. Three hundred forty-seven participants were recruited. The participants were aged between 22 to 79 years ($M=41.48$, $SD=10.16$) and in a relationship between 5 and 59 years ($M=15.21$; $SD=9.41$). The countries where the participants were raised were split into three categories: no, partial and full legal recognition. The Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale Short form, The Relationship Assessment Scale, The Intentions Towards Infidelity Scale were utilised. ANCOVA indicated that legal recognition is an important factor in intentions to engage in infidelity, furthermore females in heterosexual relationships from countries with full recognition had lower intentions to engage in infidelity. This study aimed to give direction for future research by highlighting the similarity of homosexual and heterosexual relationships when legitimised and focused more on gender differences.

Keywords: intentions to Engage in Infidelity; Legal Recognition of Relationships; Relationship Orientation; Gender; Infidelity.

1 Introduction

Infidelity is a topic which attracts high interest in popular culture, and it is constantly featured in popular media [1]. The term infidelity has been defined in many different ways by suggesting that it is cheating, having an affair or being unfaithful to your partner [2]. Early studies on infidelity tended to look at it from a narrow point of view, limiting its definition to having a sexual relationship with an individual other than the primary partner in a current exclusive relationship. In today's society, the definition of infidelity has a wider scope and constitutes many different behaviours other than sexual activity with another person. Current definitions include masturbating in the presence of another person, watching pornography, going to strip clubs, flirting, erotic kissing and, petting, and any form of emotional or sexual intimacy with a person other than the primary partner [3, 4]. After decades of research, academics and general public agree that there is no single behaviour universally considered as 'cheating' and infidelity encompasses many behaviours.

There are three kinds of infidelity distinguished by researchers [2, 5]. Emotional infidelity includes an individual who develops a bond or intense feelings with a person other than the primary partner. Sexual infidelity includes an individual who becomes sexually involved with another person other than their primary partner. Finally, composite infidelity involves an individual becoming sexually involved with another person other than their significant other while also creating a deep emotional bond with them [2, 5, 6]. Although, cultural differences, traditions and societal beliefs

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influence the existence of infidelity within a society, it is assumed that marital infidelity does exist in every culture to some extent [7].

Despite infidelity being a threat to the stability of a relationship, studies indicate a fairly high prevalence of engaging in infidelity. According to a poll conducted in North America, even though 90% of the participants found infidelity immoral and 65% stated it is unforgivable, it was found that 2-4% of individuals in legal marriages commit infidelity in any given year [8]. In 2011 it was reported that more than 20% of individuals (both men and women) who are currently involved in a romantic relationship have reported that they were involved in a sexual affair with another person other than their significant other [9]. It is suggested that there is a seasonal pattern in infidelity which shows an increase in the summer, due to spouses travelling separately which makes it easier to seize the opportunity of having other sexual partners in different geographical locations [10]. Furthermore, there is a rise in rates of infidelity across all age groups, with men aged between 65-90 showing highest levels of infidelity [11]. These high rates of infidelity could have serious consequences on the relationship, considering the findings that if an individual has practiced infidelity once during their committed relationship, they are more likely to engage in it again [12].

Due to the impact of infidelity experience on the mental health and emotional functioning of individuals, many researchers have given empirical attention to understanding infidelity and its consequences on individuals [13]. Research suggests that there are individual differences in reacting to infidelity, with many indicating that the partner who was betrayed may develop rage towards the unfaithful partner, feel depressed and ashamed, worry about being abandoned, have feelings of powerlessness, and consider themselves to be a victim [14]. Some individuals might even try and seek revenge on their partners after finding that their significant other was engaging in infidelity [15, 16, 17]. In addition to the immediate effects of infidelity on both the individuals and the relationship, it is also suggested that individuals who experience infidelity from their significant others are more likely to develop longer term depression and anxiety disorders [14, 18, 19, 20]. Owing to the breached trusts amongst couples, infidelity is considered to be one of the most damaging events to any relationship regardless of sexual orientation [21]. As such, infidelity is an important factor that needs to be further explored in order to improve the wellbeing of both the relationship and the individual. However, majority of the research focuses on heterosexual relationships and comparisons between genders.

Independent of gender, majority of individuals in stable relationships, dating, married or cohabiting have expectations about being in a sexually and emotionally exclusive relationship with their partners [22]. Earlier studies suggested that men show a greater intention to engage in infidelity and report higher number of liaisons [23, 24]. Similar patterns were found during the dating period [12, 25]. However, this originally reported gender difference appears to be decreasing, with men and women under the age of 40 reporting similar rates of infidelity [21, 26]. In fact, Whistman and Snyder [21] found that, in a sample of North American couples, 20 - 40% of men and 20 - 25% of women engage in sexual and/or emotional infidelity in their lifetime. It has been proposed that, in today's society, the idea of having casual sex without any emotional involvement is also being explored by women as commonly as men [27].

