

# Better relationships shut the wandering eye: Sociosexual orientation mediates the association between relationship quality and infidelity intentions

Journal of Social and  
Personal Relationships  
2021, Vol. 38(4) 1401–1409

© The Author(s) 2021

Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/0265407521995261

journals.sagepub.com/home/spr



Betul Urganci<sup>1</sup> , Barış Sevi<sup>2</sup> , and Ezgi Sakman<sup>1,3</sup>

## Abstract

People who lack quality relationships are more likely to engage in infidelity but how relationship quality is associated with infidelity is less clear. One psychological mechanism that might help to explain these associations is sociosexuality. Here, we tested two models in which we assessed whether overall sociosexuality and sociosexuality subscales (i.e., attitude, behavior, desire) explain how relationship quality is related to infidelity intentions by sampling individuals in exclusive relationships ( $N = 219$ ). We found that individuals with lower relationship quality had more unrestricted sexual orientation, which in turn predicted a greater intention toward infidelity. In addition, lower quality relationships were associated with greater intentions toward infidelity through behavior and desire, but not attitude dimensions of sociosexuality.

## Keywords

Exclusive relationships, infidelity, relationship quality, romantic relationship, sociosexuality

<sup>1</sup> Cornell University, USA

<sup>2</sup> University of Connecticut, USA

<sup>3</sup> Bilkent University, Turkey

## Corresponding author:

Betul Urganci, Department of Human Development, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY 14853-4401, USA.

Email: bu33@cornell.edu

Studies of representative samples have demonstrated that infidelity occurs in approximately 20–25% of all marriages (Fincham & May, 2017) and negatively influences (e.g., depression, suicidal ideation, divorce) both partners regardless of who was involved in infidelity (Baucom et al., 2017). Therefore, it is important to understand the factors that enhance the risks of infidelity in exclusive relationships. Research investigating the risk factors of infidelity primarily focuses on the personal level (see Haseli et al., 2019, for a systematic review), and relatively less is known about how relationship dynamics influence the likelihood of infidelity.

*The investment model* of commitment (Rusbult, 1980) suggests that satisfaction, alternative quality, and investments are three important elements that determine whether individuals are more or less committed to their relationships. Extending the investment model to the prediction of infidelity, researchers have suggested that people who are more satisfied with and more invested in their relationship, and who have fewer alternatives—hence are more committed to their current relationship—are less likely to engage in infidelity (Drigotas et al., 1999). In line with this theoretical framework, empirical research demonstrated that lower relationship satisfaction, sexual satisfaction, and commitment toward the partner predict infidelity (Allen et al., 2005; Atkins et al., 2001; Fincham & May, 2017). Yet, little is known about the process that underlies the association between the quality of relationship and infidelity. Here, we aim to extend these findings by investigating *sociosexual orientation* as a key psychological process that plays a role between relationship quality and infidelity (Mattingly et al., 2011).

Sociosexual orientation is defined as an individual's tendency toward engaging in uncommitted sexual relationships (Simpson & Gangestad, 1991). As compared to individuals with lower levels of sociosexuality (i.e., restricted sociosexual orientation), people with higher levels of sociosexuality (i.e., unrestricted sociosexual orientation) are more inclined to have short-term sexual relationships without commitment and emotional closeness, and they have more sexual partners. The spectrum of sociosexuality provides plurality in mating tactics, which can be adaptive in different contexts (Gangestad & Simpson, 2000). For example, in a context where sharing of resources and parental investment is needed, people can be inclined to be more restrictive in sociosexuality (Conroy-Beam et al., 2015), whereas in a context where accessibility to mates is low, people can be inclined to be more unrestricted in sociosexuality (Arnocky et al., 2016).

Unrestricted sociosexual orientation is an important predictor of infidelity. Individuals with unrestricted sociosexual orientation are more likely to engage in infidelity, have greater infidelity intentions, and more favorable attitudes toward infidelity (Barta & Kiene, 2005; Seal et al., 1994, Simpson & Gangestad, 1991). However, being in a relationship can change the context and influence the sociosexuality of an individual. Higher relationship quality may create a mating context that promotes restricted sociosexuality (i.e., resisting an attractive alternative), which might in turn prevent infidelity (Drigotas et al., 1999). In contrast, having poor relationship quality may dissolve this restriction and also breed the perception of acquiring a better relationship with a different partner (Conroy-Beam et al., 2015), which may, in turn, lead to infidelity. Yet, to our knowledge, no study has tested this research question.

