

**TWO SIDES TO EVERY STORY:
INVESTIGATING CHANGES IN CULTURAL ATTITUDES USING DISCOURSE
ANALYSIS IN COMPUTER-MEDIATED INFIDELITY DISCUSSIONS**

A Thesis Presented for the
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Michaela J. DiPillo
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“Some people can’t believe in themselves until someone else believes in them first.”—*Good Will Hunting*

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“‘Ohana’ means family. Family means no one gets left behind or forgotten.”—*Lilo & Stitch*

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“I love you 3000.”—*Avengers: Endgame*

PREFACE

An affair: It can rob a couple of their relationship, their happiness, their very identity. And yet this extremely common human experience is so poorly understood. Adultery has existed since marriage was invented, and so too the prohibition against it. So what are we to make of this time-honored taboo—universally forbidden yet universally practiced?

— Esther Perel, *The State of Affairs: Rethinking Infidelity* (p. 12, 2017)

ABSTRACT

Despite overt cultural consensus on the reprehensible nature of infidelity, prevalence rates of infidelity behavior remain elevated—highlighting a substantial discrepancy between widely-accepted infidelity practices and actual behavior. To understand this incongruence and elucidate the cultural meaning of infidelity, communication surrounding infidelity warrants extensive scrutiny. The study employs methods of discourse analysis to investigate three Reddit threads from 2017, 2019, and 2021, that address infidelity. I make a case that recent changes in the discourse surrounding infidelity reflect changes in broader societal attitudes and accepted practices concerning infidelity. Using empirical methods of discourse analysis, I conducted three analytical procedures to describe the computer-mediated communication surrounding infidelity on Reddit. These descriptions focus on the structural descriptive statistics and modified speech act analysis of the user discourse. Findings indicate that the changes in the user discourse structure over the past five years signify cultural advancements toward more supportive perspectives of infidelity. The analyses evidence stronger convictions surrounding infidelity, yet they also reveal increased uncertainty regarding the criteria for infidelity. Overall, the Reddit discourse signals a potential cultural shift toward higher rates of self-disclosure and prosocial support for those who have participated in or been affected by acts of infidelity.

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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

The current American culture recognizes numerous taboo subjects that garner stigma and shame from both affiliated and unaffiliated cultural members, including and especially infidelity in relationships (Weiser & Weigel, 2017). In fact, previous research indicates that the vast majority of Americans view infidelity as “immoral and unethical” (Munsch, 2012; Boekhout et al., 2003). Yet, despite its taboo nature, infidelity has “existed since marriage was invented... universally forbidden yet universally practiced” (p. 12, Perel, 2017). Prevalence rates of infidelity in the United States, however, remain surprisingly elevated despite the overt societal disdain toward this behavior. Infidelity is the most frequently cited reason for which couples divorce, and 30% of all couples who arrive for therapy do so because of an affair (Marín et al., 2014). It is currently estimated that approximately 20-25% of all married couples will experience an extramarital affair at some point during their marriage, which studies note are conservative estimates (Fincham & May, 2017). These estimates are particularly high among dating couples, with approximately 70-75% engaging in infidelity during their relationships (Weiser & Weigel, 2015). Furthermore, when emotional infidelity, such as participation in online sex chatrooms or dating websites, is included in these estimates, the figures rise further (Fox et al., 2014).

Research frequently cites factors such as social structure, societal norms, and cultural values as significantly associated with infidelity prevalence rates (Haseli et al., 2019). The overwhelmingly negative view of infidelity would suggest, then, far lower prevalence rates than those being consistently reported. Previous research suggests that other discrete features of culture greatly influence accepted social practices and norms, which then explain elevated engagement in infidelity in the absence of overt societal support for these behaviors (Munsch, 2012). While there is widespread overt condemnation among Americans, prevalence rates of infidelity indicate a clear disconnect within our culture between the cultural-level beliefs and observable behavior. Clearly, this prominent antagonistic rhetoric is not indicative of actual infidelity rates—rather, it is indicative of broader societal attitudes. As estimates indicate pervasive—and increasing—engagement in infidelity despite the culturally touted taboo nature of the behavior in relationships, this raises macro areas of scrutiny: how are norms surrounding

infidelity communicated? More specifically, what do recent changes in the infidelity discourse suggest about changes in broader societal attitudes and accepted practices concerning infidelity? To better understand the changes over time in social attitudes towards infidelity, I applied three discourse analysis procedures.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Infidelity: Definition and Views

Expectations in a relationship that comprise exclusivity are often not agreed upon and have been shown in various studies to be inconsistent (Weis & Felton, 1987; Weis & Slosnerick, 1981). Violations of relational exclusivity are known by many names, including extradyadic activities, non-consensual non-monogamy, cheating, affairs, and, as they will henceforth be identified in this study, infidelity (Selterman et al., 2020). If asked what constitutes infidelity, a common theme in a given answer identifies a violation of the expectation of sexual exclusivity in a relationship (Thompson, 1984), though previous reviews indicate that sexual exclusivity varies by culture and context—thus, sexual exclusivity cannot be used as a standalone definition of infidelity (Carpenter, 2012). A broad recurrent theme would also include the violation of the stated or implied expectation of a monogamous relationship and intimate exclusivity, even if the auxiliary relationship is nonsexual in nature (Sheppard et al., 1995; Treas & Giesen, 2000; Weeks & Fife, 2014). Makinen and Ediger (2011) submit that definitions of infidelity vary by couple, situation, and often by each partner's individual views and attitudes. Further, infidelity can depend on notions of averted intimacy, extent of secrecy, and level of emotional involvement (Fife et al., 2008, Weeks et al., 2014).

Despite the lack of consensus among clinicians and researchers on an exact operationalization of infidelity, current language and terminology used in descriptions of infidelity highlight the negative culturally pervasive attitudes towards acts of infidelity in relationships. For example, the partner involved in the infidelity is typically regarded as the “perpetrator” and expected to bear the blame and beg forgiveness, while the uninvolved partner is considered the “victim” and extended support from others (Blunkosky-Shaikh, 2019). Infidelity itself is often described as an act of unfaithfulness and a betrayal of the relationship, language meant to induce shame for the involved partner and social judgment of their actions (Makinen & Ediger, 2011). Given that the language available for descriptions of infidelity focuses heavily on the negative cultural attitudes and taboo nature, analyzing naturally occurring discourse on infidelity provides

an opportunity to study how individuals use this language in their narratives and interactions with others.

Discourse Analysis as a Method of Research for Infidelity

Discourse analysis is the study of language *in use*. Language use within the cultural context reveals the prevailing codes and conventions that give meaning and identity to subjects, objects, and worlds (Hansen, 2006)—Specifically, “Language does not explain the world as much as it produces it” (p. 2, Dunn & Neumann, 2016). Discourse, defined as a set of meanings that depict an individual interpretation of events (Burr, 1995; Foucault, 1972), strives to ascertain how language produces meaning. Accordingly, rather than examining an explicit message put forward in a conversation, a methodological analysis of the entire context of a statement, turn, or utterance offers insight into conventions of that language as it is used.

The nature of discourse reflects shifts in the predominant cultural attitudes at any point in time. Indeed, Foucault asserts that advancements in language use throughout time are, essentially, a given as discourse is bound by time; yet, the changes cannot be simply reduced to advancements in the knowledge on a particular subject or the available language to describe the subject (Foucault, 1972). Discourse epitomizes, “a set of rules for arranging statements in series, an obligator set of schemata of dependence, of order, and of successions, in which the recurrent elements that may have value as concepts were distributed” at the time of the discourse (p. 63, Foucault, 1972). As such, reporting discourse measures on a particular subject can accurately capture rich insights into the broader cultural values, providing additional opportunities to analyze the cultural attitudes as well as the temporal changes in these attitudes.

Although researchers have extensively explored relations between infidelity and individual- and couple-level outcome variables, as well as personality correlates and predictive precursors of infidelity, less research has been devoted to truly understanding how and when individuals use infidelity talk in their discourse (e.g., Selterman et al., 2020). Extant research indicates individuals process significant amounts of cultural

information as well as life events through the use of language (Wilkinson & Dunlop, 2021). Dunn and Neumann (2016) assert that discourse allows individuals to “know” the world as it has been presented through language, as “language conveys meaning through the deployment of signs” (p. 3) and organizational structure within its context. This highlights a distinct benefit of analyzing discourse on infidelity which allows for in-depth interpretation of subjective experiences and how individuals process cultural information to make meaning of their experiences with infidelity (Dunlop et al., 2018).

Historically, methods of discourse analysis have been employed on prompted responses procured in open-ended surveys or structured, researcher-led interviews in an attempt to investigate cultural or psychological influences behind or the predictive utility of individual responses. For example, Wilkinson and Dunlop (2021) conducted narrative identity analyses on participant narratives of either their infidelity acts or infidelity acts of their partner to explore correlates between themes emerging from the narratives and outcomes such as forgiveness and empathy. These analyses identified a positive relationship between redemptive narratives told by the uninvolved partner and demonstrations of forgiveness, but a negative relationship between the redemptive narratives and demonstrations of empathy. On the other hand, this relationship between redemptive narratives and demonstrations of forgiveness is inverted for the involved partner. Other studies have investigated language use and organization perpetuated by couples attending couple therapy as a result of an infidelity event, which sought to identify themes supporting positive relational outcomes (Bhowmik, 2020). Unsurprisingly, results indicated that couples focusing primarily on the impact of the infidelity demonstrated higher frequencies of negative relational outcomes, with the uninvolved partner maintaining anger and mistrust in the relationship and the involved partner maintaining justifications for their actions. Results also found that couples who adopted more positivity in their discourse while dedicating their efforts to moving beyond the affair and rebuilding their relationship demonstrated more collaborative methods of healing (see Discussion in Bhowmik, 2020).

