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Unveiling the infidelity problem in exclusive manufacturer-distributor relationships:

A dyadic perspective

Abstract

Infidelity has been a common dark-side phenomenon in manufacturer-distributor (M-D) relationships, which, despite its harmful effects on operating performance and long-term viability, has received scant theoretical and empirical attention in marketing research. Using data collected from 103 manufacturers and 101 distributors located in the USA, we investigate this phenomenon by conceptualizing it as a developmental process, comprising motives, symptoms, manifestations, consequences, and remedies. Our findings show that, with a few exceptions, there are no significant differences between manufacturers and distributors with regard to their perceptions of: (a) the structural, processual, and contextual factors contributing to the emergence of infidelity; (b) the behavioral and attitudinal factors helping to diagnose partner infidelity; (c) the ambiguous, explicit, and deceptive manifestations of infidelity; (d) the possible passive, mild, or aggressive consequences of infidelity; and (d) the pre-emptive or post-hoc measures that need to be taken to cure infidelity.

Keywords: Infidelity; manufacturer-distributor relationships; business ethics.

1. Introduction

Infidelity is one of the most severe, deceptive, and unethical violations of an exchange business relationship, whereby one party explores, seeks, or establishes an illegitimate, parallel collaboration with another partner, who is a competitor of the other party with whom it has an exclusivity agreement (Leonidou et al., 2017a). It is considered the ultimate form of betrayal, mainly because resources, which are critical for the smooth operation of the working relationship, are channeled to an alternative partner (Shackelford et al., 2000).¹ In this way, the offending party breaches the exclusivity in the relationship and tries to promote its own interests, seeks to obtain its own rewards, and serves its own needs at the expense of the other party (Fitness, 2001). It is a behavior characterized by unmet needs, irresponsible actions, and deliberate deception (Egan & Angus, 2004).

In manufacturer-distributor (M-D) relationships, infidelity can be defined as the violation of a business partner's rules, norms, and expectations that regulate the relationship with the other party by seeking an illegitimate, parallel collaboration with another partner(s) (Drigotas & Barta, 2001). It is basically the abrogation of an agreement and/or abandonment of an exclusive relationship to the advantage of the instigator, but without provision or remedy for the other party (Griesinger, 1990). As such, infidelity is a specific form of negative opportunism, in which the interacting parties have an explicit or implicit contract of exclusivity, and one of the parties violates that contract to reap the benefits of multiple partners (Weiser & Weigel, 2014). Its opportunistic nature lies in the fact that there is a deliberate action by one party to violate the expectations of the other, by putting its self-interest above everything else in the relationship (Griesinger, 1990). It can also result in breach of trust because the instigator violates important norms shared with the victim in the relationship (Finkel et al., 2002; Jones et al., 2001). **Table 1** provides a comparison between these three inter-related constructs of infidelity, opportunism, and breach of trust.

Table 1: A comparison between infidelity, opportunism, and breach of trust

	Infidelity	Opportunism	Breach of trust
Definition	Violation of a relational norm concerning the nature of interactions with one's competitor by channeling relational resources to the latter (Drigotas et al., 1999).	Acts by one party in a relationship to seek unilateral gains at the expense of the other (Luo, 2006).	Trustor's perceptions of incidents of trustee's failure to act with ability, benevolence, and integrity (Bell et al., 2002).
Construct Operationalization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▫ This partner searches actively for business with our competitors, while it is doing business with us. ▫ This partner contacts our competitors to explore mutual business opportunities, while still doing business with our company. ▫ This partner shows greater motivation to engage in business activities with our competitors, rather than developing business with our company. ▫ This partner not only does business with our competitors selling similar goods, but also develops social bonds with them. ▫ This partner negotiates with our competitors to obtain better business terms than what we can offer. (Leonidou et al., 2017a). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▫ This partner alters the facts slightly. ▫ This partner promises to do things without actually doing them later. ▫ This partner fails to provide us with the support it is obliged to provide. ▫ This partner avoids fulfilling its responsibilities unless it is watched closely. (Yilmaz & Hunt, 2001). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▫ I felt that the trust I had placed on this partner was violated. ▫ I felt "let down" by my partner. ▫ I felt that this partner took advantage of the trust I had placed to him/her. (Dutta et al., 2011).
Ways of expression	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▫ Showing interest in competitive offers. ▫ Actively negotiating with a partner's competitor. ▫ Actually dealing with a partner's competitor. ▫ Disclosing vital information to a partner's competitor. ▫ Telling lies to cover up an illegitimate relationship with competitor. (Mattingly et al., 2010). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▫ Violating contracts. ▫ Exerting private control. ▫ Breaking promises. ▫ Withholding/distorting information ▫ Avoiding fulfilment of obligations. (Luo, 2006; Griesinger, 1990). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▫ Lack of attachment to the partner. ▫ Failure to capably execute obligations. ▫ Breaches in adherence to mutually agreed upon principles. ▫ Disconfirmation of expectations. (Bell et al., 2002; Lewicki & Bunker, 1996).

There have been many cases of infidelity in M-D relationships in business history, some of them ending up with catastrophic results for both interacting parties (see **Appendix A** for some examples of infidelity in manufacturer-distributor relationships). An analysis of these cases indicates that infidelity usually takes a covert form, whereby the violation of norms and rules in the relationship is not easily observable or identifiable, but is discovered accidentally

by the victim. There is also the potential for the offending party to proceed with infidelity actions on a repeated basis, and in some instances to do this with multiple partners outside the relationship. Infidelity can also take place in both domestic and international business settings, with the latter being more prone to such incidences, due to the high geographic and psychic distance that separates interacting parties.

Despite its importance, the business literature has shed virtually little light on inter-organizational infidelity, as opposed to other dark side issues, such as opportunism (Barnes et al., 2010), that have received considerable attention. In light of this gap in the literature, the purpose of this study is to provide a thorough conceptualization and empirical verification of the infidelity process in M-D relationships. As a result, we aim to provide an in-depth investigation of this thorny problem within the context M-D relationships by identifying the motives of exclusive partners to engage in infidelity, the symptoms responsible for diagnosing infidelity, the various forms that infidelity can take, the consequences of infidelity, and the available ways to prevent or heal the relational damage caused by infidelity. In doing so, we draw a parallel with infidelity in interpersonal relationships. We base our investigation on data collected from both parties in the M-D relationship, who have an agreement of exclusivity with their partner.

Our motivation for conducting this study is fourfold: (a) infidelity can seriously jeopardize the efficiency and effectiveness of a M-D working relationship and harm its financial outcomes (Heide et al., 1998; Johnston & Hausman, 2006); (b) infidelity is undertaken by someone who is assumed to be trustworthy and loyal, and can therefore cause bitter feelings, disappointment, and reduced motivation on the part of the victim (Rachman, 2010); (c) infidelity may lead to a termination of the relationship, which means that the investments involved will be lost and additional investments will be required to build a new relationship from scratch (Grünhagen et al., 2017); and (d) infidelity has implications beyond

the existing relationship, with the victim losing self-esteem and the offending party damaging its reputation in the wider business community (Kowalski, 2001).