Despite the reducing gap, majority of the literature suggests that men are more likely to engage in infidelity. Del Guidice, Angelei and Manera [28] argue that this is due to biological differences associated with reproduction. Baumeister, Catanese, and Vohs [29] argue that men have a much greater sex drive when compared to women, which is manifested through an increase in desired frequency for sexual intercourse, masturbation and the frequency of sexual fantasies. According to evolutionary psychology the increased sex drive is the result of male biological need to reproduce and propagate their genetics. In fact, men demonstrate discomfort when their significant others engage in sexual infidelity due to the fact that it brings paternity doubts into question [30, 31, 32]. On the other hand, evolutionary theories suggest that the female need to propagate their genes is not as strong due to their increased investment into the offspring. As a result, females tend to be less interested in sexual aspects of a relationship [33, 34] and more concerned with infidelity than males [26, 35, 36]. This notion is in line with the theory of parental investment, which states that human females invest more time in the offspring in comparison to males (a minimum investment of 9 months during pregnancy) and, therefore, are more meticulous when it comes to mating [37]. Finally, some argue that infidelity among males is due to the societal male conditioning of masculinity [38, 39], with some societies perceiving this behaviour as acceptable, as long as it does not publicly embarrass the partner [22, 40]. As such, it is reasonable to expect that men may engage in higher levels of infidelity than women.

Homosexual relationships are commonly compared to heterosexual ones when exploring infidelity. However, some argue that the concept of love experienced by homosexuals is different than of heterosexual individuals. Studies indicate that there are more homosexual couples who are involved in open relationships compared to heterosexual couples [41, 42], suggesting that they may have different perceptions regarding fidelity. Furthermore, Trussler, Perchal and Barker [43] highlighted a dilemma amongst homosexuals where they express desire for not only casual sex but also monogamy in their relationships. It is believed that homosexuals are more likely to engage in sexual encounters without emotional

commitment, suggesting that sex is approached as a recreational activity [44, 45] which could impact infidelity rates. This is further supported by research indicating that men and women in homosexual relationships are less jealous of their partners compared to their counterparts in heterosexual relationships [46]. As such, it seems that the concept of fidelity, or infidelity, is perceived differently by homosexual couples, suggesting that this factor needs further attention.

Easterling, Knox, and Brackett [47] found that homosexuals are more likely to keep secrets from their significant other during a committed relationship when compared to their heterosexual counterparts. It is an inevitable truth that homosexuals live in heterosexist communities across the world where their romantic relationships are not recognized by the larger societies to which they belong. Due to the discrimination and lack of recognition, they may tend to be more secretive about their own sexual orientation. As such, they may require more time to develop mutual trust with their significant other and may avoid complete honesty and fidelity due to already having developed a pattern of secretive behaviour [48].

In the last decade or so, the rights of homosexuals have garnered quite a lot of attention in international media. Marital equality for same-sex couples has been a widely discussed topic throughout the world [49]. Many important steps have been taken in most Western countries towards equal rights for citizens, such as protecting citizens against discrimination and social exclusion. For instance, in Canada, Spain and the United States, new bills were passed in order to give couples in same-sex marriages and civil unions the same rights and obligations as heterosexual couples when it comes to adoption, family law, income tax and pension benefits [49, 50, 51].

Denmark was one of the first nations which recognised same-sex partnerships in 1989 by granting homosexual individuals the right to legally register as partners, which provided the couples with all the same rights given to married heterosexuals [52]. Denmark has influenced other European countries to follow its example by granting similar laws to homosexual individuals to legally register as partners (Norway, Sweden and Iceland). By the year 2014, there were a total of 17 countries in the world, and 19 U.S. states which had permitted legal marriage rights to same-sex couples [53]. Since then, due to the constant evolution of marriage equality perception, more governments across the world are legally recognizing and giving equal rights to homosexual individuals [53]. A positive perception of same-sex marriages and legal rights given to same-sex couples provide both practical and social benefits for the individuals.