Studies concentrating on discourse obtained through contrived settings inherently limit and inform the structure of participant discourse. These traditional methods not only

lack the breadth and depth of spontaneous discourse in natural settings but also expect analysts to accept participant responses at face value, notwithstanding the prospect of obtaining inaccurate representations (Korobov, 2016). Recent approaches to discourse analyses examine how couples navigate the diverse demands of their relationships through the rhetorical and argumentative organization of their spontaneous, quotidian conversation (Korobov 2016, 2018). In these studies, analyses found evidence for the implementation of infidelity talk and, specifically, insinuations of infidelity as a means of seeking greater affiliation with one's partner, managing intimacy within the relationship, and addressing potential relational conflict (p. 21). Despite the universally acknowledged contentious nature of infidelity accusations in relational contexts, closer examination of natural discourse between couples uncovered a striking counterintuitive prosocial goal fixed in the use of infidelity talk.

While studies conducted on spontaneous discourse among couples provide pragmatic insights into the functions of infidelity in discourse within couples, analysis of verbal Face-to-Face (FtF) interaction emphasizes social norm constraints on the content and presentation of discourse—especially among individuals who are known to each other (Grice, 1975). To comply with expectations of social politeness, the guiding Maxims of Conversation impose various limitations on the magnitude of personal information put forward in a conversation, verbosity of individual contributions, and scope of the content presented (Baker & Ellece, 2011; Grice, 1975). Furthermore, spontaneous couple discourse offers a view into the micro-level functionality of infidelity talk in relationships and relational outcomes, yet this method still falls short of capturing how infidelity discourse broadly functions or represents preeminent cultural influences among unaffiliated members of a shared culture. To address these limitations, I turn to an easily accessible medium permeating our current culture and becoming a progressively popular target of scientific analysis: social media.

The Availability of Social Media Networks and Computer-Mediated Communication

In an increasingly technology-rich world, the saturation of social media networking and digital communication has profoundly affected not only the prominent medium of communication but also how individuals connect and communicate with others (Margerison, 2013). Social media platforms provide a community for users to connect with others without the constraints of geographical distance, the capacity to maintain existing relationships or form new ones without the effort ordinarily required, and a source of up-to-date and comprehensive news, among other attractive capabilities. These advancements in technology have led to greater accessibility for social media networks, and it is no surprise that engagement in social media sites and computer-mediated forums has also risen in the past few decades (Fox et al., 2014; Margerison, 2013). Currently, social media networks are not costly (i.e., often free to use at a basic level), and individuals of all ages and backgrounds have incorporated social media use into their everyday lives (Fox et al., 2014). In fact, many Americans have created one or more social media accounts on the various available platforms and actively engage in these platforms an average of 6 days per week (Fox et al., 2014; Hertlein, 2012). The constantly shifting dynamics of and advancements in these social media platforms, though adding additional benefits for connectivity and engagement both locally and internationally, present challenges for users as the guidelines for appropriate participation are ever-changing (Fox et al., 2014; Margerison, 2013). As such, the accessible capabilities for users to actively engage in computer-mediated communication (CMC)—defined as “predominantly text-based human-human interaction mediated by networked computers or mobile telephony” (Herring, 2004)—and the implications these capabilities have on the structure and content of widely-available discourse have been a recent source of scrutiny for researchers (Andalibi & Forte, 2018; Andalibi et al., 2018; Gray & Howard, 2014).

Extant research on CMC in these social media spaces has identified several characteristics that delineate CMC from written discourse and quotidian FtF interaction,

specifically regarding violations of the social Maxims of Conversation—most notably on the extent of personal information put forward for large audiences and lack of brevity in individual contributions to the conversation (Baker & Ellece, 2011; Grice, 1975; Herring, 2004, 2007). Studies indicate many social media users, often motivated by the potential of receiving social support, engage in discussions about sensitive topics online in which they would not otherwise engage as well as offer more extensive personal disclosures on social media networks than they might in FtF contexts (Andalibi & Forte, 2018; Andalibi et al., 2018). Previous research exploring this violation of the typical social norms guiding discourse suggests that features of CMC, such as a lack of non-verbal cues and the ability to interact without revealing the user’s true identity, reduce the anxiety that some may experience around disclosing stigmatized personal information in FtF settings and facilitate sensitive disclosures (Andalibi et al., 2018; Andalibi & Forte, 2018). When processing particularly difficult emotional events in the past, traditional Western values have emphasized autonomy, the elimination of social dependence, and the suppression of emotion to achieve emotional regulation (Dunahoo et al., 1998). In recent years, researchers have declared this notion “untenable” and advanced the importance of interpersonal processes in emotion regulation, coping, and understanding (p. 60, Rimé, 2009), a shift that aligns more harmoniously with the need to socially share stigmatized experiences and challenges with others found in our culture (Andalibi, 2019). Evidence of this cultural shift emphasizing interpersonal connection emerges in recent studies on motivations driving sensitive disclosures on social media. These studies found that disclosing stigmatized experiences—specifically, pregnancy loss, sexual abuse, and mental illness—facilitated social support exchanges, reciprocal disclosures, and connections among those with similar experiences (Andalibi, 2019; Andalibi et al., 2018; Andalibi & Forte, 2018). Because the disclosures of these experiences were made on public social media pages and threads, they also increased visibility and awareness of the issues and acted to reduce the stigma around the experiences (Andalibi, 2019; Andalibi et al., 2018; Andalibi & Forte, 2018).

The social phenomena behind disinhibition and disregard of norms guiding interaction in the CMC space are also captured and described by the Social Identity-

Deindividuation (SIDE) Theory (Postmes et al., 1998; Spears & Lea, 1992). The SIDE Theory posits the distinct lack of nonverbal cues which are abundant in FtF conversational settings and, as often is the case with CMC, prior personal knowledge about other users present in the discussion leads to a breakdown of barriers that prevent certain discourses from transpiring—cutting across traditional social boundaries, increasing freedom of communication, and promoting equality among users in the sociotechnical setting (Herring, 1993; Postmes et al., 1998). The awareness of immediate social judgment reactions that may be a result of stigmatized sensitive disclosures in FtF settings alone has the power to suppress an individual's desire to engage in disclosure (Postmes et al., 1998; Fox et al., 2014). However, studies have found that CMC on social media networks eliminates the indications of immediate negative reactions and group nonverbal cues, reduces fear of humiliation in providing disclosures, and also allows users to choose their audience so they can still engage in higher frequencies of sensitive disclosures on topics that defy conventional social norms while avoiding their intimate network of acquaintances (Andalibi & Forte, 2018; Cooper, 2002; Fox et al., 2014).

As a result of the ambiguity and limited cues available on social media networks, users tend to overinflate their impressions based on subtle cues present in the CMC. Thus, users base their impressions of the discourse and users contributing to the discourse—and, subsequently, the content and tone of their contributions to the discourse—on the limited information available in the comments of other users (Postmes et al., 1998; Spears & Lea, 1992). Walther (1996) expands on the SIDE Theory and suggests that the subtle cues present in CMC become particularly significant to other users given that they are the only available cues on which to base their opinions, a process that leads to hyper-positive or hyper-negative evaluations of other users and promotes the extensive inclusion of hyperpersonal information (i.e., information exceeding the bounds of FtF interpersonal communication) in the responding comments within the discourse. This Hyperpersonal Model of Communication (Walther, 1996) expands on how the absence of physical appearances and nonverbal cues benefits social sharing in CMC spaces, which is further amplified when users are presented with options to mask their identities through anonymity or pseudonymity (i.e., identity is not at all

provided, participation is untraceable, or user identity is known through a pseudonym in the social media network; Howard et al., 2010). Certain outward features can inhibit or altogether preclude interpersonal interaction in a FtF setting (Walther, 1996) and, because CMC removes these potentially mediating factors from the discourse setting, users feel that they are in control of the impressions they put forward and are empowered to participate in hyperpersonal social sharing.

Additionally, as fewer cognitive resources are dedicated to constantly adjusting based on nonverbal micro-signals from others in close proximity and with the removal of the temporal constraints of FtF interaction, more cognitive resources are free to think over and organize highly effective contributions to asynchronous discourse (p. 26, Walther, 1996). Just as Korobov (2018) noted for the study on spontaneous verbal discourse between romantic partners, the presentation of cultural messages, attitudes, and values in language use may vary tremendously when the research targets naturally occurring discourse on infidelity among individuals versus explicit participant statements gathered in a contrived research setting. Discourse occurring naturally in an online social media space among unaffiliated users exhibits a similar trend, though it appears to promote a more accurate representation of cultural messages, attitudes, and values (Chen et al., 2019). Despite these affordances in CMC providing the opportunity for users to filter their messages to present only the most socially desirable content, researchers surprisingly found that users do not filter their messages to a greater extent in this sociotechnical space. Surprisingly, users tend to decrease the extent to which they filter their messages, particularly when afforded anonymity in the space. As an explanation, previous studies suggest, “features of computer-mediated communication [CMC] such as a lack of non-verbal cues or increased anonymity can facilitate sensitive disclosures” (Andalibi & Forte, 2018, p. 3). Further, Howard and colleagues (2010) found that offering anonymity in a CMC forum for students to conduct peer reviews on websites designed by their classmates positively impacted the level of student engagement in the feedback process. The students not only produced higher quantities of feedback for their classmates, but the results also indicated students reviewing the websites anonymously were five times more likely to submit substantively critical feedback than their classmates

whose identities were known to the reviewees (Howard et al., 2010). This evidence indicates that the reduction in content filtering is compounded by the affordance of anonymity in the sociotechnical space, a process that provides an unimpeded view of how users discuss and debate difficult, stigmatized subjects in publicly available CMC.

Many social media users choose to engage in discussions about sensitive topics online in which they would not otherwise engage, despite the risk of shaming from other users (Andalibi & Forte, 2018). Thus, the prevalent use of social media platforms throughout the United States accompanied by the distinct advantages of CMC on popular social media platforms (i.e., Reddit is the social media platform targeted in this study) affords researchers a unique opportunity to analyze naturally occurring discussion and debate on infidelity and how the goals of infidelity discourse among many unaffiliated users have evolved within the last five years.