This study contributes to the marketing literature in various ways. First, it introduces infidelity, a neglected construct in the study of dark side relationships, which can have serious direct and indirect detrimental impact on other relational constructs (e.g., trust, commitment, satisfaction) and jeopardize operating performance. Second, it enhances our limited understanding of infidelity in M-D relationships by synthesizing scattered knowledge on the subject into a meaningful organizing conceptual framework. Third, it underscores the dynamic role of infidelity, by proposing a stages-approach to its conceptualization, with each stage characterized by distinctive characteristics. Finally, it provides useful empirical insights from both interacting parties in the dyad, namely manufacturers and distributors.

2. Background research

To our knowledge, only two studies have so far been conducted on the infidelity problem in an inter-organizational context (particularly focusing on the relationship between exporters and importers): the first found that low levels of relationship quality increases the likelihood of infidelity incidents, which subsequently may result in reassessment or punishing actions against the perpetrating party (depending on the social ties and long-term focus of interacting parties) (Leonidou et al., 2017a), while the second revealed that relational distance, opportunism, and uncertainty, driven by the exercise of coercive power, are responsible for infidelity incidents by the powerless party (Leonidou et al., 2019). Notably, both studies focused on various factors that act as antecedents or outcomes of infidelity in buyer-seller relationships, rather than analyzing the stages of the infidelity process (which is the object of the present study). Despite this scarcity of research on the subject, there have been various attempts in the marketing literature that tackled aspects peripherally related to infidelity issues.

These can be classified into four groups: working relationship exclusivity, psychological contract breach, deteriorating behavioral atmosphere, and switching behavior motives.

2.1 Working relationship exclusivity

With regard to working relationship exclusivity, Fein and Anderson (1997) examined the antecedents of the degree of this exclusivity from both the distributor's and the supplier's sides. They concluded that the exclusivity offered by one party is reciprocated by the other, while transaction-specific investments and relational parties' resources (e.g., brand strength) increase, and competitive intensity decreases the degree of exclusivity. Extant research also indicates some positive aspects in exclusive M-D relationships. For instance, perceived levels of relationalism, communication, and channel performance is found to be higher in exclusive as opposed to non-exclusive relationships (Li & Dant, 1997). Moreover, in exclusive relationships, a manufacturer's cooperative attitudes are more likely to translate into distributor satisfaction (Iglesias & Vazquez, 2001), while a manufacturer may become more tolerant to violations of contracts made by resellers (Bergen et al., 1998). However, exclusive relationships are not free from problems. For example, Vinhas and Gibbs (2018) focus on triadic relationships between manufacturers and their exclusive and non-exclusive resellers in the same territory, noting that a manufacturer's communication with non-exclusive resellers could result in both high conflict and low commitment in its relationships with exclusive retailers.

2.2 Psychological contract breach

A psychological contract breach occurs when a party recognizes that its exchange partner has failed to honor his/her obligations in the working relationship in a way that this is disproportionate to the former's contributions (Morrisson & Robinson, 1997). Some scholars

(e.g., Blessley et al., 2018; Eckerd et al., 2013; Eckerd et al., 2016; Gillani et al., 2021; Mir et al., 2016) devoted attention to different aspects of the psychological contract breach and concluded that if the breach by the supplier is attributed to renegeing (as opposed to disruption) and if the breach is perceived as a major (as opposed to a minor one), this may lead the buyer to decrease the average order quantity and repurchase intention, lower fairness perceptions, and increase the likelihood to switch to another supplier. Some of the drivers of psychological contract breach reported in the pertinent marketing literature refer to unethical behavior, becoming submissive to avoid conflict/confrontation with the other partner, letting emotions influence relationship management, setting informally a new set of relational norms, and withholding and/or manipulating information critical for the smooth functioning of the working relationship (Hill et al., 2009; Thornton et al. 2017). The literature concludes that psychological contract breach decreases partner satisfaction, loyalty, and trust, as well as discourages open discussions on critical issues concerning the working relationship (Kingshott et al., 2020; Lusch et al., 2011; Thornton et al., 2017).

2.3 Deteriorating behavioral atmosphere

Deteriorating conditions in the behavioral atmosphere of inter-organizational relationships can provide a fertile ground for performing deceitful actions by interacting parties, with infidelity being a possible option. For example, in examining exporter-importer relationships, Leonidou et al. (2017b) concluded that high degrees of uncertainty, opportunism, partner incompatibility, relational distance, and conflict give rise to betrayal (a much wider concept incorporating also the possibility of infidelity) by the foreign buyer, which is responsible for reducing relational performance. However, enhanced levels of trust, communication, long-term orientation, and social bonding between interactive parties will help to reduce vulnerability to betrayal intentions (Leonidou et al., 2018). Also, Kaynak et al.'s (2015) study revealed that deceitful

actions of the supplier threaten the continuity of its relationship with the buyer. Finally, there are indications that relationships suffering from a lack of partner commitment, unresolved destructive conflict, and opportunistic acts) have a high likelihood to be terminated (Pressey & Selassie, 2007).

2.4 Switching behavior motives

A final group of studies centers on the motives of parties in inter-organizational relationships to switch partners, with the focus being particularly from the buyer's perspective. These switching behavior motives can be divided into economic and non-economic. Some of the economic motives examined were low switching costs, (Blut et al., 2016; Wathne et al., 2001), poor partner performance (Kim et al., 2008), better financial options offered by other suppliers (Wathne et al., 2001), and financial difficulties encountered in the relationship (Bygballe, 2017). On the other hand, non-economic switching motives referred to decreasing trust on the current partner (Eggert & Ulaga, 2010), loose social bonding and relational strength (Barry et al., 2008), and poor relationship value (Geiger et al., 2012; Hansen et al., 2008; Skarmeas et al., 2016). Finally, the appearance of other partners in the market, who are more attractive (in terms, for example, of better financial prospects, better reputation, and more reliability) than the current partner may give rise to opportunism by the tempted partner (Yen & Hung, 2017a), decrease satisfaction with and trust on the current partner (Yen & Hung, 2017b), and even lead to a termination of the relationship (Ping, 1993).