Literature suggests that accepting same sex marriages has numerous social benefits [50, 51, 54, 55]. Many gay and lesbian individuals/couples do not receive support and acceptance from their own families and the society they live in [56]. Legal acceptance of these marriages would challenge families and the public to be more accepting of their relationship [57, 58, 59]. For instance, members of families, who think that cohabiting without getting legally married is against the sanctity of marriage, might be more inclined to provide support and show more positive attitudes towards same-sex couples who are legally married [59]. In a survey conducted by Ramos, Goldberg, and Badgett [59] amongst a sample of 558 individuals in same-sex relationships in North America, a high majority of the participants (85%) stated that legal recognition is one of the most important reasons for getting married. Ramos et al. [59] highlighted that this may be due to the fact that higher social recognition is afforded to legally married couples. This is further supported by Zicklin [60], who argues that giving same sex couples the right to legally get married, results in increased levels of social support offered to these couples. In fact, it has been found that the level of social support same-sex couples receive from their peers, families and the society influences the levels of commitment to the relationships. As such, when the partners have higher levels of social support, the level of commitment increases [61]. This is supported by Dee [52], who argues that the legalisation of same-sex marriage in some European countries have reduced the rates of promiscuous behaviour amongst homosexuals.

Interestingly, little research has looked at the effect of sexual orientation and legal recognition of the relationship on infidelity. However, the literature has highlighted the importance of satisfaction in the relationship as an important factor which influences infidelity [61]. Individuals who report higher relationship commitment, or intentions to demonstrate commitment such as through engagement, civil partnership, and marriage are less likely to engage in infidelity [62, 63] and have intentions to engage in infidelity [63, 64]. This may be due to the fact that infidelity and relationship dissolution are positively related to each other [65]. Individuals who are in good-standing and have happy relationships with higher levels of satisfaction may avoid engaging in infidelity to not lose their current exclusive partners [66]. According to Rodrigues, Lopes and Pereira [67], when the relationship satisfaction is lower, the individuals tend to try and create new interactions and connections with people other than their primary partners due to their need to feel understood, share personal feelings and express themselves sexually, which gives them the opportunity to connect on an emotional intimacy level that they lack with their primary partner. These findings suggest that relationship satisfaction should be controlled for when exploring the effect of gender, orientation, and legal recognition of the relationship on infidelity.

Although there is some literature exploring the role of orientation, gender, and legal recognition of the relationship could play in understanding infidelity, the studies tend to focus on heterosexual couples [11, 26, 68]. As such, there is a gap in the literature when it comes to understanding infidelity across different sexual orientations. The present study aimed to explore the effect of relationship orientation (homosexual/heterosexual), legal recognition of the relationship and gender on infidelity, while controlling for relationship satisfaction. It aims to contribute to the literature by further investigating the social and legal recognition of heterosexual and homosexual relationships and the impact it may have on fidelity rates.

The present study hypothesizes that:

- Gender will have an effect on infidelity, while controlling for relationship satisfaction. Specifically, males will report higher levels of intentions to engage in infidelity.
- Orientation of the relationship will have an effect on infidelity, while controlling for relationship satisfaction. Specifically, individuals in homosexual relationships will report higher levels of intentions to engage in infidelity.
- Legal recognition of the relationship will have an effect on infidelity, while controlling for relationship satisfaction. Specifically, individuals who live in countries where the relationship is not legally recognized will report the highest levels of intentions to engage in infidelity.
 - There will be an interaction effect between gender, orientation, and legal recognition of the marriage on intentions to engage in infidelity, while controlling for relationship satisfaction. Specifically,
 - among homosexual couples, males from countries that do not legally recognise the relationship will report the highest intentions to engage in infidelity,
 - among couples that come from countries that fully recognise their relationship, homosexual males will report the highest intentions to engage in infidelity.

2 Material and methods

2.1 Design

This study was conducted as a quantitative, cross-sectional study which is non-experimental and correlational in its nature.

2.2 Participants

Participants were recruited by snowball sampling. The study was advertised on social media and sent to personal contacts. Participants were asked to forward the survey to other individuals who met the inclusion criteria. The inclusion criteria for this study were adults in a relationship for a minimum of five years, who are not in an open or long-distance relationship.

Of those who started the study, 414 met the inclusion criteria. However, 67 participants chose to withdraw from the study. The final sample consisted of 347 participants from 39 countries across Asia, Europe, Africa, South America, and North America. The sample was predominantly female (Female $N=257$; Male $N=90$), heterosexual (Heterosexual $N=280$; Homosexual $N=45$; Bisexual $N=22$) and married (Married $N=266$, Cohabiting $N=56$, Dating $N=25$). From the full sample, 298 reported being in a heterosexual relationship and 49 in a homosexual relationship. In addition, 146 participants reported being raised in countries with full legal recognition of homosexual relationships at the time of the study, and 145 participants from countries with partial recognition. The participants were aged between 22 and 79 years ($M=41.48$, $SD=10.16$) and in a relationship between 5 and 59 years ($M=15.21$; $SD=9.41$).