Based on the investment model and evolutionary mating theories, we hypothesize that people who score low on relationship quality will have greater unrestricted sociosexuality, which in turn will predict greater infidelity intentions. Sociosexual orientation was recently redefined with three components: desire, attitudes, and behavior (Penke & Asendorpf, 2008). Therefore, we will also explore whether behavior, attitude, and desire components of sociosexual orientation act as parallel mediators between relationship quality and intentions toward infidelity. Finally, given that men report greater unrestricted sociosexuality than women (Barta & Kiene, 2005; Seal et al., 1994), we will explore gender as a possible moderator.

## Method

### *Participants and procedure*

According to a power analysis using G\*Power 3.1, for multiple linear regression with four predictors, at  $\alpha = .05$ , a minimum sample size of 155 is needed to provide 80% power to detect a small-to-medium effect size<sup>1</sup> ( $f^2 = .08$ ). As part of a larger project on individual differences and infidelity (Sakman et al., 2021; Sevi et al., 2020), participants were recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk. MTurk workers had to have an approval rate of 95% or higher to be deemed eligible to participate. Respondents were given a Qualtrics survey link to complete the study. Informed consent was received from all participants. All the measures were presented in a randomized order and the survey took approximately 15 minutes to complete. Three hundred and forty-three individuals completed the study and all of them were debriefed after completion. We eliminated the data of participants who failed the attention check questions ( $n = 34$ ), resulting in a sample size of 309.

For the current study, only participants who were in an exclusive romantic relationship were included in the analyses ( $N = 219$ , 53.42% women). The sample ranged in age from 20 to 70 ( $M_{\text{age}} = 37$ ,  $SD_{\text{age}} = 10.55$ ,  $Mdn_{\text{age}} = 35$ ). Relationship length ranged from 2 months to 54 years ( $M_{\text{year}} = 8.12$ ,  $SD_{\text{year}} = 9.10$ ), and 56.2% of the participants were married. We report all data exclusions, analyses conducted, and variables related to the present research questions.<sup>2</sup> All study procedures and materials were approved by the first author's Institutional Review Board.

### *Materials*

**Relationship quality.** The 18-item Perceived Relationship Quality Component Inventory (Fletcher et al., 2000) was used to assess relationship satisfaction, commitment, intimacy, trust, passion, and love on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *Not at all* to 7 = *Extremely*. A composite score for total relationship quality was computed by averaging these items, with higher scores indicating higher relationship quality. Cronbach's alpha for the items is .96.

**Sociosexual orientation.** The 9-item Revised Sociosexual Orientation Inventory (Penke & Asendorpf, 2008) was used to measure sociosexual orientation. The inventory consists of three subscales: behavior (e.g., "With how many different partners have you had sex within the past 12 months?";  $\alpha = .81$ ), attitude (e.g., "I can imagine myself being

comfortable and enjoying “casual” sex with different partners.”;  $\alpha = .76$ ), and desire (e.g., “In everyday life, how often do you have spontaneous fantasies about having sex with someone you have just met?”;  $\alpha = .93$ ). Each item was rated on a 9-point scale. A total sociosexual orientation score ( $\alpha = .87$ ) and scores for each subscale were computed by adding up the scores of each item. Higher scores indicate a higher tendency toward unrestricted sociosexuality.

**Infidelity intentions.** The 7-item Intentions Toward Infidelity Scale (Jones et al., 2011) was used to assess participants’ judgments of their likelihood of staying faithful to their romantic partner (e.g., “How likely would you be to hide your relationship from an attractive person you just met?”) on a 7-point scale (1 = *Not at all likely*, 7 = *Extremely likely*). Items were averaged to create a composite score, with higher scores indicating higher intention toward infidelity ( $\alpha = .85$ ).

## Results

First, we conducted bivariate correlation analyses (see Table 1). Relationship quality was negatively correlated with total sociosexuality score, all sociosexuality subscales, and infidelity intentions. Total sociosexuality score and all sociosexuality subscales were positively correlated with infidelity intentions. Next, we performed a series of t-tests to explore possible sex differences in study variables (see Table 1). Men reported higher scores on all sociosexuality scores and intentions toward infidelity.