3. Theoretical explanations of infidelity

3.1 Interpersonal relationship perspective

Various theories have been proposed to explain infidelity in dyadic interpersonal relationships, namely the normative approach, equity approach, investment model perspective, and the social exchange theory. According to the *normative approach*, the likelihood of somebody engaging

in infidelity actions is attributable to societal norms, such as disapproval of extra-dyadic relationships, the censure attached to cheating, and a permissive social environment tolerating infidelity (Buunk & Bakker, 1995). Norms are essential to guaranteeing predictability, guarding against the excessive use of power, reducing relational uncertainty, eliminating unsatisfactory behaviors, and enhancing the cohesion of the relationship (Thibault & Kelley, 1959). In inter-organizational relationships, well-established relational norms (e.g., integrity, harmonization of conflict, flexibility) set the standard for acceptable behavior and deter interacting parties from engaging in opportunistic actions (Brown et al., 2000; Gundlach et al., 1995; Zhou et al., 2015). Infidelity-related norms can be distinguished as injunctive or descriptive. While the former refer to perceptions of the formal laws and norms that a specific society shares (e.g., the perception that other people disapprove of unfaithfulness in a relationship), the latter refer to perceptions of how somebody perceives the behavior of others (e.g., the perception that relatively many other people have been involved in infidelity issues) (Buunk & Dijkstra, 2006). Although both injunctive and descriptive norms can independently influence the likelihood of engaging in infidelity actions, descriptive usually outweigh injunctive norms (Buunk & Bakker, 1995). There is evidence that the violation by some people of a prohibition, such as engaging in disloyal behavior with other illegitimate partners, will induce others to engage in such prohibited activity (Buunk, 1980). Indeed, having regular contacts with people that have been unfaithful to their partners will increase the tendency to engage in infidelity (Buunk & Bakker, 1995).

The *equity theoretical approach* (also called the *evolutionary approach*) stresses the importance of benefits within a dyadic relationship, that are responsible for keeping the two partners together (Adams, 1965). In fact, the satisfaction derived from the relationship largely depends on: (a) having equitable exchanges that are mutually beneficial for both parties; and (b) the absence of similar alternative relationships from which benefits could also be derived.

The motivation to cheat the partner arises when one party is not satisfied with the overall quality of the working relationship and/or the quality of alternative relationships is superior to that with the existing partner (Drigotas & Barta, 2001). Thus, infidelity may signal serious inequities in the relationship that will drive one of the parties (and sometimes both) to seek an illegitimate parallel relationship with another partner (Adams, 1965). This is because, in an unfair relationship, the vulnerable party may feel entitled to obtain additional rewards from an extra-dyadic relationship in order to restore the perception of fairness (Buunk & Van Yperen, 1993; Sprecher, 1998). In a marketing context, high levels of satisfaction are found to encourage partners to continue the relationship by engaging in constructive behavior, while a low level of satisfaction will make alternatives appear more attractive and increase the desire to exit (Ping, 1993).

Under the *investment model perspective* (Rusbult, 1980), the primary force in relationship development is commitment, which denotes a psychological attachment to a partner and, thereby, the motivation to continue the relationship. Some of the factors determining commitment in a relationship include: the amount of satisfaction (whether happy or not) derived from within the existing relationship, the potential satisfaction provided from outside relationships, and the possible loss of investments (e.g., physical, monetary, etc.) if the relationship terminates (Drigotas & Barta, 2001). According to this theory, infidelity arises because of the lack of commitment to the relationship, which reduces the psychological attachment to the other party and weakens the willingness to maintain the relationship in the long term (Buunk & Dijkstra, 2006). Highly committed partners are less likely to be unfaithful, because: (a) they find potential alternative relationships unattractive in terms of the rewards and benefits derived; (b) they are reluctant to lose the time, effort, money and other resources they have devoted to the relationship; and (c) they seriously consider the long-term ramifications of such behavior on the existing relationship as a whole and the individual partner

per se (Drigotas et al., 1999). Hence, commitment, on the one hand, will reduce the incidence of temptations to engage in infidelity incidents, and, on the other, will resist the movement of resources from the existing to other parallel, illegitimate relationships. Not surprisingly, in inter-organizational relationships, committed partners belittle the alternatives and tend to maintain their partnership (Larsen & Lyngsie, 2017; Tsiros et al., 2009).

Finally, the *social exchange theory* states that a partner's infidelity contributes to the costs of the relationship that outweigh the rewards gained by the other party (Buunk & Dijkstra, 2006). In fact, some of these rewards are lost, because they are now diverted to a third party outside the relationship. The attraction of a rival relationship stems from the fact that the current relationship is unsatisfactory and counterproductive and that more attraction in terms of rewards is now found in the new relationship (Buunk & Dijkstra, 2006). The offending party also loses the motivation to put more energy, time, and effort into the primary relationship, and even thinks of its termination (Fitness, 2001; Jones & Burdette, 1994; Shackelford & Buss, 1996). Infidelity signifies the transformation from a partner seeking joint outcomes from a relationship, to decisions that are based on individualistic actions. It also marks the restructuring of the relationship from one based on solidarity and satisfaction, to another characterized by selfishness and deception. As expected, in inter-organizational relationships, the violation of norms and expectations diminishes the attractiveness of the relationship, encourages business partners to decrease transactions, and even to terminate the relationship completely (Eckerd et al., 2013; Lusch et al., 2011; Yang et al., 2012). According to this theory, the incidence of infidelity is higher during the early stages of relationship-building, where partners produce rewards for one another without expecting immediate returns, thus increasing the possibility of receiving better outcomes elsewhere (Mills & Clark, 1982). However, as the relationship develops, the interacting parties become more interdependent and as positive

experiences develop, these may bring rewards that will reduce the inclination to seek them outside the relationship (Rusbult & Buunk, 1993).

3.2 Inter-organizational relationship perspective

From an inter-organizational perspective, infidelity in dyadic relationships can be explained by transaction cost economics, agency theory, and cooperation theory. *Transaction cost economics* focuses on the association between the design of governance mechanisms for processing market transactions and organizational structure (Williamson, 1979). Transaction costs include *ex ante* costs like preparing and negotiating contracts and *ex post* costs like monitoring and enforcing contracts. Behaviorally, bounded rationality and opportunism give rise to transaction costs. Under conditions of environmental uncertainty (as is the case of facing the need to make adaptations to a new context) and behavioral uncertainty (as is the case with potential exclusivity violations), bounded rationality becomes more evident because decision-makers find it more difficult to make rational decisions and this may encourage a business partner to initiate a parallel illegitimate relationship hoping to have a better chance for survival (Leonidou et al., 2017b). In addition, specific assets dedicated to the partner will increase the likelihood of the business partner to act in a self-interest seeking manner, as in the case with infidelity which violates an exclusive relationship characterized by high levels of specific investments (Rindfleisch & Heide, 1997). Although infidelity acts lower trust to the instigator, it may not be easy for the cheated partner (who has made significant investments to an exclusive partner) to quit, and may have to use alternative ways to restore the relationship (Leonidou et al., 2017a).