2.3 Data Collection

Ethical approval from the University was obtained prior to data collection. After receiving the online survey link, the participants needed to click on the secure link which directed them to the information sheet describing the study. Each participant gave their consent to participate in the present study and were advised that the collected data could be shared with the supervisor of the study. The rights of the participants were protected by stating that they could withdraw from the study at any given time without providing a specific reason. To control for order effects, the scales were randomized in the study.

2.4 Measures

2.4.1 Evaluation of the legal recognition of the relationship

During the decision of the legal recognition of the relationships, the reported country of the participants being raised in was taken into consideration. The countries where the participants were raised were split into three categories: no legal recognition, partial legal recognition, and full legal recognition. No legal recognition category included countries where same sex couples are not given any legal rights or are outlawed. Partial recognition included countries where same sex relationships may be recognised under civil partnerships but are not always given the same rights as heterosexual marriages. Finally, full legal recognition category included countries where the same rights are awarded to homosexual couples as heterosexual. Heterosexual relationships were all fit in the full legal recognition category.

2.4.2 Relationship orientation

The present study focused on the orientation of the relationship since the main focus was the legal recognition of the relationship and not the individual. As such, sexual orientation of the individuals was not taken into consideration. To evaluate the relationship orientation, the participants were asked to report their own gender and their partner's gender. Based on those answers, the participants were classified into heterosexual relationships (opposite-sex partner) and homosexual relationships (same-sex partner).

2.4.3 The Intentions Towards Infidelity Scale

Infidelity was measured by the Intentions Towards Infidelity Scale (ITIS) [69]. Although the actual infidelity was not measured, research suggests that intentions are extremely good predictors of actual behaviour [70]. ITIS is a 7-item scale which measures the likelihood of individuals to engage in infidelity in their current relationships. Each item (e.g., How likely are you to be unfaithful to future partners? How likely are you to be unfaithful to a partner if you knew you would not get caught?) is rated on a seven-point Likert type scale from Not at All Likely (-3) to Extremely Likely (+3). Mean score of each participant was computed, with higher positive scores indicating higher intention to engage in infidelity. Similar to previous research [69], the current study found a high reliability for the scale (Cronbach's $\alpha=.74$).

2.4.4 The Relationship Assessment Scale

The Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS) [71] was used to measure satisfaction with the current relationship. The participants were asked to rate from 1 (lowest) to 5 (highest) their satisfaction with the relationship on seven questions (e.g., 'How well does your partner meet your needs? In general, how satisfied are you with your relationship?'). Six participants within the data set had missing values for the relationship satisfaction items. Missing values were replaced with the mean for each item. Due to the low number of missing values, the insertion of the mean should not have significant effects on the results. Items 4 and 7 were reverse scored and the responses were computed to create a mean score ranging from 1 to 5. Higher scores indicated higher satisfaction with the relationship. The current study found a high reliability for the scale (Cronbach's $\alpha=.91$), which is comparable to previous research (Cronbach's $\alpha=.80$) [72].

2.4.5 The Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale Short Form

Self-report questionnaires are susceptible to distortion and may cause the answers provided by the participants to become invalid data. Considering the nature of the study, it was anticipated that participants may not be truthful in responding to questions regarding infidelity due to social desirability. Thus, The Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale Short Form (MCSDS) [73] was used to control for social desirability effects. It is an 11-item scale (e.g., 'There have been times when I was quite jealous of the good fortune of others, I am always courteous, even to people who are disagreeable') where the participants are asked to indicate whether the statements are true (0) or false (1). Items 1, 2, 4, 6, 9 and 10 were reverse scored and a total score was computed ranging from 0 to 11. Higher scores indicated higher levels of social desirability. The current study found low reliability for the scale (Cronbach's $\alpha=.63$) compared to previous research (Cronbach's $\alpha=.74-.76$) [73].

3 Results

Of the full sample, 49 participants have indicated being in a homosexual relationship. Of these, 21 reported being raised in countries that had full recognition of their relationships, 6 with partial recognition, and 22 with no legal recognition. The remaining 298 participants reported being in heterosexual relationships.