Analyzing Computer-Mediated Infidelity Discourse

Given the advantages of anonymity offered by online social media platforms, the previously established tendency to engage in more open, honest discussions around sensitive topics when user identity is not necessary to disclose, and the longitudinal persistence characteristic of digital material posted on the Internet, CMC lends itself well to rich empirical analysis. Yet, as Herring (2004) discerns, researchers aiming to apply traditional analytic approaches to CMC face challenges in systematically organizing available corpora on language use into a functional dataset and in determining, specifically, “how to identify and describe online phenomena in culturally meaningful terms, while at the same time grounding their distinctions in empirically observable behavior” (p. 338). To address the need for appropriate methods to systematically examine CMC, Herring created an empirical approach for the express purpose of researching naturally occurring linguistic phenomena that transpire via CMC: Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA; Herring, 2001, 2004). CMDA has been adapted from numerous language-focused specialties, such as communication and rhetoric, and is broadly described as the process of ascertaining patterns in archived textual interactions

between users present in online behavior (Herring, 2004). The particular approach to CMDA advanced by Herring (2004) relies heavily on a functional linguistic perspective, as this view is best fit to answer research questions derived from online language structure, co-constructed meaning, use, and interactivity between multiple users, and how these characteristics change over time. Furthermore, CMDA has the power to methodically address macro-level research questions of broad cultural significance via CMC faceted classification and synthesis (Herring, 2007).

To date, studies on discourse surrounding infidelity in couple romantic relationships are sparse and limited in scope to the analysis of within-couple discourse (Korobov, 2016, 2018). Further, there are no known studies detailing structured analyses of discourse surrounding infidelity in relationships between numerous unaffiliated others. Naturally occurring discourse in a publicly available online platform provides an avenue for researchers to investigate how individuals use language to make meaning in discussions about infidelity without the fixed constraints of perceived social norms placed on FtF interactions, thus yielding a deeper understanding of cultural-level influences integrated into infidelity talk and how that has changed.

Framing a Study from this Literature

Given the increasing prevalence of infidelity literature and information available to the lay public in recent years as well as the overwhelming success and popularity of relationship psychologists like Dr. Esther Perel, there is a unique opportunity to explore changes in cultural attitudes regarding infidelity practices communicated through online discourse in a relatively short time. In addition, it stands to reason that a social media site that provides not only the lack of non-verbal cues but also anonymity among users would further promote discourse involving culturally taboo topics as well as individual self-disclosure. Thus, this study aims to analyze publicly available online discussion surrounding infidelity among unaffiliated adult users on Reddit, a widely used social media platform, and examine the cultural implications of changes in the naturally occurring discourse over approximately the last five years. Due to its ability to offer users

an anonymous, free, and publicly available discussion space, Reddit has been the source of several rich qualitative studies on discourse involving sensitive, stigmatized topics, such as addiction and eating disorders (e.g., Sharma et al., 2016; Sowles, 2018). To facilitate the classification of the discourse being analyzed, I employed Herring's (2004) CMDA faceted classification, which allows for the practical description of micro-level linguistic phenomena within CMC in the Reddit corpora to address macro-level phenomena and detail broader cultural implications as conveyed through infidelity-focused discourse (p. 2). Guided by this approach, I conducted a sequence of analyses to detail the structural and speech act characteristics of the corpora to interpret the meaning and primary goals expressed through the discourse.

Taken altogether, the analyses conducted at each level of the CMDA approach in this study aim to elucidate the implications of recent changes in the infidelity discourse on changes in broader societal attitudes concerning infidelity. In addition to the CMDA framework, I employ a bottom-up approach to analyzing the corpora which relies more on the use of naturally occurring data rather than theory or introspection (Baker & Ellece, 2011). The goal of this approach is to avoid imposing existing linguistic theories from the outset or investigating pre-identified hypotheses about the language use in the dataset (p. 29). Thus, the two analyses in this study individually detail unique aspects of the computer-mediated infidelity discourse emerging from the dataset organized at each CMDA level that concurrently address facets of the broader societal attitudes and norms. The methods that follow detail the bottom-up approach to the structural and speech act analyses of the corpora and, as such, the pre-evaluation of the corpora within each discourse analysis procedure which creates analysis-specific datasets.

CHAPTER THREE
METHODS AND MATERIALS

This research was approved by the University of Tennessee Institutional Review Board (IRB) and all activities were performed in accordance with the regulatory requirements laid down in U.S. Code of Federal Regulations, Title 45 Department of Health and Human Services Part 46, Protection of Human Subjects. The checklist process for rich descriptions of CMC data embodied in the CMDA faceted classification scheme guided this study's analytical process, which emphasizes the structure, participation patterns, and meaning aspects of language (see Figure 1 for a visual depiction of the process; Herring, 2004, 2007, 2012; Zhu et al., 2019). The flowchart in Figure 1 visually details the CMDA-adapted analytical process for further clarification of the methods in this study. To begin, I collected a sample (i.e., three threads) from Reddit and described their medium and situational characteristics. Next, I measured a number of pre-selected participation frequencies. Finally, I analyzed patterns of speech acts in the CMC. The flowchart in Figure 1 visually details the CMDA-adapted analytical process, presented vertically in sequential order, for further clarification of the methods in this study.

As shown in Figure 1, I began this study by collecting a sample (i.e., three threads) from Reddit and described their medium and situational characteristics. Next, I measured a number of pre-selected participation and structural frequencies and organized the initial analyses into functional datasets. Finally, I modified a codebook using pre-selected speech acts to direct the analysis of the patterns of speech acts in the CMC.

A Description of the Sample

Three corpora comprised of 28,051 words, 522 turns, and spanning approximately 5 years were collected from Reddit. Reddit is a free, publicly available online platform that allows for anonymous discourse. As seen in Figure 2, the website allows for two-way, many-to-many communication, with the ability to create a thread and communicate back and forth with other users. A benefit of Reddit that is not shared by other social media giants like Twitter is the ability to publish long posts, as the message limit allows users to post up to 40,000 characters or approximately 6,400 words.

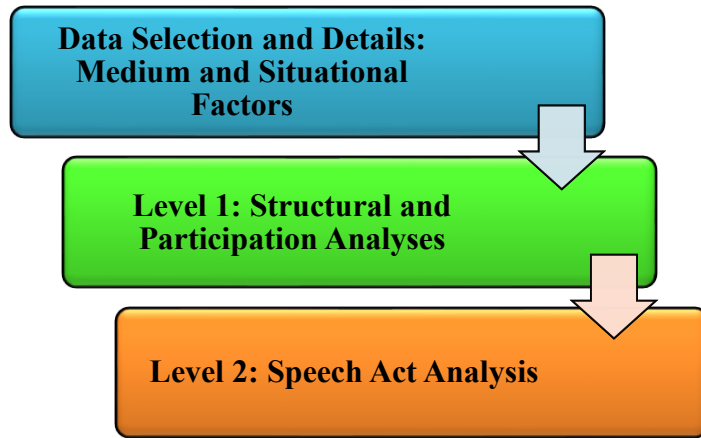


Figure 1. *Analytical plan of the current study*

Note. Flowchart of the analytical approach employed in this study adapted from the structure, meaning, and participation pattern analyses of the CMDA faceted classification system (Herring, 2004, 2012; Zhu et al., 2019).

There is also very little moderation involved in Reddit, with all moderation—if any—being done after a post is published and only if the post is completely off-topic or reported by other users.

Though Reddit does allow users as young as thirteen years of age to create an account and join in posting on the website, the topics involved in the threads (serious relationships and infidelity) grant us leeway to assume that the users commenting in the threads are adults. While the identities of the users can be anonymous if the users choose, revealing aspects of a user's identity may be disclosed in the username or the content of the posts or comments. As such, and to maintain user confidentiality, the usernames within these threads are not included in this study.

The purpose of the interactions in these chosen threads is to discuss or debate infidelity in relationships, with many users choosing to offer their own experiences with infidelity or reactions to other users' experiences with infidelity. The tone of discussion tends to be informal, with the primary objective of the communication ranging from commiserating with others who have either engaged in or been a victim of infidelity in a serious relationship. Shaming, sarcasm, anger, and writing with the goal of healing (e.g., Wright & Chung, 2001) are also prominent community-accepted objectives for user comments within the threads.

The screenshot in Figure 2 exemplifies the structure of the comment threads on Reddit. This screenshot depicts comments discussing infidelity from the 2017 Reddit thread. Though Reddit comments have usernames attributed to individual comment authorship, those have been redacted in the screenshot in Figure 2 to protect user confidentiality.

The comments in Figure 2 are all from different users, with the last three comments individually responding to the topmost comment. User comments responding directly to a previous comment appear below the original comment and are slightly indented, indicating that the comment is on the immediate next level in the Reddit thread.