According to *agency theory*, the dependence of one party (the principal) on another (the agent) to perform some action on behalf of the principal gives rise to an agency relationship (Bergen et al., 1992). At the center of this theory is to secure the most efficient contract to

govern an agency relationship, given the characteristics of the relational parties and difficulties in monitoring the agent due to environmental uncertainty and cost of acquiring information. By their very nature, exclusive manufacturer-distributor relationships represent agency relationships. A manufacturer's exclusivity agreements with a distributor could minimize the reluctance of the latter to promote the brands of the former due to the availability of these brands in other distributors (Bergen et al., 1992), although this may not be always to the best interest of the manufacturer (Desiraju, 2004). A principal is often exposed to two problems: (a) hidden actions at the post-contractual stage, that is, whether the agent has the characteristics sought by the principal and the type of strategies required to adopt in order to discover these; and (b) hidden information at the pre-contractual stage, that is, how the principal should appraise and reward the agent's performance to ensure goal compatibility and the type of information strategies needed to pursue to make these assessments (Bergen et al., 1992). The existence of information asymmetry between the principal and the agent, coupled with environmental uncertainty, make it difficult to ensure that the agent will honor the contract, with this problem becoming more acute in the case of exclusive agreements which usually have longer duration and are more binding (Dwyer et al., 1987). This situation provides a fertile ground for the development of infidelity, because environmental uncertainty will justify infidelity acts, while information asymmetry will minimize the risk of being detected (Ju et al., 2014; Katsikeas et al., 2009).

Cooperation theory sets cooperation as an alternative for competing/self-interest seeking acts and posits that if relational parties cooperate they will be better off (Axelrod, 1984). The theory indicates that parties cooperate when they believe that the other party will also be willing to cooperate (Kramer, 2010). It also posits that it is best to cooperate with a party who will reciprocate in the future, because cooperation evolves when chances are high for the parties to repeatedly interact and have a stake in future interactions (Axelrod, 1984).

Cooperation precludes the possibility of having a parallel relationship with other competing firms (Marvel, 1982) and this is particularly true in the case of exclusive relationships (like the one between a manufacturer and a distributor), whose long-term focus makes interacting parties more willing to adapt (Han et al., 2014). A cooperative relationship is less vulnerable to infidelity incidents because interacting parties: (a) are involved in each other's activities, which result over time in converging interests/goals that motivate parties to preserve the relationship (Gadde & Snehota, 2000; Heide & John, 1990; Luo, 2008); and (b) make significant mutual investments in the working relationship that increase expected rewards in the long run, providing in this way an incentive to maintain the relationship and avoid any infidelity attempts (Ring & Van de Ven, 1994; Nevins et al., 2006).

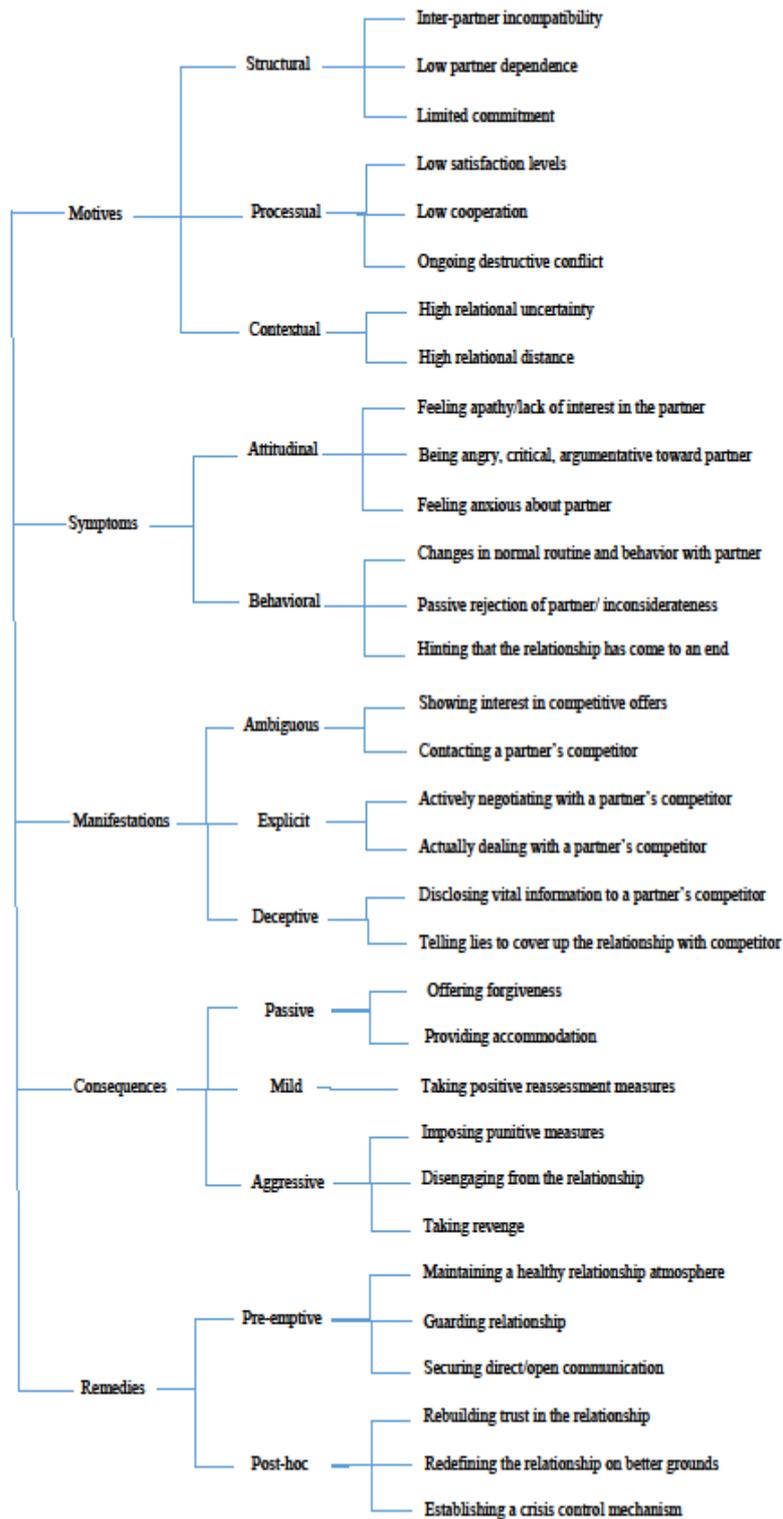
4. Research method

The method adopted to carry out our research comprised the following steps. First, two experts performed a comprehensive review of the literature on infidelity within the realm of interpersonal relationships, where this topic has been extensively researched and assessed. The outcome of this review was to identify a wide range of concepts and ideas that could be transferred into M-D relationships, taking into consideration their equivalence at two levels of analysis: (a) *ontological*, that is, achieving correspondence between constituent elements in both domains; and (b) *analogical*, that is, achieving correspondence between links among constituent elements in both domains (Chen et al., 2013; Hunt & Menon, 1995). These concepts and ideas were categorized into groups based on previous reviews of the literature (e.g., Allen et al., 2005), established theories (e.g., Drigotas & Barta, 2001; Shackelford & Buss, 1997a,b), and various typologies developed by researchers in the domain of interpersonal relationships (e.g., Buss, 1988; Shackelford & Buss, 1997a; Mattingly et al., 2010). We have also drawn on categorizations of the developmental process of other psychological constructs, such as conflict

(Pondy, 1967). The result of this analysis was to identify five different stages of infidelity, namely motives, symptoms, manifestations, consequences, and remedies.