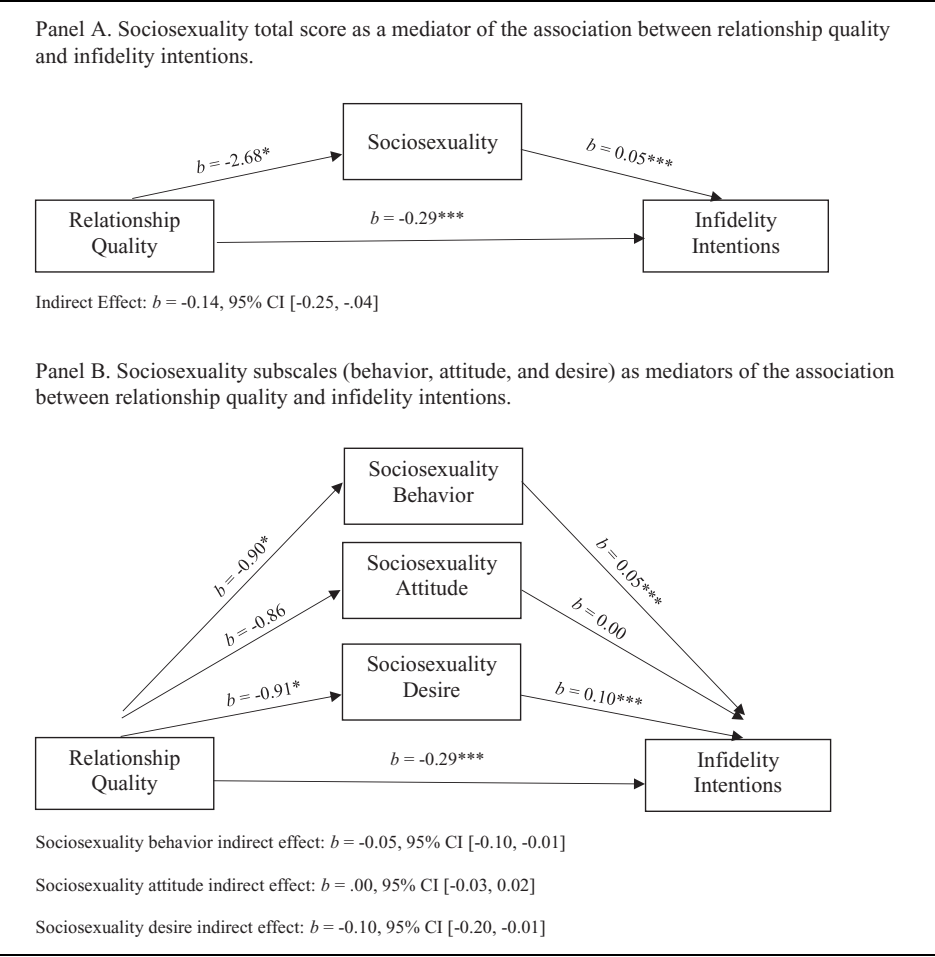
To test our hypotheses, we first examined a mediation model where the total sociosexuality score was tested as a mediator between relationship quality and infidelity intentions. We used Model 4 of Hayes’ (2018) bootstrapping procedure with 5000 samples to run the mediation model. As shown in Figure 1 Panel A, we found evidence for indirect effect of relationship quality on infidelity intentions through sociosexuality ( $b = -0.14$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ , 95% CI  $[-.25, -.04]$ ). The direct effect of relationship quality on infidelity intentions ( $b = -0.44$ ,  $SE = 0.09$ , 95% CI  $[-0.61, -0.27]$ ) was reduced after the indirect path through sociosexuality was added ( $b = -0.29$ ,  $SE = 0.07$ , 95% CI  $[-0.43, -0.16]$ ). These results suggest that sociosexual orientation mediated the association between relationship quality and infidelity intentions. The results were invariant across the sexes (95% CI  $[-0.15, 0.26]$ ).

Next, to explore which facets of sociosexuality orientation account for mediating relationship quality and infidelity intentions, we ran a parallel mediation model where we tested the three subscales of sociosexuality; behavior, attitude, and desire as possible mediators. Model 4 of Hayes’ (2018) bootstrapping procedure with 5000 samples was used to run the parallel mediation model. As shown in Figure 1 Panel B, we found evidence for indirect effects of relationship quality on infidelity intentions through sociosexual behavior ( $b = -0.05$ ,  $SE = 0.02$ , 95% CI  $[-0.10, -0.01]$ ) and sociosexual desire ( $b = -0.10$ ,  $SE = 0.05$ , 95% CI  $[-0.20, -0.01]$ ), but not through sociosexual attitude ( $b = 0.00$ ,  $SE = 0.01$ , 95% CI  $[-0.03, 0.02]$ ). The direct effect of relationship quality on infidelity intentions ( $b = -0.44$ ,  $SE = 0.09$ , 95% CI  $[-0.61, -0.27]$ ) was reduced after the indirect paths through sociosexuality subscales were added ( $b = -0.29$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ , 95% CI  $[-0.42, -0.17]$ ). These results suggest that sociosexual behavior and