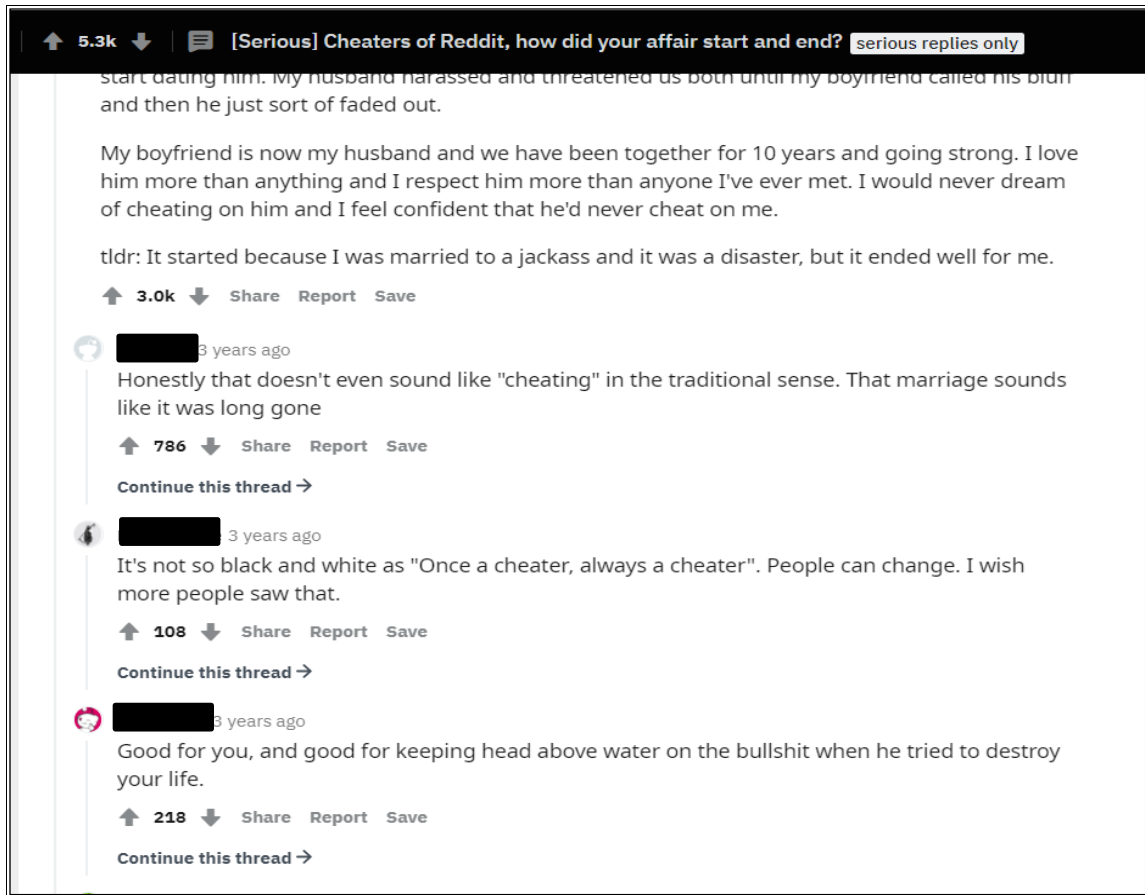


Figure 2. Screenshot of Reddit comments section from the 2017 thread

Note. Reddit comments section from the 2017 thread, which shows a section of 2nd and 3rd level comments among users discussing relationship infidelity.

For example, the screenshot in Figure 2 shows a comment in the 2nd level (the topmost comment) and three comments in the 3rd level (the subsequent comments). This configuration allows comments to be directed at a specific user, a group of users, or to the general thread.

All three corpora were collected by hand. To begin, I searched “relationship infidelity” in the search bar on the main home page on Reddit and selected three threads spanning approximately 5 years in age (one thread from 2017, one thread from 2019, and one thread from 2021). Threads were selected based on the way in which the questions to begin the threads were worded. Ideally, the threads would remain neutral in phrasing (i.e., containing no derogatory, blaming, or shaming language for either party) and tone to reduce their impact on Reddit user comments. Threads were also excluded if they were initiated with a user’s firsthand account of their infidelity or their partner’s infidelity, as this might influence subsequent thread comments based on the phrasing of the account. The selected threads were phrased to attract and elicit narratives, accounts, and testimony from a wide audience. As Perel’s integration—as well as the overall integration of infidelity discussions among the lay public—into popular culture grew exponentially with the 2017 release of *The State of Affairs: Rethinking Infidelity*, the first thread selected came from 2017. To analyze the evolution in discourse and cultural attitudes while removing the focus on more gradual changes, the last two threads were selected at two-year intervals following the first thread. The thread from 2017 is titled “[serious] Cheaters of Reddit, how did your affair start and end?” The thread from 2019 is titled “Cheaters of reddit. Why did you do it?” The thread from 2021 is titled “[Serious] People who cheated on their SO, why did you do it?” Though the phrasing is aimed to solicit the accounts of those who perpetrated the infidelity, these were the first threads to meet the criteria of remaining neutral in phrasing and tone, and initiating wide discussion about infidelity without the influence of a firsthand account. Further, all three threads contained comments from the perspectives of those who perpetrated the infidelity, those who were affected by infidelity, and those who neither perpetrated nor were directly affected by infidelity.

All three Reddit threads were started by different users. The discourse in all three threads was carried out by self-selected Redditors and any user could choose to comment on the threads. Of the total 522 turns (comments), 117 comments were selected from the 2017 thread, 117 comments were selected from the 2019 thread, and 288 comments were selected from the 2021 thread. In order to select the turns, I began my search from the top of the thread (which begins with the users who commented on the thread first) and included the comment if it was relevant to the thread on infidelity (i.e., discussed the user's own infidelity, commented on another user's infidelity, or expressed thoughts or feelings about infidelity). The selected comments were manually copied from the original Reddit 2017, 2019, and 2021 posts to a Microsoft Excel workbook (Version 2201, 2022) for de-identification and organization. The screenshot in Figure 2 depicts examples of user comments included in this study.

Level 1: Structural and Participation Methods

To identify user discourse patterns of interest, I conducted preliminary structural and participation analyses in organizing the comments from the corpora into a functional dataset. The preliminary examinations—explained below and illustrated in Table 1—serve to guide the subsequent areas of analytical interest and emphasis emerging from the dataset and are not yet considered results of the study. The units of analysis are comments posted in response to the starting threads on Reddit for the chosen years and topics (e.g., see Figure 2). Each comment is counted separately as a unit, as is the case even if one user comments multiple times. Ko (1996) outlines numerous possibilities for the examination of present participation, and I included measures for the number of users per thread, average number of comments per user, average words per comment, average length of characters per comment, and average number of characters per word. Table 1 reflects the data for the selected participation measures and structural analysis for a combined corpus of 522 comments from 342 different users.

Table 1.

Participation and structural analyses showing increases in words per comment and characters per word from 2017 to 2021 in Reddit threads discussing infidelity

Measure	2017 Thread	SD	2019 Thread	SD	2021 Thread	SD	Total corpus	SD
Number of units (Comments)	117.00	N/A	117.00	N/A	288.00	N/A	522.0	N/A
Number of users per thread	76	N/A	81	N/A	185	N/A	342	N/A
Average number of comments per user	1.54	1.60	1.44	0.97	1.56	1.56	1.54	2.02
Average words per comment	33.50	65.00	83.13	133.99	50.02	85.74	53.74	96.34
Average length of characters per comment	144.32	273.82	354.62	554.53	215.61	352.86	230.79	398.74
Average number of characters per word	4.31	0.63	4.27	0.60	4.49	0.83	4.45	0.74

The first column represents the discourse from the Reddit thread from 2017, approximately 5 years past with 117 comments from 76 different users. The second column represents the discourse from the Reddit thread from 2019, approximately 3 years past with 117 comments from 81 different users. The third column represents the discourse from the 2021 Reddit thread, approximately 1 year past with 288 comments from 185 different users. None of the users from the three threads commented on more than one of the three threads collected.

In addition to analyzing the differences in the structural regularities of the comments, the analysis of the discourse in the threads focused on the differences in syntactic feature frequencies of emphatics, amplifiers, hedges, possibility modals, and adverbial causal subordinators between the three threads. Using Microsoft Excel formulas, the frequencies were calculated based on the presence of specific words within each comment (detailed below) and then averaged within the Reddit post year and across all three corpora. Table 2 reflects the preliminary analyses regarding the changes in the chosen syntactic features across the three corpora.

The preliminary analyses shown in Table 2 reflect the changes between each year and highlight overall increases in amplifiers, emphatics, possibility modals, hedges, and adverbial causal subordinators from the 2017 Reddit thread to the 2021 thread.

Amplifiers include words that bolster the comment and convey certainty about the content, such as “totally,” “absolutely,” and “completely.” Emphatics include words that impart emphasis in the comment, make clear the user’s stance about the content, and signify higher levels of personal involvement in the subject, such as “for sure,” “really,” and “a lot.” Possibility modals include words that indicate a specific probability or a prospect but also suggest reservations about the content, such as “may,” “can,” and “could.” Hedges include words that indicate a less specific probability or prospect and highlight a lack of clarity of the user’s stance about the content, such as “maybe,” “something like,” and “sort of.” Finally, adverbial causal subordinators include words that are meant to relay information or suggest causal reasoning, such as “because,” “thus,” and “therefore.”

Table 2.

Participation and structural analyses showing increases in the use of amplifiers, emphatics, hedges, possibility modals, and adverbial causal subordinators from 2017 to 2021 in Reddit threads discussing infidelity

Measure	2017 Thread	SD	2019 Thread	SD	2021 Thread	SD	Total corpus	SD
Average Amplifiers per comment	0.17	0.44	0.34	0.92	0.38	0.87	0.32	0.81
Average Emphatics per comment	0.29	0.77	0.86	1.53	0.61	1.07	0.60	1.15
Average Possibility Modals per comment	0.17	0.46	0.49	1.06	0.34	0.79	0.34	0.81
Average Hedges per comment	0.22	0.53	0.50	0.96	0.25	0.74	0.30	0.76
Average Adverbial Causal Subordinators per comment	0.17	0.72	0.49	0.99	0.34	0.94	0.34	0.91

According to Ko (1996) using possibility modals and hedges in discourse signals a user's uncertainty about what they are saying. Thus, higher frequencies of possibility modals and hedges in discourse would indicate more uncertainty about the subject of the discourse or content of the comment. Further, I use amplifiers and emphatics to signal confidence, conviction, and inflexibility in mindset. Higher frequencies of amplifiers and emphatics indicate more confidence, conviction, and inflexibility in mindset regarding the subject of the discourse or content of the comment. I operationalize adverbial causal subordinators to signal the tone of support and justification (i.e., prosocial tones) in a user's CMC.

Level 2: Speech Act Methods

Background

Analysis of speech acts has been shown in prior studies to be useful in identifying the purpose of communication with discourse and how the communication is used to accomplish a goal (Nastri et al., 2006). To examine how users organize and use communication in the discourse surrounding infidelity, explore how those processes have changed, and elucidate the implications of those changes on cultural infidelity attitudes, the 2017, 2019, and 2021 corpora collected from Reddit were analyzed for the presence of utterances reflecting specific main categories and subcategories of speech acts.

Speech acts have been described as what the speaker is doing with an utterance and, more recently, what the speaker aims to accomplish with an utterance (Nastri et al., 2006; Searle, 1969, 1979). Numerous taxonomies of speech acts have been presented throughout discourse analysis research (Nastri et al., 2006). However, this study primarily analyzes speech acts among users engaged in the discourse surrounding infidelity using Herring and colleagues' (2005) speech act taxonomy to complement the meaning domain of the CMDA faceted classification system (Herring, 2004, 2007). The

speech act analysis will, to a lesser extent, incorporate Nastri and colleagues' (2006) framework for organizing speech acts— with notable modifications.