A panel of business academics was invited to assess and verify the applicability, transferability, and relevance of these concepts in an M-D relationship context, taking into consideration the similarities and differences between source and target domains (Hunt & Menon, 1995). In addition, to confirm that the categorization of the various concepts was correct, the panel of academics was asked: (a) to take the full list of concepts identified and classify them into each of the five groups by providing first the title of each group; and (b) to try to assign titles to each of the five groups of concepts, having first removed the titles from them. This resulted in some of the concepts being removed, and some others changing category. The various concepts relating to infidelity and their categorization were further refined in a brainstorming session with business managers who worked in either manufacturing or distributing organizations. The purpose of this session was to verify the practical relevance and applicability of the derived categorization of the infidelity process (Bantham et al., 2003). In doing so, participant managers were asked to articulate incidents of infidelity to which their companies had been exposed from their manufacturers or distributors, as well as to comment on the way in which the various components of the organizing framework were relevant and applicable to their case. They were also requested to add to this framework any other items considered appropriate for inclusion, based on their practical experience. The organizing framework was also augmented with input from the business-to-business relationships literature, such as various dark side issues (e.g., contract breach, search for alternatives, relationship termination), their antecedents and outcomes (e.g., Lusch et al., 2011; Tsiros et al., 2009), and the use of various precautionary and/or combative mechanisms (e.g., Dant & Gleiberman, 2011). The resulting organizing framework is presented in **Figure 1**.²

Figure 1: Organizing framework of infidelity in exclusive M-D relationships



We sought also to obtain factual data on the incidence of appearance of each of the items included in the classificatory framework from both manufacturers and distributors located in the U.S., using the Qualtrics electronic service. To be eligible to participate in the survey, participants had to be exposed to at least one infidelity incidence by their distributors or manufacturers with whom they had an exclusivity agreement. Among the 1,603 manufacturers and 1,479 distributors to which the survey was made available, 354 manufacturers and 351 distributors (i.e., a proportion of 22.1% and 23.7% respectively) did not respond, while of the remainder, only 335 manufacturers (incidence rate 26.8%) and 352 distributors (incidence rate 31.2%) stated in a screening question that they were exposed to an infidelity situation by exclusive partners.³ However, of those only 103 manufacturers and 101 distributors (i.e., a response rate of 30.7% and 28.7% respectively) proceeded with fully completing the questionnaire. Although these response rates are above the average of similar research on buyer-seller relationships (Aykol & Leonidou, 2018), to exclude the possibility of non-response bias, we followed Armstrong and Overton's (1977) procedures, where the data collected from early respondents were compared to those of late respondents, revealing no particular problems. The questionnaire contained a series of closed-ended questions, corresponding to the motives, symptoms, manifestations, aftermath, and remedies relating to infidelity incidences. Respondents had the option to select any of the alternative dimensions provided for each of the stages of infidelity. Key informants were mainly general managers, vice presidents, marketing managers, purchasing managers, or relationship managers.

5. Research findings and discussion

The results of our analysis are presented in **Table 2**, while a more detailed discussion is presented along the five dimensions of the infidelity process in the following.⁴

Table 2: Manufacturers' versus distributors' views on issues relating to the infidelity process

Dimensions of the infidelity process in M-D relationships	M (%)	D (%)	χ^2	p-value
A. Motives for infidelity				
<i>Structural motives</i>				
Our partner felt very little commitment to us.	28.8	38.4	2.261	.133
Our partner was not very dependent on us.	28.8	31.3	.216	.642
Our goals, strategies, and expectations were incompatible with this of our partner.	26.7	33.3	1.178	.278
<i>Processual motives</i>				
Our partner was dissatisfied/disappointed with our overall relationship.	43.2	32.3	2.145	.143
Our partner was neither conscientious nor responsive about maintaining a cooperative relationship.	35.0	40.4	.772	.380
Our working relationship was characterized by a high degree of conflict.	28.8	28.3	.000	1.000
<i>Contextual motives</i>				
Our relationship was characterized by a great degree of uncertainty.	20.6	35.4	5.643	.018
We were not familiar with our partner's business environment, as well as organizational culture, values, and attitudes.	15.5	20.2	.866	.352
B. Symptoms of infidelity				
<i>Attitudinal symptoms</i>				
Our partner became increasingly angry and critical about our actions in the relationship before the infidelity problem was revealed.	31.9	39.4	1.407	.236
Our partner was showing feelings of anxiety and guilt in the relationship before the infidelity problem was revealed.	30.9	40.4	2.198	.138
Our partner displayed apathy and indifference toward our relationship before the infidelity problem was revealed.	22.7	30.3	1.663	.197
<i>Behavioral symptoms</i>				
Our partner had not taken us into consideration on aspects concerning our relationship before the infidelity problem was revealed.	31.9	33.3	.092	.762
We had often caught our partner behaving in an abnormal way before the infidelity problem was revealed.	25.8	26.3	.026	.871
Our partner had several times given hints to terminate our relationship before the infidelity problem was revealed.	20.6	18.2	.130	.718
C. Manifestations of infidelity				
<i>Ambiguous manifestations</i>				
Our partner contacted our competitor(s) to explore the possibility of business opportunities, while still doing business with us.	31.9	53.5	9.934	.002
Our partner was caught searching for business with our competitor(s), while doing business with us.	27.8	28.3	.025	.874
<i>Explicit manifestations</i>				
While doing business with us, our partner was seriously negotiating with our competitor(s) about the possibility of having business with them.	45.3	41.4	.184	.668
Our partner had actually transacted business with our competitor(s), while still doing business with us.	26.8	26.3	.016	.898
<i>Deceptive manifestations</i>				
Our partner released information, which we gave it in confidence, to our competitor(s) with the purpose of harming us.	35.0	32.3	.090	.764
Our partner had often told us lies to cover up the new business relationship that it was going to establish with our competitor(s).	34.0	37.4	.352	.553
D. Consequences of infidelity				
<i>Passive stance</i>				
We sought accommodation with our partner and tried to carry on our collaboration.	30.9	42.4	3.125	.077
We have forgiven our partner for its actions to establish business relationship with our competitor(s).	13.4	22.2	2.805	.094
<i>Mild reactions</i>				
We tried to clarify and resolve the causes of pushing our partner to seek another partner, so that it does not happen again.	42.2	51.5	2.013	.156
<i>Aggressive responses</i>				
We terminated the relationship with our partner after we heard about its intentions/actions to establish a business relationship with our competitor(s).	38.1	38.4	.021	.884
We imposed several punitive measures on our partner, such as financial penalties and operational sanctions.	30.9	26.3	.397	.529
We tried to revenge our partner by taking several actions, such as spreading bad news and seeking financial compensation.	17.5	12.1	2.120	.145
E. Remedies for infidelity				
<i>Pre-emptive measures</i>				
We tried to minimize such "infidelity" incidents in the future by establishing a more direct and open communications with our partner.	51.5	59.6	1.633	.201
To avoid similar problems in the future, we paid particular attention to protecting our relationship with our partner from having contacts with our competitor(s)	43.3	45.5	.183	.669
To avoid the appearance of such "infidelity" incidents in the future, we put an effort in maintaining a harmonious atmosphere in the relationship with our partner.	25.8	34.3	1.947	.163
<i>Post-hoc actions</i>				
We sat together with our partner and found commonly agreeable ways to redefine our relationship on a more solid and healthy base.	37.1	44.4	1.333	.248
Rebuilding trust in the relationship with our partner was one of our key priorities in order to avoid similar infidelity problems in the future.	28.8	34.3	.842	.359
We put a "crisis resolution" mechanism in place in order to identify and resolve early in advance issues with our partner that may result in "infidelity."	26.8	26.3	.000	1.000