Overall, the sample reported high levels of relationship satisfaction ($M=3.99$, $SD=.80$; $KS(347)=.14$ $p<.001$), low intentions to engage in infidelity ($M=-1.55$, $SD=1.22$; $KS(347)=.17$, $p<.001$), and moderate social desirability levels

($M=5.84$, $SD=2.43$; $KS(347)=.09$, $p<.001$). Furthermore, explorative analysis indicated that heterosexuals and married participants reported highest intentions to engage in infidelity. The Kruskal-Wallis analysis was performed since both normality (Married $KS(266)=.18$, $p<.001$; Cohabiting $KS(46)=.20$, $p<.001$; Dating $KS(25)=.18$, $p=.033$) and homogeneity of variance ($F(2, 344)=12.93$, $p<.001$) were violated. The Kruskal-Wallis analysis indicated that there were significant differences in intentions to engage in infidelity between the reported sexual orientations ($U(2)=36.70$, $p<.001$), with heterosexual participants ($M=-1.75$, $SD=.06$) reporting the highest intentions to engaging in infidelity, followed by homosexual ($M=-.49$, $SD=.23$), and then bisexual ($M=-1.09$, $SD=.23$). The Kruskal-Wallis analysis was performed since both normality (Heterosexual $KS(280)=.19$, $p<.001$; Homosexual $KS(45)=.16$, $p=.004$; Bisexual $KS(22)=.12$, $p=.200$) and homogeneity of variance ($F(2, 344)=11.38$, $p<.001$) were violated. A second Kruskal-Wallis analysis indicated that there were significant differences in intentions to engage in infidelity across relationship status ($U(2)=17.38$, $p<.001$). Married participants ($M=-1.72$, $SD=.07$) reported the highest intent to engage in infidelity, followed by those dating ($M=-1.26$, $SD=.27$), and then cohabiting ($M=-.84$, $SD=.20$). Finally, there was a significant negative correlation between intentions to engage in infidelity and length of the relationship ($r=-.14$, $p=.012$), but not with age ($r=-.02$, $p=.743$). Although explorative analysis indicated that length of the relationship and sexual orientation had an effect on intentions to engage in infidelity, these variables were not added to the hypothesis testing to ensure that Power was not diminished.

To ensure that social desirability and satisfaction with the relationship should be retained as covariates within the hypotheses, a Pearson correlation analysis was performed. The analysis indicated that both social desirability ($r=.19$, $p<.001$) and relationship satisfaction ($r=-.45$, $p<.001$) had a significant relationship with intentions to engage in infidelity.

An ANCOVA was performed to test the first hypothesis. Gender was entered as independent variable and intent to engage in infidelity as the dependent variable. Finally, social desirability, and relationship satisfaction were entered as the covariates. The assumptions of normality (Males: $KS(90)=.15$, $p<.001$; Females $KS(257)=.20$, $p<.001$) and homogeneity of variance ($F(1, 345)=31.49$, $p<.001$) were violated. In addition, homogeneity of regression slopes assumption was met for relationship satisfaction ($F(2, 341)=.46$, $p=.635$), but violated for social desirability ($F(2, 341)=14.11$, $p<.001$). Although the assumptions were not met, ANCOVA is a robust test and should cope with these violations. The analysis indicated that both relationship satisfaction ($F(1, 343)=86.00$, $p<.001$, *Partial Eta Squared*=.20) and social desirability ($F(1, 343)=4.29$, $p=.039$, *Partial Eta Squared*=.01) were significant covariates. Furthermore, the ANCOVA indicated that males ($M=-.69$, $SD=1.44$) were significantly more likely to intend engaging in infidelity than females ($M=-1.84$, $SD=.97$; $F(1, 343)=71.31$, $p<.001$, *Partial Eta Squared*=.17).

An additional ANCOVA was performed to explore the second hypothesis. Orientation of the relationship was entered as the independent variable and intent to engage in infidelity as the dependent variable. Finally, social desirability, and relationship satisfaction were entered as the covariates. Again, both assumptions of normality (Homosexual: $KS(49)=.16$, $p=.002$; Heterosexual $KS(298)=.18$, $p<.001$) and homogeneity of variance ($F(1, 345)=5.86$, $p=.016$) were violated. Furthermore, homogeneity of regression slopes assumption was met for relationship satisfaction ($F(2, 341)=.50$, $p=.607$), but violated for social desirability ($F(2, 341)=15.41$, $p<.001$). However, ANCOVA should be able to cope with these violations. The analysis indicated that both relationship satisfaction ($F(1, 343)=69.57$, $p<.001$, *Partial Eta Squared*=.17) and social desirability ($F(1, 343)=9.39$, $p=.002$, *Partial Eta Squared*=.03) were significant covariates. Furthermore, the ANCOVA indicated that those in heterosexual relationships ($M=-1.70$, $SD=1.10$) were significantly less likely to intend engaging in infidelity than those in homosexual relationships ($M=-.60$, $SD=1.48$; $F(1, 343)=30.27$, $p<.001$, *Partial Eta Squared*=.08).