Process

As with the structural and participation analyses, I conducted a preliminary speech act analysis in organizing the comments from the corpora into a functional dataset and creating an appropriate codebook from the dataset (see Figure 3). Before coding each user comment, the speech acts were thoroughly defined based on language from Herring et al. (2005) and Nastri et al. (2006) to create a detailed codebook with speech act codes (i.e., subcategories) for the process. Once all comments were coded, the frequencies of each speech act subcategories were summed using Microsoft Excel formulas. The subcategories of speech acts were aggregated into overarching main themes following the conclusion of the coding.

The speech act coding process consisted of me reading each user comment completely, reviewing the codebook and associated definitions, and assigning the appropriate speech act code to segments of the comment (which varied in length) if present in the user comment. Each comment, contingent on my interpretation of the apparent goals of the content, could receive more than one speech act code and there were no limitations on the number of speech act codes that could be assigned to a comment. However, as it is assumed that every comment submitted by a user is serving a purpose or achieving a goal, every comment received at least one speech act code. In addition, the same segments of a comment could be assigned multiple speech act codes if the segment was interpreted to accomplish numerous speech goals. Further, to ascertain consistency in coding comments, an independent coder re-coded a small, randomly selected sample of the total corpus ($N = 52$). The independent coder completed these recodes using the same detailed codebook employed in the original coding and without prior knowledge of the original codes assigned to each user comment. Analysis of the intercoder judgments determined agreement of approximately 77.77%, which indicates good intercoder agreement on speech acts.

The preliminary examinations—explained below and illustrated in the speech act codebook (see Figure 3)—serve to guide the interpretations of meaning expressed via speech acts in user comments emerging from the dataset and are not yet considered results of the study. The speech act codebook (i.e., Figure 3) depicts and defines each of the subcategories of speech acts, which are subsumed by five overarching main categories of speech acts: *Narrate*, *Contradict*, *Connect*, *Influence*, and *Investigate*. The speech act subcategories (i.e., codes) largely included Herring and colleagues’ (2005) taxonomy as subcategories, with alterations made to best fit the data (see Figure 3).

As shown in the codebook (i.e., Figure 3), the category of “Claim” has been apportioned into the subcategories of “Assert” and “Justify,” as these were the prevalent goals within comments coded as “Claim.” Further, the category of “React” has been divided to indicate the valence of the comment (positive or negative). Additionally, the “Self-Deprecate” component of the category “Apologize” appropriately identified the primary goal of all comments coded as “Apologize.” The main themes aggregated after coding had concluded established the predominant goals shared among the speech act subcategories and grouped the subcategories based on similarities in the speech act goals. For example, a user reacting with open criticism or hostility (coded as “React-Negative”) and a user stating explicit disagreement with a behavior (coded as “Reject”) both share a theme of disputing or challenging a claim or proposition and, as such, comprise the main category of *Contradict*. The final speech act codebook created for the speech act analysis in this study is reflected in Table 2. The speech act codebook includes the definitions and organization of each speech act main category and subcategory, as well as comment examples of each subcategory from the Reddit threads in the sample for reference.

Narrate: To give an account of or provide commentary on an event.

Assert: To make known, proclaim, or state clearly and emphatically.

Example: *"Cheating is never cool..."*

Inform: To provide information that can be corroborated or supported.

Example: *"There's a famous Esther Perel quote: 'The victim of the affair isn't always the victim of the marriage.'"*

Justify: To indicate that an action should or should not be considered acceptable/unacceptable if properly understood.

Example: *"No sex for a year. When we did have sex, she'd just lay there."*

Elaborate: To comment on, explain, or paraphrase a previous utterance.

Example: *"My wife has had a couple of side partners who had the same issue as you have."*

Repair: To provide additional explanation for the purpose of making a previous statement clear and understandable.

Example: *"Yes, my wife and I have been in an open relationship for as long as we've been together (27 years) and she's into older men."*

Contradict: To disagree, dispute, or challenge a claim or proposition.

React (Negative): To respond with open hostility, opposition, or criticism.

Example: *"No matter what you say it isn't gonna convince me that that isn't weird and unsettling."*

Reject: To explicitly state that one disagrees with a behavior or proposition.

Example: *"Nah, he still cheated."*

Connect: To find common ground or interpersonally connect with those in the shared space.

Accept: To concur, agree, or acquiesce.

Example: *"Ditto my man."*

Self-Deprecate: Disparage or explicitly undervalue oneself.

Example: *"I was stupid."*

React (Positive): To respond with understanding, encouragement, forgiveness, or approval.

Example: *"You don't have to keep beating yourself up about it."*

Thank: To express appreciation or gratitude.

Example: *"Thank you, it was really hard not giving in..."*

Influence: To attempt either directly or indirectly to alter the thoughts, behaviors, or attitudes of others.

Direct: To give pointed instructions, make a request, prohibit, or strongly advise.

Example: *"The grown up action was to at least confront her and/or leave her."*

Desire: To express a strong feeling of wanting something or wishing for something to happen.

Example: *"I hope you're a better person now."*

Figure 3. *Speech act codebook for Reddit discourse surrounding infidelity in relationships showing aggregated categories derived from Herring and colleagues (2005) and guided in organization by Nastri and colleagues (2006)*

Investigate: To attempt to gather more information to discover and examine the facts.

Inquire: To ask for more information from someone.

Example: “*Did you ever end up dating your coworker?*”

Invite: To solicit the opinions or suggestions of others.

Example: “*You can’t just break a marriage because she refuses her duties as a wife, can you?*”

Figure 3. Continued

Note. This codebook represents the five main categories and subcategories of speech acts that emerged from the data. Main speech act categories that subsume each of the subcategories are in bold font.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Level 1: Structural and Participation Analyses

The participant data reflected in Table 3 indicate that the structure of Reddit discourse on infidelity changes over the course of the 2017, 2019, and 2021 threads in numerous aspects. Despite the 2-year time difference and similarity of thread topics, the threads involved more users in 2019 than in 2017 (81 versus 76 users) and evoked fewer repeat responses per user from 2017 ($m = 1.54$) to 2019 ($m = 1.44$). The 2021 thread involved 185 users, though there were also 171 more turns collected from the 2021 thread. Reddit users from the 2021 thread did, however, increase their average response rates from 2019 ($m = 1.44$) to 2021 ($m = 1.56$). The average characters per word stays approximately the same from 2017 ($m = 4.31$) to 2019 ($m = 4.27$), then increases in 2021 ($m = 4.49$). However, the average words per comment increased substantially from 2017 ($m = 33.50$) to 2019 ($m = 83.13$), $t(232) = 3.61$, $p < .001$, then subsequently decreased from 2019 to 2021 ($m = 50.02$), $t(403) = 2.96$, $p = .003$. Thus, the overall trend for the average words per comment did not substantially increase from 2017 to 2021, $t(403) = 1.88$, $p = .061$.

The data in Table 3 describe not only the measures for each thread but also how the thread-specific measures compare to each of those in the other threads. As the overall trends between the three corpora did not significantly change on all but one measure (average characters per word), these data suggest that users are participating in infidelity discourse at approximately the same rates and their comments are structured similarly. Distributions of these measures are often specific to the communication medium being used and, thus, are indicative of Reddit-specific usage. Users continuing this level of engagement in infidelity discourse on Reddit while maintaining similar comment structures across the three threads suggests that other changes in user lexical choices cannot simply be attributed to alterations in Reddit usage over time.

Reddit post content differentiated over the three Reddit threads in their use of specific types of speech. Analyses of user lexical frequencies evidenced significant changes in the overall trends from 2017 to 2021 on all features except for hedges and possibility modals. The bar graph shown in Figure 4 details the distributions of the chosen linguistic features for Reddit user posts for each thread as well as the total corpus collected.

Table 3.

Changes in the linguistic features of the user participation and comment structure across the 2017, 2019, and 2021 Reddit threads discussing infidelity

	Measure	M	SD	T-Score	P	CI Upper	CI Lower	DF
2017 Thread	<i>Units (Comments)</i>	117.00	N/A					
	<i>Users/Thread</i>	76.00	N/A					
2017 v. 2019 Thread	<i>Average Comments/User</i>	1.54	1.60	0.45	0.326	-0.24	0.44	232.00
	<i>Average Words/Comment</i>	33.50	65.00	3.60	0.001	-76.76	-22.50	232.00
	<i>Average Characters/Comment</i>	144.32	273.82	3.68	0.001	-322.95	-97.65	232.00
	<i>Average Characters/Word</i>	4.31	0.63	0.50	0.619	-0.12	0.20	232.00
2019 Thread	<i>Units (Comments)</i>	117.00	N/A					
	<i>Users/Thread</i>	81.00	N/A					
2019 v. 2021 Thread	<i>Average Comments/User</i>	1.44	0.97	-0.60	0.275	-0.19	0.43	403.00
	<i>Average Words/Comment</i>	83.13	133.99	2.96	0.003	11.13	55.09	403.00
	<i>Average Characters/Comment</i>	354.62	554.53	3.01	0.003	48.29	229.73	403.00
	<i>Average Characters/Word</i>	4.27	0.60	2.60	0.010	-0.39	-0.05	403.00
2021 Thread	<i>Units (Comments)</i>	288.00	N/A					
	<i>Users/Thread</i>	185.00	N/A					
2017 v. 2021 Thread	<i>Average Comments/User</i>	1.56	1.56	-0.08	0.468	-0.32	0.36	403.00
	<i>Average Words/Comment</i>	50.02	85.74	1.88	0.061	-33.83	0.79	403.00
	<i>Average Characters/Comment</i>	215.61	352.86	1.96	0.051	-142.85	0.27	403.00
	<i>Average Characters/Word</i>	4.49	0.83	2.11	0.035	-0.35	-0.01	403.00

The findings represented in Figure 4 appear to suggest that users increased the frequencies of all syntactic features from the 2017 thread to the 2019 thread, but then decreased their usage on all but emphatics from the 2019 thread to the 2021 thread. Despite this decrease between the two most recent threads, analyses revealed that there was still an upward trend in frequencies for most of the syntactic features between the 2017 thread and the 2021 thread (see Figure 4). Specifically, users increased the frequency of emphatics in their comments from 2017 ($m = 0.29$) to 2019 ($m = 0.86$), $t(232) = 3.60, p < .001$. Users then decreased the frequency of emphatics in their comments from 2019 to 2021 ($m = 0.61$), but this was not a significant decrease, $t(403) = 1.87, p = .062$. Overall, users significantly increased the use of emphatics in their comments from 2017 ($m = 0.29$) to 2021 ($m = 0.61$), $t(403) = 2.94, p = .004$. Users also increased the frequency of amplifiers in their comments from 2017 ($m = 0.17$) to 2019 ($m = 0.34$), however, this increase was not significant, $t(232) = 1.80, p = .07$. Users increased the use of amplifiers nonsignificantly again from 2019 to 2021 ($m = 0.38$), $t(403) = 0.41, p = .680$, yet the overall increase in amplifier use in comments from 2017 to 2021 was significant, $t(403) = 2.48, p = .013$.