Note: M refers to manufacturers' views of infidelity committed by their exclusive distributors (n=103)

D refers to distributors' views of infidelity committed by their exclusive manufacturers (n= 101)

5.1 Motives for infidelity

Infidelity in M-D relationships can be driven by three broad categories of motives, namely *structural* (that is, limited commitment, low partner dependence, and incompatibility), the *processual* (that is, low satisfaction, limited cooperation, and continuing conflict) and the *contextual* (that is, uncertainty and distance).

5.1.1 Structural motives

The existence of *limited commitment* is an important factor (reported by 28.4% of the manufacturers and 38.4% of the distributors), which can push one party in the relationship to cheat on the other with an illegitimate partner. This is because commitment shows how much a partner needs or desires the existing relationship and helps to resist violations of relational norms, even if doing so is against its self-interest (Drigotas et al., 1999). Usually, a committed party wants to stay in a relationship for a long time and reap long-term benefits, thus reducing the chances of being unfaithful. This can be attributed to: (a) the many sacrifices already made in the relationship that make alternative partners look less attractive; (b) the possible loss of the various investments accumulated over time if the relationship were terminated; and (c) the non-materialization of the possible long-term gains expected to be obtained from the relationship when changing a partner (e.g., Dutta et al., 1999; Fein & Anderson, 1997; Padgett et al., 2020; Tsiros et al., 2009).

Low dependence (reported by 28.8% of the manufacturers and 31.3% of the distributors) can also lead a partner to seek another parallel, illegitimate relationship, because it has little to lose if the relationship is terminated (Kumar et al., 1995).⁵ Over time, the offending party may acquire new knowledge, skills, and superior status in the market, which may reduce its dependence on the relationship, as well as allow it to find better alternatives that were non-existent when the relationship was initiated (Buss et al., 2017). As a result, it will be more flexible about finding the resources required for its company elsewhere, fulfilling its

expectations using external partners, and accomplishing its goals by relying on sources from outside the relationship. In addition, any punishments or sanctions caused by the engagement in infidelity actions will have a limited impact on the less dependent party. However, in the case of a party with high dependence, continuity will be sought with the current partner by making relationship-specific investments and adaptations in the relationship (Ganesan, 1994).

Infidelity is also likely to arise in the case of *incompatibility* of goals, strategies, and expectations between partners in the working relationship (reported by 26.7% of the manufacturers and 33.3% of the distributors). When partners are incompatible, it is very likely that a party will seek to promote its own interests at the expense of the other, will be reluctant to devote necessary resources to the relationship, and will engage in non-collaborative behavior, which can create instability in the relationship, promote non-reciprocal actions, and weaken relational bonds (Das & Rahman, 2010). All these will subsequently make the working relationship more vulnerable to violations of trust and increase the probability of seeking to find an illegitimate alternative partner. In contrast, compatible partners share feelings of harmony and respect, pursue actions of mutual interest, and cultivate a spirit of trustworthiness, all of which are vital in order to protect the relationship from external temptations (Sarkar et al., 2001).

5.1.2 Processual motives

A firm's *dissatisfaction* with the relationship is usually the main cause of infidelity (declared by 3.2% of the manufacturers and 32.3% of the distributors), mainly because any positive expectations of the existing partner are not being met. In fact, a dissatisfied partner will seek to obtain benefits from a relationship with another external partner, due to the perception that the rewards gained from the existing relationship are not enough to outweigh the costs suffered (Buunk & Dijkstra, 2006). As a result, the offending party will reduce the emphasis placed on the relationship with the current partner and gradually transfer its resources to another more

rewarding relationship, such as that of the partner's competitor (Evanschitzky et al., 2020). Satisfaction with the relationship is highly dynamic, in the sense that some changes may negatively affect partner value (e.g., being severely affected by unfavorable economic conditions), while others may positively enhance a competitor's value (e.g., introducing more advanced technology) (Buss et al., 2017; Tóth et al., 2020). This will lead the instigator to transfer its attention and business to the partner's competitor, which now offers the highest value (Dion & Banting, 1995).

A total of 35.0% of the manufacturers and 40.4% of the distributors argued that *less cooperative* relationships are more vulnerable to infidelity incidents. This can be attributed to the fact that the offending party: (a) is very likely to act in its own self-interest, rather than caring about its partner and the relationship as a whole; (b) no longer values the relationship with the current partner and, therefore, seeks to transfer resources to alternative firms which are more attractive; (c) finds that the benefits of collaborating with the existing partner are less than the costs paid and the sacrifices made; and (d) no longer bothers to put energy, time, and effort into a relationship from which there is no equitable exchange (Fitness, 2001; Smith et al., 1995). On the other hand, a high level of cooperation will facilitate the smooth running of the relationship and safeguard its continuation by shared problem-solving, coordination of activities, and reciprocal behavior.