**Table 1.** Bivariate correlations between study variables.

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Relationship Quality	—					
2. Total Sociosexuality	-0.18**	—				
3. Sociosexual Behavior	-0.16*	0.82***				
4. Sociosexual Attitude	-0.13*	0.79***	—			
5. Sociosexual Desire	-0.15*	0.84***	0.45***	—		
6. Infidelity Intentions	-0.33***	0.65***	0.61***	0.46***	—	
Men: <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	5.71 (1.00)	40.45 (16.35)	0.56***	0.38***	0.66***	—
Women: <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	5.65 (1.19)	30.65 (15.42)	11.98 (6.59)	16.08 (6.93)	12.39 (6.83)	3.10 (1.44)
<i>t</i> -value (Cohen's <i>d</i> )	0.38 (.05)	4.55*** (.62)	9.36 (5.61)	12.51 (7.29)	8.66 (6.18)	2.53 (1.45)
			3.14** (.43)	3.69*** (.50)	4.25*** (.57)	2.91** (.39)

Notes. \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .



**Figure 1.** Sociosexuality as a mediator of the association between relationship quality and infidelity intentions. Notes: \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ ; Values represent unstandardized regression coefficients.

sociosexual desire mediated the relation between relationship quality and infidelity intentions.<sup>3</sup> The results were invariant across the sexes for sociosexuality subscales (95% CI<sub>behavior</sub> [-0.12, 0.09]; 95% CI<sub>attitude</sub> [-0.09, 0.04]; 95% CI<sub>desire</sub> [-0.08, 0.28]).

Discussion

We examined whether sociosexuality mediates the association between relationship quality and infidelity intentions among individuals in exclusive romantic relationships for the first time. People who have lower levels of relationship quality reported more unrestricted sociosexuality, which in turn predicted greater infidelity intentions.

Moreover, lower quality relationships were associated with greater intentions toward infidelity through behavior and desire, but not the attitude dimension of sociosexuality. One possible explanation for this differential pattern of finding is that the attitude dimension can reflect different social constructs, such as an individual's moral views toward the issue (Haidt, 2001) and cultural expectancies from an individual (Penke & Asendorpf, 2008). Thus, the attitude dimension may be less impacted by the relationship dynamics and hence not emerge as a mediating factor between relationship quality and infidelity.

Our findings are consistent with existing research about the association between relationship dynamics (i.e., commitment) and infidelity (Fincham & May, 2017). Extending the prior literature, we also found that having unrestricted sociosexual orientation is one of the mechanisms explaining why people who lack in quality relationships are more likely to engage in infidelity. This finding is consistent with the idea that people hold a repertoire of mating tactics (Gangestad & Simpson, 2000) and they can pursue one or the other depending on the context (low-quality vs. high-quality relationships). Our findings show that investigation of the relationship context along with sociosexuality can provide better conceptualizations for intentions toward infidelity in romantic relationships.

Although the sample used in the study was diverse in terms of relationship length and status, given that MTurk workers might differ from subject pool participants (Hauser & Schwarz, 2016), future research should replicate these findings in more representative community samples. Moreover, the effect of sociosexuality on infidelity was found in several studies (Barta & Kiene, 2005; Seal et al., 1994; Simpson & Gangestad, 1991), yet future research should examine its independence from potential confounds, such as sexual satisfaction and long-term relationship desires. Lastly, we should be careful about not implying causation because relationship quality and sociosexual orientation were not experimentally manipulated in the current study.

In sum, the current study provided the first empirical support demonstrating that lower relationship quality predicts greater infidelity intentions through unrestricted sociosexuality. These findings have important implications for couples' counseling as infidelity is one of the most common reasons to seek therapy. It could be beneficial for future research to develop intervention programs for monitoring sociosexuality levels of individuals with low relationship quality to prevent potential acts of infidelity.


## Acknowledgments

The present research was conducted during the third author's post-doctoral research fellowship funded by Fulbright and the Scientific and Technological Research Council of Turkey.

## Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## ORCID iDs

Betul Urganci  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7449-7804>

Bariş Sevi  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9663-4339>

## Open research statement

As part of IARR's encouragement of open research practices, the authors have provided the following information: This research was not pre-registered. Reported data, used syntax, and materials can be accessed at [https://osf.io/h734x/?view\\_only=0825b2e48d3940349b9ef8a0503d8080](https://osf.io/h734x/?view_only=0825b2e48d3940349b9ef8a0503d8080).