These results suggest that users have become more confident in their beliefs surrounding infidelity. The increase in amplifier usage also indicates higher degrees of certainty in those beliefs. The elevated use of emphatics in their discourse further suggests that users have become more certain in their beliefs, as more emphatics used indicates an expansion of the presence of certainty among users. In addition, heightened emphatics usage signals a level of personal involvement in the infidelity discourse. Thus, over the three Reddit threads, users have become more intensely involved in the discourse.

Further, users incorporated more possibility modals in 2019 ($m = 0.49$) than in 2017 ($m = 0.17$), $t(232) = 3.00, p < .01$, but then incorporated fewer in 2021 ($m = 0.34$) than in 2019. This decrease from 2019 to 2021, though, was not significant ($t[403] = 1.56, p = .119$). Users incorporated more possibility modals overall from 2017 to 2021, $t(403) = 2.18, p = .030$. More hedges were incorporated in user comments from 2017 ($m = 0.22$) to 2019 ($m = 0.50$), $t(232) = 2.76, p < .01$, though significantly fewer from 2019 to 2021 ($m = 0.25$), $t(403) = 2.82, p = .005$. Thus, the overall increase in frequency of hedges in user comments from 2017 ($m = 0.22$) to 2021 ($m = 0.25$) was not significant, $t(403) = 0.37, p = .710$.

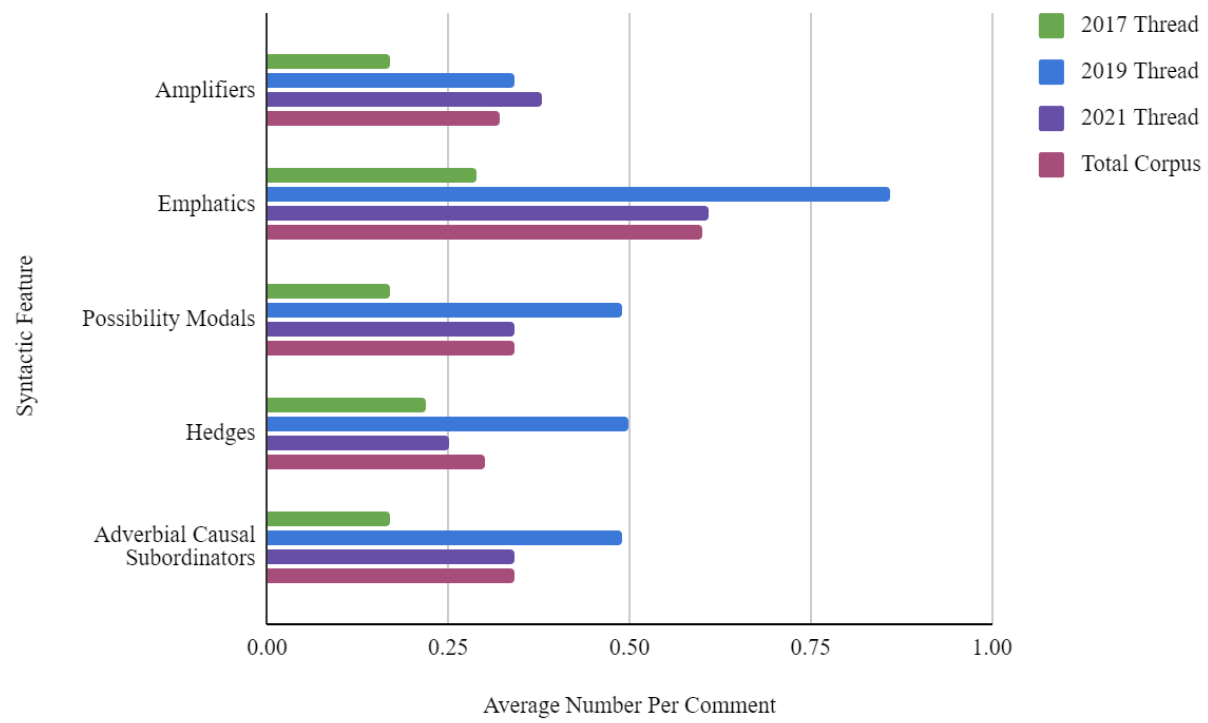


Figure 4. *Changes in syntactic features of user comments across the three Reddit threads*

Increased usage of possibility modals over the three Reddit threads suggests that users have become less sure of the exact definitions or bounds of infidelity. Users, by implementing higher frequencies of possibility modals, have signaled reservations in their knowledge of what constitutes infidelity and have called into question the claims of others regarding posted concrete construals of infidelity. This syntactic feature also suggests that users have escalated their offers of specific probabilities to explain acts of infidelity. Though the rise in the use of hedges was not significant, this further indicates a lack of clarity among users on what behaviors define infidelity. In addition, higher frequencies of hedges suggest a rise in user offers of less specific probabilities to explain acts of infidelity.

Finally, users implemented a significantly higher frequency of adverbial causal subordinators in 2019 ($m = 0.49$) than in 2017 ($m = 0.17$), $t(232) = 2.83, p < .01$. Users reduced their adverbial causal subordinator implementation from 2019 to 2021 ($m = 0.34$), though this reduction was not significant, $t(403) = 1.43, p = .153$. Overall, users did not significantly increase their implementation of adverbial causal subordinators in Reddit posts from 2017 ($m = 0.17$) to 2021 ($m = 0.34$), $t(403) = 1.76, p = .08$.

User implementation of adverbial causal subordinators signals the tone of support for other users in infidelity discourse or justification regarding acts of infidelity (i.e., prosocial tones). Between 2017 and 2019, users more frequently conveyed their support for others or justification for the behavior of themselves and others in their Reddit discourse. Yet, because they reduced this trend between 2019 and 2021, users did not significantly convey more support or justification over the course of the three Reddit threads.

Level 2: Speech Act Analyses

The speech act analyses revealed some considerable differences among the users' primary goals of speech and of the aggregate speech act themes across the three Reddit post timepoints. A Chi-Square Test of Independence was conducted to assess the association between the post year and speech act goals (see Table 5 in the Appendix). This test determined that the post year (i.e., 2017, 2019, and 2021) was significantly related to the speech act goals of Reddit users, $\chi^2(28, N = 1335) = 787.61, p < .001$. Further, Chi-Square Tests of Independence were

performed pairwise between each post year (see Table 5 in the Appendix). The test revealed a significant relationship between 2017 and 2019 ($\chi^2[14, N= 465] = 135.97, p < .001$), 2019 and 2021 ($\chi^2[14, N= 1137] = 430.24, p < .001$), and 2017 and 2021 ($\chi^2[14, N= 1068] = 556.66, p < .001$). Figure 5 represents the overall changes in speech act usage in the 2017, 2019, and 2021 Reddit threads by users discussing infidelity.

Between the 2017 and 2019 Reddit posts, and as evidenced in Figure 5, usage of the *Narrate*, *Connect*, and *Contradict* speech acts markedly changed while the *Influence* and *Investigate* speech acts stayed relatively the same. While in the 2017 thread the second most frequent usage of an utterance was to be contradictory (22% of speech acts), the *Contradict* speech act became the least frequent usage of an utterance in the 2019 thread (7% of speech acts). As a complement to the decrease in *Contradict* speech act usage, the frequency of *Connect* speech act usage increased from 2017 to 2019 (9% to 15%). Additionally, in both 2017 and 2019, the majority of the utterances were used within the Reddit threads to give an account of an infidelity event or provide commentary on another's account (i.e., *Narrate*), and the frequency of this speech act rose from 55% in 2017 to 61% in 2019.

Interestingly, between the 2019 and 2021 Reddit posts, usage of the *Narrate* and *Connect* speech acts varied again while the *Contradict*, *Influence*, and *Investigate* speech acts remained consistent. The *Narrate* speech act maintained its lead as the most frequent usage of an utterance in the 2021 Reddit thread, though its usage decreased from 2019 to 2021 (61% to 55%). Usage of the speech act *Connect*, on the other hand, increased from 2019 to 2021 (15% to 20%). Users also implemented slightly more *Influence* speech acts in 2021 than in 2019 (11% versus 9%, respectively), though they decreased their implementation of *Investigate* speech acts (8% versus 7%) and held constant in their usage of *Contradict* speech acts (7%) over the same period (see Figure 5).

Finally, the overall trends between the 2017 and 2021 Reddit posts demonstrate that usage of the *Connect* and *Influence* speech acts markedly increased, the *Contradict* speech act decreased, and the *Narrate* and *Investigate* speech acts held steady. Users implemented significantly more *Connect* and *Influence* speech acts in the 2021 thread (20% and 11%, respectively) than in the 2017 thread (9% and 7%, respectively). In addition, users substantially reduced the usage of *Contradict* speech acts in the threads from 2017 to 2021 (22% to 7%).