The existence of an *ongoing conflict* (expressed in terms of disagreements, confrontation, and tension) between the interacting parties was also cited by 28.8% of the manufacturers and 28.3% of the distributors as a factor that can be conducive to infidelity. This can be ascribed to the fact that conflict impedes the smooth functioning of the relationship by decreasing the value attached to it, makes striving for joint goals meaningless, and increases doubts about its future development and success (Leonidou et al., 2006). Conflict is characterized by destructive acts, blocking behaviors, and the violation of relational norms and

expectations, which prevent interacting parties from accomplishing their goals, materializing their strategies, and obtaining optimal solutions to common problems (Anderson & Narus, 1990). Ongoing conflict results in the withholding of the resources needed by the partner, which subsequently leads the latter to search for these resources elsewhere.

5.1.3 Contextual motives

A fifth (20.6%) of the manufacturers and 35.4% of the distributors mentioned that infidelity can arise when there is a *high level of uncertainty* in the relationship. Such uncertainty can be the result of limited understanding of the roles performed by the interacting parties, the misalignment of relational goals, and the inadequate exchange of relevant and timely information. Uncertainty implies a lack of confidence in the suitability of the partner, the value derived from the relational exchange, and the future direction of the relationship (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999). Under conditions of high uncertainty, difficulties arise in accurately measuring the costs and benefits of the relationship, thus creating a reluctance to invest additional resources and stimulating a desire to channel these resources into alternative, illegitimate relationships. The existence of high uncertainty also leads to both ill-defined and unfulfilled expectations associated with the relationship, which is responsible for reducing relation-specific investments and promoting deceptive behavior (Elangovan & Shapiro, 1998).

The existence of a *high distance* (e.g., differences in personalities, norms, operating methods) between the interacting parties is also a cause to infidelity incidents, as reported by 15.5% of the manufacturers and 20.2% of the distributors. This is because distance: (a) makes each party's goals less clear and the investments devoted to the relationship less visible, thus increasing the possibility of transferring resources to alternative partners (Hallén & Sandström, 1991); (b) can create difficulties in building close social relationships between boundary spanners of the two parties, which are vital to maintaining a smooth working relationship (Kaufmann and Carter, 2006); and (c) facilitates a tendency to separate, due to the existence

of inconsistent frames of reference, different interpretation of strategic issues, and incongruent expectations (Griffith & Dmitrova, 2014; Obadia, 2013).

5.2 Symptoms of infidelity

Changes in the attitudes and behavior of the instigator may help in the diagnosis of infidelity. Attitudinal changes include unusual *anger, criticism, and argumentation* directed at the partner, *anxiety and stress*, and *apathy and disinterest* in the relationship. Behavioral changes, on the other hand, involve *passive rejection, and inconsiderateness, changes in normal routine and behavior*, and providing hints that the *relationship has come to an end*.

5.2.1 Attitudinal symptoms

Infidelity may be signaled by the uncharacteristically *angry, critical, and argumentative* attitudes of the offending party, as mentioned by 31.9% of the manufacturers and 39.4% of the distributors (Shackelford & Buss, 1997a). This rebellious behavior can be ascribed to the guilt the party feels about the infidelity it has committed, particularly if it believes that the victim is suspicious of the deception. Another explanation of this behavior has to do with an attempt by the offending party to hide the infidelity incident from the victim by diverting the latter's attention to other issues. The perpetrator may also express anger to the victim, in order to shift the blame for having an extra-dyadic relationship to the latter (Kowalski, 2003). All the above situations are rooted in the altered perception about the current partner versus the new partner, as the comparison between the two reduces the value of the former (and make its contributions less valuable) as opposed to the latter (Malshe & Friend, 2018).

Another symptom of infidelity, reported by 30.9% of the manufacturers and 40.4% of the distributors, is when the offending party *adopts an anxious and stressful attitude*. The instigator may express anxiety by becoming unusually apologetic and/or avoiding any interaction with the current partner (Shackelford & Buss, 1997a). This can be attributed to the

fear of revealing the infidelity sooner or later, thus making the instigator accountable for the transgression. The anxiety may increase when the instigator regrets the infidelity episode and has to continue exclusive business with the current partner, but knows that this will probably cease once the offence is revealed. Under such conditions, the violator may come up with unreasonable demands, cause emotional unrest, and even exert strong pressure on the victim. This will gradually strain the working relationship and reduce the benefits associated with it (Holmlund-Rytkönen & Strandvik, 2005). It may be a tactic by the violator to widen the distance from the current partner and gradually lead to ending the relationship.

Beginning to *feel apathy and disinterest* in the relationship is another symptom of committing infidelity (noted by 22.7% of the manufacturers and 30.3% of the distributors) (Shackelford & Buss, 1997a). This is expressed, for example, by a reduction in the time, effort, and resources put into the working relationship, as well as a reluctance to perform its duties and obligations in the same way as before. There are also signs of indifference by the offending party toward actively participating in the relationship, such as collaborating on joint projects, materializing strategic plans, and accomplishing common goals. A slowdown in information exchange becomes also apparent, as well as avoiding/rejecting participation in meetings and contacts (Malshe & Friend, 2018). The victim may even discover that any effort to satisfy and delight the partner is no longer reciprocated, thus evoking a feeling of abandonment. These signs indicate that the offending party no longer cares about creating value in the working relationship or contributing to its performance, but wants to channel its efforts toward another competing business.

5.2.2 Behavioral symptoms

Proceeding with a *passive rejection and behaving in an inconsiderate way* is an indication that infidelity was committed in the relationship (reported by 31.9% of the manufacturers and 33.3% of the distributors). Passive rejection involves an indirect, rather than a direct, rejection of the

partner (Shackelford & Buss, 1997a). This may be expressed by inventing excuses for not having time to put effort into the relationship (e.g., personnel on vacation). Inconsiderateness, on the other hand, represents carelessness about the feelings, expectations, and rights of the partner. The victim may notice that social bonds with the boundary spanners of the instigator are starting to weaken. For example, their meetings may take place less frequently and be of shorter duration than usual or the boundary spanners may adopt a transaction approach, as opposed to striving for a collaborative relationship (Storbacka, 2011).

Changes in the normal routine and behavior in relationship can also be a symptom of infidelity, as indicated by 25.8% of the manufacturers and 26.3% of the distributors. For instance, the instigator may suddenly start to stage an unusually low performance because of devoting limited resources (e.g., time, personnel, space) to more than one partner with different (and even conflicting) goals (Shackelford & Buss, 1997a). Moreover, the instigator may make improvements to its own resources (e.g., technological, human, physical), which are not used in the relationship with the current partner. Furthermore, the instigator may suggest some new methods and procedures of doing business in their working relationship, which have been adopted from its interaction with the extra-dyadic partner (Roos et al., 2004).

Providing hints to the other partner that the *relationship has come to an end* is also a symptom of infidelity being committed, which was reported by 20.6% of the manufacturers and 18.2% of the distributors. Some of these hints are: the slowdown or complete interruption of contacts with the victim, the withholding of resources that are critical for the smooth functioning of the working relationship, and showing indifference about its long-term prospects. In addition, the instigator may adopt a cost-escalation strategy, that is, it can raise the cost of the relationship with unrealistic expectations and ongoing conflict, leading the victim to make the termination (Habib et al., 2020). Further, the instigator may even not extend the contract by finding excuses

(e.g., unavailability of time) or by blaming the victim for violating some terms of the agreement (e.g., selling/payment terms) (Baxter, 1985).