## Notes

1. The effect size was based on previous findings on the relation of sociosexuality and infidelity (e.g. Mattingly et al., 2011).
2. Reported data, used syntax, and materials can be accessed at [https://osf.io/h734x/?view\\_only=0825b2e48d3940349b9ef8a0503d8080](https://osf.io/h734x/?view_only=0825b2e48d3940349b9ef8a0503d8080).
3. The mediation analysis was also tested with the *commitment* subscale as a predictor. The primary results regarding sociosexuality and its dimensions as mediators remained the same.

## References

- Allen, E. S., Atkins, D. C., Baucom, D. H., Snyder, D. K., Gordon, K. C., & Glass, S. P. (2005). Intrapersonal, interpersonal, and contextual factors in engaging in and responding to extramarital involvement. *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice*, 12, 101–130.
- Arnocky, S., Woodruff, N., & Schmitt, D. P. (2016). Men's sociosexuality is sensitive to changes in mate availability. *Personal Relationships*, 23, 172–181.
- Atkins, D. C., Baucom, D. H., & Jacobson, N. S. (2001). Understanding infidelity: Correlates in a national random sample. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 15, 735–749.
- Barta, W. D., & Kiene, S. M. (2005). Motivations for infidelity in heterosexual dating couples: The roles of gender, personality differences, and sociosexual orientation. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 22, 339–360.
- Baucom, D. H., Pentel, K. Z., Gordon, K. C., & Snyder, D. K. (2017). An integrative approach to treating infidelity in couples. *The Family Journal*, 16, 300–307.
- Conroy-Beam, D., Goetz, C. D., & Buss, D. M. (2015). Why do humans form long-term mate-ships? An evolutionary game-theoretic model. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 51, 1–39.
- Drigotas, S. M., Safstrom, C. A., & Gentilia, T. (1999). An investment model prediction of dating infidelity. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 77, 509–524.
- Fincham, F. D., & May, R. W. (2017). Infidelity in romantic relationships. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 13, 70–74.
- Fletcher, G. J. O., Simpson, J. A., & Thomas, G. (2000). The measurement of perceived relationship quality components: A confirmatory factor analytic approach. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 26, 340–354.
- Gangestad, S. W., & Simpson, J. A. (2000). The evolution of human mating: Trade-offs and strategic pluralism. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 23, 573–587.
- Haidt, J. (2001). The emotional dog and its rational tail: A social intuitionist approach to moral judgment. *Psychological Review*, 108, 814–834.
- Haseli, A., Shariati, M., Nazari, A. M., Keramat, A., & Emamian, M. H. (2019). Infidelity and its associated factors: A systematic review. *The Journal of Sexual Medicine*, 16, 1155–1169.



- Hauser, D. J., & Schwarz, N. (2016). Attentive Turkers: MTurk participants perform better on online attention checks than do subject pool participants. *Behavior Research Methods*, 48, 400–407.
- Hayes, A. F. (2018). *Introduction to mediation, moderation, and conditional process analysis: A regression-based approach* (2nd ed.). Guilford publications.
- Jones, D. N., Olderbak, S. G., & Figueredo, A. J. (2011). The intentions towards infidelity scale. In T. D. Fisher, C. M. Davis, W. L. Yarber, & S. L. Davis (Eds.), *Handbook of sexuality-related measures* (pp. 251–253). Routledge.
- Mattingly, B. A., Clark, E. M., Weidler, D. J., Bullock, M., Hackathorn, J., & Blankmeyer, K. (2011). Sociosexual orientation, commitment, and infidelity: A mediation analysis. *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 151, 222–226.
- Penke, L., & Asendorpf, J. B. (2008). Beyond global sociosexual orientations: A more differentiated look at sociosexuality and its effects on courtship and romantic relationships. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 95, 1113–1135.
- Rusbult, C. E. (1980). Commitment and satisfaction in romantic associations: A test of the investment model. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 16, 172–186.
- Sakman, E., Urganci, B., & Sevi, B. (2021). Your cheating heart is just afraid of ending up alone: Fear of being single mediates the relationship between attachment anxiety and infidelity. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 168, 110366.
- Seal, D. W., Agostinelli, G., & Hannett, C. A. (1994). Extradyadic romantic involvement: Moderating effects of sociosexuality and gender. *Sex Roles*, 31, 1–22.
- Sevi, B., Urganci, B., & Sakman, E. (2020). Who cheats? An examination of light and dark personality traits as predictors of infidelity. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 164, 110126.
- Simpson, J. A., & Gangestad, S. W. (1991). Individual differences in sociosexuality: Evidence for convergent and discriminant validity. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 60, 870–883.