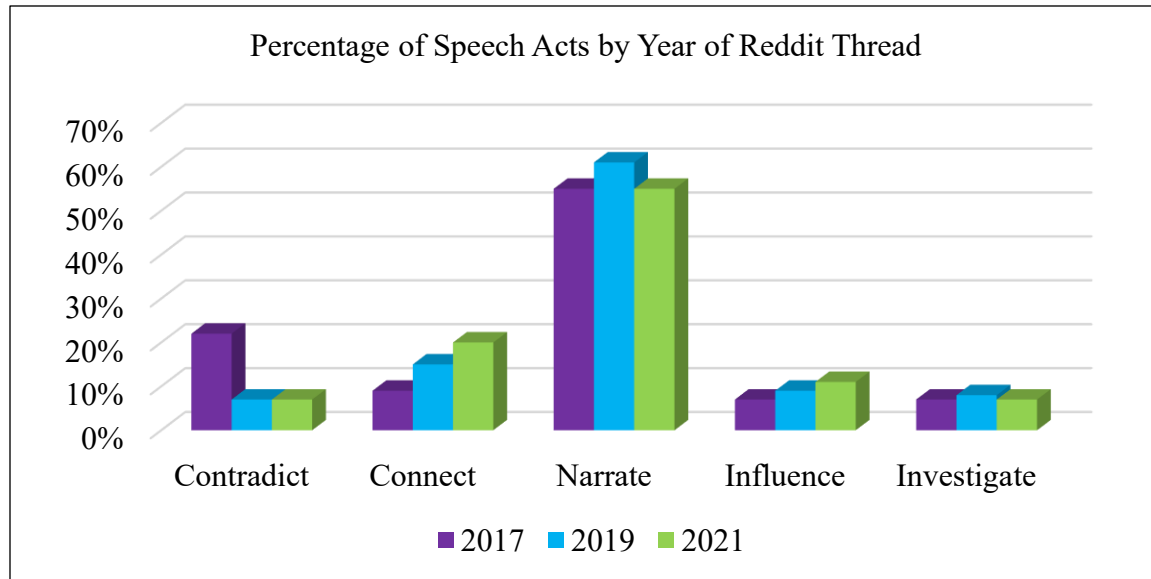


Figure 5. *Speech act main category composition for all three corpora*

Though users varied within the collected timepoints on their usage of *Narrate* and *Investigate* speech acts, they ultimately implemented the same frequencies of these speech acts in 2021 as they did in 2017 (55% and 7%, respectively; see Figure 5).

Compositions of each main speech act category were also examined and, as depicted in Table 4, there were several notable divergences in the compositions between the 2017 and 2021 Reddit threads—the most striking of which were found in the increases of “react-positive” and “justify” speech acts. To promote connection, users reacted more positively to other users within the thread in 2021 (38% of *Connect*) versus the thread in 2017 (11% of *Connect*). Further, users employed far more justifications for their actions or the actions of others in the 2021 thread (31% of *Narrate*) versus the 2017 thread (3% of *Narrate*).

The speech act main category *Connect* evidenced changes in all other subcategories as well. Users in the 2017 thread implemented more utterances of self-deprecation than those in the 2021 thread (39% versus 21% of *Connect*, respectively). In addition, those in the 2017 thread implemented more utterances of acceptance than those in the 2021 thread (44% versus 27% of *Connect*, respectively). Users in 2021, however, implemented more utterances of gratitude than users in 2017 (14% versus 6% of *Connect*, respectively).

Next, analyses of speech act main category *Narrate* found that users in the 2017 thread incorporated more utterances of elaboration (44%) and assertion (34%) than their 2021 counterparts (26% and 17% of *Narrate*, respectively). Users in 2021 also included more utterances of information that can be corroborated than those in 2017 (19% versus 5% of *Narrate*, respectively). Yet, users in 2017 employed more utterances of information for clarification of previous comments than those in 2021 (14% versus 6% of *Narrate*, respectively).

Analyses of the speech act main categories *Influence* and *Contradict* revealed that the composition of both remained approximately the same from 2017 to 2021. The composition of the speech act main category *Contradict* became more predominantly represented by utterances conveying open hostility, opposition, or criticism between users (51% versus 57% of *Contradict*, respectively) rather than explicitly stating disagreement with another user regarding behaviors or propositions from the 2017 to the 2021 Reddit posts (49% versus 43% of *Contradict*, respectively).

Table 4.

Changes in speech act main categories by changes in their subcategories

Speech Act Main Category	Speech Act Subcategory	2017 Thread Percentage of Main Category	2019 Thread Percentage of Main Category	2021 Thread Percentage of Main Category
Contradict	React-Negative	51%	45%	57%
	Reject	49%	55%	43%
Connect	React-Positive	11%	51%	38%
	Self-Deprecate	39%	24%	21%
	Thank	6%	10%	14%
	Accept	44%	15%	27%
Narrate	Assert	34%	26%	17%
	Justify	3%	31%	31%
	Inform	5%	9%	19%
	Elaborate	44%	31%	26%
	Repair	14%	3%	6%
Influence	Direct	71%	79%	72%
	Desire	29%	21%	28%
Investigate	Inquire	71%	68%	84%
	Invite	29%	32%	16%

The data found that the composition of *Investigate*, however, saw a drop in the frequency of users soliciting opinions or suggestions from others in the thread between 2017 and 2021 (29% to 16% of *Investigate*, respectively). Instead, users more frequently asked specific users for further information in 2021 than in 2017 (84% versus 71% of *Investigate*, respectively).

CHAPTER FIVE
DISCUSSION, LIMITATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

Level 1: Structural and Participation Interpretations

Changes in structure and participation of discourse suggest changes in cultural norms regarding infidelity, including support for growth and deeper engagement in infidelity talk while facilitating supportive environments for infidelity discussions. The last five years have seen a burgeoning integration of infidelity literature and information into popular American culture, as seen with the immense media coverage and positive lay-public reception of Perel's works, which seems to have vastly influenced the contexts in which infidelity can be discussed. Additionally, as the methods of common personal interaction have evolved, it appears that so, too, have the attitudes surrounding socially acceptable communication and behavior among others outside of a romantic relationship. Actions that may have been previously condemned as clear instances of infidelity now might be viewed as potentially platonic. In addition, the increasing use of social media platforms for sharing sensitive topics and connecting with like-minded others not only may have heightened exposure to infidelity discourse and awareness of circumstances surrounding infidelity but also may have softened the traditionally harsh perspectives of infidelity. This cultural evolution, suggested by changes in discourse structure over the past five years, may have ushered in a more receptive and open-minded environment.

Between the 2017 and 2021 Reddit threads, the structure of the user comments and the ways in which users participated in the threads remained relatively stable. The complexity and specificity of the language— measured by the average characters per word— have, however, significantly expanded regarding discourse around infidelity. As the Reddit comments were longer, users did have more to say on the subject of infidelity in 2021 versus 2017, which speaks to higher levels of personal involvement in infidelity discourse. As such, users appear to have placed more value and importance on the subject of infidelity. On the other hand, the greater frequencies of possibility modals in user comments from this Reddit sample suggest that, though users have more to say and have placed more value in infidelity discourse, they still appear to be more uncertain in their speech on the components of infidelity behaviors. This suggests that the users commenting on the 2021 thread lack clarity about what is or is not considered infidelity

to a greater extent than the users commenting on the 2017 thread. This may, in part, be due to opportunities presented by the Internet starting to be considered more acceptable rather than unfaithful in nature for those in committed relationships; or a lack of clarity and congruence regarding unacceptable Internet practices between romantic partners (Vossler & Moller, 2020). Thus, the fluctuating criteria for FtF infidelity and heightened conflicting specifications for appropriate online behavior in recent years may be contributing to the uncertainty users express when discussing acts of infidelity. To augment this uncertainty, the ubiquity of the modern methods of and avenues to initiating romantic behavior with potential partners may complicate the traditional definitions of relationships and exclusivity. Romantic partners that began their partnership in a dating app, message board, or gaming server might not abide by the same definitions and expectations of a relationship as those who began their partnership in their shared workplace, church, or school. Partners who meet and initiate relationships in different mediums, therefore, may have less explicitly defined conceptualizations of relationships, appropriate and inappropriate relationship conduct, and infidelity behavior.

As the users become more uncertain in their knowledge of what constitutes infidelity, it would stand to reason that there should be more available discourse space for reservations in attitudes toward infidelity to emerge. Because infidelity is not understood as distinctly defined, it could, therefore, be difficult to remain steadfast in staunch opinions regarding infidelity. However, though users were more uncertain about what behavior meets the criteria for infidelity or potentially even the standards by which infidelity is judged, users did not express greater reservations in their discourse as might be expected. Strikingly, users incorporated higher frequencies of emphatics in their discourse structure, which suggests that the users, while becoming progressively uncertain about what constitutes infidelity, may have strengthened the conviction in their opinions about infidelity over time. This paradox might be explained by the advancements in the lexical specificity and complexity of language—signaled by average characters per word—employed over time. When engaging in discussions online, the cognitive load of producing language closely resembles that of FtF conversations; which, due to temporal constraints, require simultaneous thought and speech (Ko, 1996).

Previous studies have shown that cognitive resources become stretched as a result of trying to engage in online discourse, and language complexity is subsequently reduced. Yet, the increased language complexity found across the three Reddit threads in this study implies that more cognitive resources are available for language production regarding infidelity, which may be due to the inflation in user confidence about their beliefs. As users become more confident and steadfast in their opinions on infidelity, they might not require the degree of cognitive resources as earlier online infidelity discourse in order to ascertain the nature of their beliefs. Instead, they might be able to more easily comprehend their beliefs about infidelity and convey them to others through specific, complex language use.

The users also expressed greater frequencies of support and justification in 2021 than in 2017 for acts of infidelity—implied through the use of adverbial causal subordinators—which appears to further substantiate the suggested growth in personal involvement and importance placed on infidelity discourse found in this study. The proliferation and dissemination of infidelity information for the lay audience in recent years has facilitated growth in the popularity of such content, which has influenced the level and type of coverage infidelity receives. Thus, this integration of infidelity discourse into mainstream contexts and subsequent rise in exposure to infidelity discourse may have ushered in greater support and justification of infidelity behaviors.