Another ANCOVA was performed to evaluate the third hypothesis. Legal recognition of the relationship was entered as the dependent variable and intent to engage in infidelity as the independent variable. Finally, social desirability, and relationship satisfaction were entered as the covariates. The assumption of homogeneity was violated ($F(2, 344)=3.50$, $p=.031$) and the assumption of normality was violated only for full recognition condition (Full recognition: $KS(319)=.18$, $p<.001$; Partial recognition $KS(6)=.22$, $p=.200$; No recognition $KS(22)=.13$, $p=.200$). In addition, homogeneity of regression slopes assumption was violated for both relationship satisfaction ($F(3, 340)=21.53$, $p<.001$) and social desirability ($F(3, 340)=8.11$, $p<.001$). Again, the analysis indicated that both relationship satisfaction ($F(1, 342)=65.50$, $p<.001$, *Partial Eta Squared*=.16) and social desirability ($F(1, 342)=7.59$, $p=.006$, *Partial Eta Squared*=.02) were significant covariates. Furthermore, the ANCOVA indicated that there was a significant difference between the legal recognition of the relationship on intent to engage in infidelity ($F(1, 342)=13.88$, $p<.001$, *Partial Eta Squared*=.08). The LSD post hoc analysis indicated that those from countries with full recognition of their relationship ($M=-1.66$, $SD=1.12$) were significantly less likely to intend engaging infidelity than those with no recognition ($M=-.03$, $SD=1.58$; $SE=.24$; $p<.001$). No other significant differences were identified by the LSD post hoc (Partial Recognition: $M=-1.02$, $SD=1.58$).

To evaluate the fourth hypothesis, two separate ANCOVAs were performed. To evaluate hypothesis 4(a), the first ANCOVA was performed only on those in homosexual relationships ($N=49$). Gender and legal recognition of the relationship were entered as independent variables, while intent to engage in infidelity as the independent variable. Finally, social desirability, and relationship satisfaction were entered as the covariates. The number of participants across the conditions was insufficient to evaluate the interaction effect due to very low number of females reporting being in homosexual relationships (Full recognition=7; Partial recognition=0; No recognition=2). The assumption of homogeneity of variance was met ($F(4, 44)=.73, p=.578$) and the assumption of normality was met for legal recognition of the relationship (Full recognition: $KS(21)=.19, p=.050$; Partial recognition $KS(6)=.219, p=.200$; No recognition $KS(22)=.13, p=.200$) and partially met for gender (Males $KS(40)=.18, p=.002$; Female $KS(9)=.20, p=.200$). Finally, homogeneity of regression slopes assumption was met for both legal recognition (relationship satisfaction $F(2, 40)=.17, p=.847$; social desirability $F(2, 40)=.78, p=.465$) and gender (relationship satisfaction $F(1, 40)=3.57, p=.066$; social desirability $F(1, 40)=3.52, p=.068$). The analysis indicated that both relationship satisfaction ($F(1, 42)=8.600, p=.005, Partial Eta Squared=.17$) and social desirability ($F(1, 42)=12.69, p=.001, Partial Eta Squared=.23$) were significant covariates. However, the analysis indicated that there were no main effects of gender ($F(1, 42)=.64, p=.430, Partial Eta Squared=.02$) and legal recognition ($F(2, 42)=.84, p=.441, Partial Eta Squared=.04$).

To evaluate the hypothesis 4(b), a second ANCOVA was performed only on those that were raised in countries with full legal recognition of their relationships ($N=319$). Gender and orientation of the relationships were entered as independent variables, while intent to engage in infidelity as the independent variable. Finally, social desirability, and relationship satisfaction were entered as the covariates. The assumption of homogeneity of variance was violated ($F(3, 315)=7.03, p<.001$), as was the assumption of normality across most conditions (Gender: Male $KS(64)=.16, p<.001$; Female $KS(255)=.20, p<.001$; Orientation of relationships: Homosexual $KS(21)=.19, p=.050$; Heterosexual $KS(298)=.18, p<.001$) and their interactions (Male: Homosexual $KS(14)=.29, p=.002$; Heterosexual $KS(50)=.13, p=.051$; Female: Homosexual $KS(7)=.18, p=.200$; Heterosexual $KS(248)=.20, p<.001$). Finally, homogeneity of regression slopes assumption was met for both gender (relationship satisfaction $F(1, 312)=2.36, p=.125$; social desirability $F(1, 312)=1.92, p=.167$) and relationship orientation (relationship satisfaction $F(1, 312)=.62, p=.431$; social desirability $F(1, 312)=1.31, p=.254$). Although the analysis indicated that relationship satisfaction was a significant covariate ($F(1, 313)=74.95, p<.001, Partial Eta Squared=.19$), social desirability was not ($F(1, 313)=.99, p=.320, Partial Eta Squared=.00$). Furthermore, the analysis indicated that gender had a significant main effect ($F(1, 313)=6.38, p=.012, Partial Eta Squared=.02$), with males reporting significantly higher intentions to engage in infidelity ($M=-.90, SD=1.33$) than females ($M=-1.85, SD=.97$). However, there was no main effect of relationship orientation ($F(1, 313)=.84, p=.359, Partial Eta Squared=.00$) or interaction effect ($F(1, 313)=3.65, p=.057, Partial Eta Squared=.01$).