Additionally, the trajectory of relationships has evolved over time, which may explain the greater frequencies of prosocial tones. As noted in recent research, societal emphasis in romantic relationships has diverged from the traditional rhetoric (exclusivity, living together after the commitment to marriage, conservative sexual behavior, etc.) and shifted toward more exploratory romantic behavior without the commitment constraints (Labrecque & Whisman, 2017). Individuals are marrying later in life, marrying less often, and cohabitating with significant others before marriage at greater rates than ever before, further signifying less value placed on these traditional relationship ideals. Cohabitation rates prior to engagement or marriage, which have been shown to encourage relationship dissolution, are becoming increasingly prevalent due to socioeconomic burdens and other disadvantages experienced by individuals; thus, subsequently contributing to lower

marriage rates (Labrecque & Whisman, 2017; Sassler, 2010). As evidenced in the current sample, these societal trends of placing less value on romantic relationships, less adherence to traditional relationship guidelines, and more frequent cohabitation without the influence of commitment to marriage have appreciably complicated understandings of romantic relationships and infidelity behaviors, consequently prompting a rise in prosocial tones in the discourse on infidelity. This signifies that the tones of support and justification are being expressed more frequently in 2021 than in 2017, which appears to contradict the indication that users exhibited more conviction and inflexibility in mindset toward infidelity in their discourse. Taken together, these data signify that users in 2021 might have not only become more uncertain in the criteria for infidelity, more personally involved in the discourse, more supportive, and more likely to offer justifications for their own acts of infidelity or those of their fellow users but also more confident and convicted in their beliefs over the course of the three Reddit threads.

Level 2: Speech Act Interpretations

The goals of speech over the last five years indicate that cultural attitudes surrounding infidelity may have evolved to become more understanding and validating, fostering higher rates of self-disclosure and encouragement for those who have participated in or been affected by infidelity behavior. While many sensitive subjects are prevalently stigmatized and “frowned upon” in our Western culture, the focus of media and research on positive outcomes of affair recovery in the past few years has shifted to allow more room to discuss these subjects with less fear of interpersonal judgment (Laaser et al., 2017). Relationship distress and culturally shameful events such as infidelity have historically been the source of extreme reticence among couples, which perpetuates the cultural attitudes towards openly discussing these issues. As efforts to bring widespread attention to these issues and remove the stigma increase, and as individuals and couples seek additional support in overcoming these issues in spaces like social media (Andalibi et al., 2018), the discourse surrounding infidelity and other relationship stressors might have become less derogatory and more supportive.

Frequency measures of the speech act *Contradict* conducted in this study found that users engaged in fewer disagreements over time. That is, utterances were less frequently used with the aim of disagreeing, disputing, or challenging a claim or proposition made by another user. This pattern suggests that users were engaging in disagreements or arguments with each other less often when discussing infidelity, what constitutes infidelity, how the affair began and ended, and what led to the affair. This trend seems to suggest that the users challenged each other's statements regarding infidelity claims less frequently. It also suggests that users did not negatively react to each other's narratives of their infidelities as much as they had in the 2017 thread. It also suggests that they did not explicitly reject the behaviors or propositions of others regarding infidelity in the threads as often over time. Previous research highlights the contentious debate on clinical definitions of infidelity or, more inclusively, extradyadic activities, and has failed to come to a universal consensus (Weeks & Fife, 2014). In addition, what constitutes infidelity varies significantly between and within couples (Abughazaleh, 2020). Given this continued ambiguity around the criteria for infidelity, the positive reception of relationship psychologists and infidelity literature among the lay public, and the increasing popularization of social media as an outlet for negative emotional events over time, these results seem to indicate that users have less frequently perpetuated the stigma against all acts of unfaithfulness—whether clear or interpreted—and focused the discourse on other goals.

Frequency measures also suggest that the users, rather than coloring their discussions with the intent to argue, devoted their primary reactions to the posts of others to positivity. Specifically, as evidenced by the increase in the speech act main category *Connect*, utterances were more frequently used with the aim of finding a common ground among the users in the shared space. The use of more utterances meant to promote connection complements and explains the reduction in disagreements among users, as well. Thus, users responded to each other with more understanding, encouragement, forgiveness, and approval. Additionally, the users responded to each other with more appreciation and gratitude, which seems to have further facilitated interpersonal connections between users. It does not appear that these changes stem from a higher

approval of infidelity by itself. Rather, users engaged in more understanding and forgiving discussions about infidelity instead of blame-filled, hateful commentary towards those who had been involved in infidelity. Previous research indicates that not only do negative emotional events bring about the internal need to share the event with others but that the process of sharing the event with others also assists in processing and coping with the event (Rimé, 2009). As users are less frequently engaging in staunch defense of the widespread cultural stigma against infidelity in relationships via rejections and negative reactions, users seem to be diverting the goals of their discourse to emotion sharing and understanding with others.

Finally, the composition of the speech act category *Narrate* changed from 2017 to 2021 in every subcategory. Users provided fewer assertion claims, fewer elaborations, and fewer clarifications in their comments over time. Users also employed more justifications and more evidence-based information in their comments over time. Previous research on moral disengagement and moral agency suggests that providing a justification for engaging in morally questionable actions reduces the subsequent feelings and expressions of guilt for the involved party as well as negative judgments of the perpetrator by uninvolved parties (Bandura, 2002). This phenomenon, thus, promotes more understanding expressed by users and reduces expressions of hostility and criticisms, and embodies the primary changes in the goals of the discourse from 2017 to 2021. These changes suggest that we have culturally adapted to the availability of technology and the advantages it offers, such as allowing more avenues for emotional sharing of events between unaffiliated others within spaces dedicated to those who have experienced similar negative events. Given the added benefit of anonymity in this sociotechnical space, users seem to have become more comfortable engaging in more thorough discussions of their own experiences with infidelity as well as the experiences of others without the fear of interpersonal judgment and ostracization. Consequently, as time passes and new accessibility features of social media develop, users seem to have become more comfortable with expressing their true thoughts and engaging in sensitive discussions with unaffiliated others, as evidenced by the increased infidelity discourse engagement and narrative speech goals. As discussion on these sensitive subjects

becomes widely available and facilitates more in-depth debate over time, increased exposure to online infidelity discourse may have induced greater user demonstrations of connection and fewer disagreements with other users.

Conclusions

As suggested by the data from this study, online infidelity discourse has changed considerably in the last five years— thus indicating parallel overall cultural shifts in attitudes surrounding infidelity. Despite evidence of intensified positions regarding the derisiveness of infidelity, increased opportunities provided by the Internet and the popularity of social media may have exacerbated uncertainty and a lack of consensus on the criteria for infidelity. Yet, the mechanisms that contribute to the opportunities to engage in infidelity may have also provided sociotechnical spaces within which to safely discuss infidelity and connect with others affected by infidelity. While it appears to remain broadly “immoral and unethical,” the transformation and expansion of sensitive infidelity discussions over the past five years evidence a higher emphasis on prosocial interaction and disclosure of lived experiences rather than simply criticizing and contradicting experiences of others. Those in years past would have likely declared with resolution, “once a cheater, always a cheater” and refuted any notions of the alternative. Now, however, before such hasty conclusions, it might be said that “there are two sides to every story.”

Study Limitations and Recommendations

One limitation is the evolution in the popular uses of Reddit and other forms of social media over the past five years may account for the changes in the online infidelity discourse. Thus, modifications to facets of online user engagement (e.g., how, why, when, where, etc.) may have introduced confounds to the study findings. Further, the changes noted in this study could be due to the differences in popular social media trends over time rather than true differences in cultural attitudes. On the other hand, the noted

changes could be due to differences in subjective interpretations of the participation, structural, and speech act characteristics, as well as the subjective interpretations of the perceived influences emerging from the discourse. Additionally, this study only targets three threads over the course of 5 years beginning in 2017 from one social media platform, which may limit the generalizability of the findings.

Though all three threads were neutral in phrasing and tone, the wording of the threads was still phrased to solicit the accounts of those who had perpetrated the infidelity and may have influenced the user comments. The threads did contain comments from the perspectives of those who perpetrated the infidelity, those who were affected by infidelity, and those who neither perpetrated nor were directly affected by infidelity. Nonetheless, the thread phrasing may have deterred users from posting, which might have offered more traditional, less prosocial perspectives. Further, it is important to note that the findings were based on self-selected Redditors who chose to engage in these threads and, as such, may not generalize to other populations.

To discover truly implicit cultural attitudes regarding infidelity, examine reasonings that facilitate infidelity behavior, and comprehend the apparent historic discrepancies between them (Perel, 2017), we must thoroughly analyze how these norms are communicated (Vangelisti & Gerstenberger, 2014). As such, more extensive future studies should be conducted including earlier timepoints, more user comments, and other social media platforms to establish stronger conclusions regarding shifts in broad cultural attitudes toward infidelity.

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APPENDIX

Table 5.

Chi-square tests of independence for the speech act subcategories and main categories across all three Reddit threads

Subcategories	X²	df	P
2017 vs. 2019 Thread	403.95	14	.000
2019 vs. 2021 Thread	590.30	14	.000
2017 vs. 2021 Thread	581.00	14	.000
Total Corpus	787.61	28	.000
Main Categories			
2017 vs. 2019 Thread	158.30	4	.000
2019 vs. 2021 Thread	281.00	4	.000
2017 vs. 2021 Thread	268.80	4	.000
Total Corpus	354.10	8	.000

VITA

Michaela June (Mercer) DiPillo was raised in Franklin, Tennessee, by the parents of Benjamin and Jennifer Mercer. She is the oldest of four siblings, succeeded by Shawn, Naomi, and Brandon, and married William Nicholas DiPillo in 2018. Michaela graduated from the University of Tennessee—Knoxville in 2016, where she received a Bachelor of Arts degree in Psychology with honors and a minor in Child and Family Studies. In 2019, she began her master’s program in Experimental Psychology at the University of Tennessee—Knoxville under the direction of Drs. Jeff Larsen and Kristina Coop Gordon. Michaela will graduate with her Master of Arts in Experimental Psychology with a minor in Statistics in 2022.