4 Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to better understand the impact of legal recognition of relationships on infidelity. It was hypothesized that gender, orientation of the relationship and legal recognition of the relationship will have a significant effect on intentions to engage in infidelity, independent of relationship satisfaction. A total of 347 participants from 39 countries have completed an online questionnaire evaluating their intentions to engage in infidelity and relationship satisfaction. Of the sample, 49 reported being in homosexual relationship, with 21 participants reporting being raised in countries with full recognition of their relationships and 22 with no legal recognition. Finally, given the nature of the study, social desirability was controlled for.

Although previous research suggests that infidelity is on the rise [74, 75], the current sample reported low intention to engage in infidelity and are highly satisfied in their relationship. However, the moderate level of social desirability reported by the participants may have impacted the honesty of the answers.

Consistent with the first hypothesis, analysis suggested that gender has a significant main effect on the intentions to engage in infidelity. Specifically, it was found that males have significantly higher intentions to engage in infidelity than females, independent of relationship satisfaction and social desirability levels. This is in line with previous literature indicating that gender is one of the most consistent factors in understanding extramarital behaviour and infidelity [26, 27, 76] and supports the evolutionary theories arguing that males have a higher drive to engage in extramarital relationships [31]. Although recent studies report a decrease in the gender differences when it comes to rates of marital infidelity [21, 26], the current study suggests that the gender difference is nonetheless significant when looking at intentions to engage in infidelity.

Consistent with the second hypothesis, those in heterosexual relationships reported significantly lower intentions to engage in infidelity than those in homosexual relationships. This finding is in line with the literature suggesting that those in homosexual and heterosexual relationships are different in their perception of fidelity. Symons [77] confirmed

that all men, regardless of their sexual orientation, desire variety when it comes to their sexual partners. However, he argues that homosexual men can find partners to engage in casual sex more easily than heterosexual men. This argument is further reinforced by the finding that individuals in homosexual relationship are also more likely to choose to be in open relationships [41, 42, 78] and perceive sex as a recreational activity [44, 45]. The difference may also be driven by the lack of fear of unwanted pregnancies that may pose a threat to paternity and maternity in heterosexual relationships [46]. It has been argued that the difference in the perception of fidelity and sex by homosexual couples could be the result of the secretive nature of these relationships, caused by the lack of social acceptance of the homosexual relationships [47]. Although the results support this argument, it should be further explored through qualitative research.

Although some may argue that this difference between homosexual and heterosexual couples' intentions to engage in infidelity is due to the biological differences associated with sexual orientation [80, 81, 82], this study found the contrary. Studies supporting biopsychological basis have focused only on jealousy rather than infidelity [80] or focused on only males [81, 82]. The current study of a diverse sample of both genders found that when looking at sexual orientation alone, homosexual individuals had significantly lower intentions to engage in infidelity. These findings are consistent with previous research highlighted the lack of psychobiological differences between the genders, suggesting that the differences may be due to the perception within the relationship. Bell and Weinberg [83] found that both heterosexual and homosexual individuals value having permanent affectionate partners. Peplau and Cochran [84] conducted a study in which they asked both homosexual and heterosexual individuals to state the importance of various aspects of romantic relationships. The results highlighted only a few differences, most significant of which was the finding that homosexual individuals of both genders did not give as much importance to sexual exclusivity when compared to their heterosexual counterparts [84]. In line with current findings, this reinforces the notion that the main effect of relationship orientation on intentions to engage in infidelity is not the result of psychobiological differences due to sexual orientation [85]. However, the current study was unable to evaluate the interaction effect of sexual orientation and relationship orientation due to insufficient sample size. As such, future research should explore this further to confirm the rationale behind these findings.

Consistent with the third hypothesis, the performed analysis suggests that there was a significant difference between the legal recognition of the relationship on intent to engage in infidelity. Specifically, individuals from countries with full recognition of their relationship were significantly less likely to intend engaging in infidelity than those with no recognition. Legal recognition of a relationship legitimises the union and facilitates social support should problems in the relationship arise [50, 51, 54, 57, 58, 59]. However, further empirical research, both quantitative and qualitative, is required to explore the consistency and nature of these findings.

To evaluate the fourth hypothesis exploring the interaction of gender, orientation and legal recognition, two models were evaluated. One model focused on homosexual relationships and explored the interaction of gender and legal recognition (hypothesis 4a), while the second model focused on those who come from countries with full legal recognition and evaluated the interaction of gender and relationship orientation (hypothesis 4b). Analysis indicated no interaction effect on intentions to engage in infidelity in both models. Furthermore, when focusing only on homosexual relationships, the main effect of gender and legal recognition was reduced to non-significance. This could be due to the small sample size, particularly of individuals in homosexual relationships from countries that have partial or no recognition of the relationship. However, when focusing only on countries that have full legal recognition, the analysis indicated that there was a main effect of gender, but not relationship orientation. This suggests that when the relationship is legally recognised, gender has a unique effect on intentions to engage in infidelity, independent of relationship orientation and relationship satisfaction. This is an important finding supporting the importance of legal recognition of homosexual marriages in improving and maintaining relationships. However, as previously outlined, further research is required in order to confirm this effect.

The current study offered a new direction of research into infidelity and relationship health. However, it contained a number of limitations that need to be addressed in further research. First, the current study focused on intentions to engage in infidelity rather than actual infidelity. Although it has been argued that intent is a good predictor of future behaviour [70], there has been some critique into the strength of this prediction [86]. As such, future studies should explore actual infidelity in addition to intentions.

Furthermore, as outlined above, the sample of the study was not as diverse and large, compromising generalisability and power of the findings. The sample was predominantly female from heterosexual relationships. Given the sensitive nature of the topic not many male individuals in homosexual relationships may want to come forward, despite the study

being anonymous. This is especially so in countries where homosexual relationships are illegal. This highlights the importance of this topic and the need for further research into these types of relationships across the world.

Relating to the sensitivity of the topic, more reliable and extensive measures of social desirability could be employed in future studies. The current study employed the MCSDS, and although it is a commonly used brief survey of social desirability, it is also easy to fool. Due to the sensitivity of the topic in the present study (infidelity, sexual orientation), participants might have provided answers which may not necessarily represent their actual behaviour, attitude, and beliefs. Although it is difficult to overcome this problem, future studies could utilise more robust measures of social desirability or focus on more qualitative and individual approaches, where rapport and trust could be built for more honest communication.

Finally, future studies may also want to explore the effect of culture and religion on infidelity as both of them might have a significant effect on infidelity [87, 88], the present study looked at legal recognition of the relationships across the world and did not account for religious or cultural differences across the countries. Culture is an important factor when it comes to understanding motives and intentions to engage in infidelity, thus the effects of culture and cultural differences across the countries included in the present study should also be taken into consideration, to better understand culture's effect on the social recognition and the legalization of marriage [89, 90]. Furthermore, future research can include the effects and influence of religion with regard to attitudes towards same-sex relationships and infidelity.

Despite the aforementioned limitations the current study offers original avenues for further research on infidelity. Even though there is a great amount of research in the literature on infidelity across different samples and the effect of different factors on infidelity, such as age and gender [76, 92, 93, 94, 95], there is a gap in the literature when it comes to understanding whether the legal recognition of the union has an impact on intentions to engage in infidelity. There is also a gap in the literature when it comes to understanding the interaction of legal recognition, relationship orientation and gender, and its impact on intentions to engage in infidelity. The present study aimed to bridge this gap and serve as a basis for further research in order to better understand infidelity. The current findings suggest that legal recognition is an important factor in intentions to engage in infidelity. Specifically, it was found that, independent of relationship satisfaction and social desirability, females, those in heterosexual relationships and those from countries with full recognition of their union, had lower intentions to engage in infidelity. However, the main effect of relationship orientation was reduced to non-significance when looking only at countries that fully recognise their union.

5 Conclusion

The present study aimed to better understand the impact of legal recognition of relationships on infidelity. In summary, the findings indicated that legal recognition is an important factor in intentions to engage in infidelity. Furthermore, females in heterosexual relationships from countries with full recognition had lower intentions to engage in infidelity. With homosexual relationships becoming more common and more countries legitimising these relationships, further empirical research is needed into this area. The current study aims to attract more attention to the importance of these relations and prevention of their breakdown due to infidelity. This study aimed to give direction for future research and to practitioners, highlighting the similarity of homosexual and heterosexual relationships when they are legitimised, and with a particular focus on gender differences.

Compliance with ethical standards

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Disclosure of conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interests.

Statement of ethical approval

Ethical approval was obtained from the Psychology Research Ethics Committee at University.

Statement of informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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