5.3 Manifestations of infidelity

Infidelity is manifested in various forms, which can be categorized as *ambiguous* (that is, contacting a partner's competitor and paying attention to competitive offers), *explicit* (that is, actively negotiating with the partner's competitor and actually doing business with an extra-dyadic partner), and *deceptive* (that is, disclosing confidential information and telling lies) (Mattingly et al., 2010).

5.3.1 Ambiguous infidelity

One type of ambiguous infidelity is manifested by making efforts to *contact a partner's competitor* for the purpose of exploring the possibility of doing business together (mentioned by 31.9% of the manufacturers and 53.5% of the distributors). Such contacts represent an intention real enough to switch to the competitors. These contacts may take the form of planned business meetings, participation in trade shows for the purpose of meeting new partners, or interactions with new partners through third parties. In fact, this behavior might be considered as a tactic by the instigator to ensure stability and performance in the market, especially when there is a decrease in the value of the current business partner due to external (e.g., economic crisis) or internal (e.g., bad liquidity) problems (Anderson & Jap, 2005). The instigator may also seek to establish contact with alternative partners when it anticipates that the performance derived from them will be much higher compared to that of the current partner (Buss et al., 2017).

More than a quarter of the manufacturers (27.8%) and distributors (28.3%) stated that an ambiguous infidelity may also appear when one of the parties in the relationship is systematically *attentive to competitive offers*. Such offers may take, for example, the form of

providing higher quality, lower prices, and better payment/selling terms and can serve mainly to balance the costs of defecting from the existing relationship. The instigator may pay more attention to these offers when its relationship with the current partner is characterized by high distance, low commitment, and low satisfaction, as well as in the case of relationships that are close to termination (Skarmeas et al., 2016). The instigator searches for companies with better offers, in order to obtain resources that will help to secure its long-term survival and improve its financial performance (Schmitt & Buss, 2001).

5.3.2 *Explicit infidelity*

Actively negotiating with a partner's competitor to achieve better terms, compared to those offered by the current partner, provides a form of explicit infidelity as indicated by 45.3% of the manufacturers and 41.4% of the distributors. Such negotiations aim to find a back-up partner and can be compared to simulations of long-term relationships without a full commitment (Buss et al., 2017). These help the instigator to have a more thorough evaluation of alternative partners on various aspects, such as exploring whether their structures, goals, and strategies are compatible, evaluating their readiness to collaborate, and assessing the costs/benefits associated with the potential relationship. During this evaluation process, the instigator constantly compares and contrasts the value of its current partner to that of the potential new partner, as well as calculating the possible costs from exiting the relationship (e.g., financial penalties from possible law suits) (Dwyer et al., 1987).

Actual dealing with another firm, which is a direct competitor of the other party in the relationship, comprises the most severe form of infidelity, reported by 26.8% of the manufacturers and 26.3% of distributors. Here, the offending party disregards the victim and the relationship, looks after its own interests, and intentionally violates the contractual agreement (Weiser & Weigel, 2014). Developing a working relationship requires investments in financial (e.g., venture capital), human (e.g., staff training), physical (e.g., equipment) and

allied resources. By committing infidelity, these resources are now being shared between the victim and another partner, and the instigator has to set priorities as to their allocation (Håkansson & Snehota, 1995). This will usually leave the victim with less resources, which can be a cause of conflict, tension, and frustration in the relationship, especially in light of the fact that it has already made significant tangible and intangible investments.

5.3.3 *Deceptive infidelity*

Deceptive infidelity can arise when one party in the relationship *discloses vital information* that was given in confidence by the other party to a firm outside the relationship. This was mentioned by 35.0% of the manufacturers and 32.3% of the distributors. Although informational resources devoted to the instigator may be denied after infidelity, the knowledge accumulated during years of interacting with the victim cannot be retrieved. For the smooth operation of a working relationship, it is important for the parties involved to share some critical information regarding their goals, strategies, future plans, and other matters. However, divulging this information to a third party can cause major financial, operational, and allied problems, which may put the working relationship at risk. This situation becomes even more crucial, when the extra-dyadic party is a firm that is a direct competitor of the victim, and therefore can use this information against it (Harutyunyan & Jiang, 2017).

Another type of deceptive infidelity, which was reported by 34.0% of manufacturers and 37.4% of the distributors, is when the instigator *tells lies* on issues relating to its planned or actual association with an illegitimate partner. In this case, lying aims to cover up the specific misconduct, is responsible for distorting the quality of the information exchanged, and harms the integrity of the working relationship (Lewicki, 1983). Such lies make the victim believe that the instigator is still a loyal, dependable, and committed partner and that the relationship continues normally as before without any problems. However, this will prevent the victim from attaining its own goals, because misguidedly, it will make false decisions about critical aspects

of a relationship that is doomed to fail (Lewicki, 1983). In some cases, the offending party uses one lie to justify a previous one regarding the infidelity committed and this may create a vicious circle, whereby the quality, prosperity, and viability of the relationship is gradually distorted.

5.4 Consequences of infidelity

The victim's reactions toward business partner infidelity can take three different forms: (a) adopting a *passive stance* by seeking accommodation with or offering forgiveness to the instigator; (b) *reacting mildly* by taking various reassessment measures; or (c) exhibiting *aggressive responses* by disengaging from the relationship, imposing punitive measures, or seeking revenge.

5.4.1 Passive stance

One common reaction to an infidelity incidence is to *accommodate* the offending party, in the hope that there will be no repetition of infidelity (reported by 30.9% of the manufacturers and 42.4% of the distributors). In other words, the victim deliberately chooses not to react in a disruptive manner to the partner's infidelity act, but instead maintains a low profile, by taking into consideration the long-term orientation of the relationship (Rusbult et al., 1991). In this sense, the victim will continue the working relationship with the offending party by adopting a passive stance, especially if the type of infidelity committed was not very serious. This is because the victim: (a) has invested a great deal of physical, financial, and other resources in the relationship, which are difficult to remove; (b) hopes that the negative behavior of the offending party will not be repeated and that the relationship will soon revert to normal; and (c) believes that there are no other promising alternatives on the horizon enabling a new promising relationship to be developed (Bello et al., 2010; Finkel et al., 2002; Fitness, 2001; Hannon et al., 2010).

Another possible reaction to an infidelity incidence is to *offer forgiveness* to the offending party, especially if the latter provides reasonable excuses and apologizes for the mistake made (as indicated by 13.4% of the manufacturers and 22.2% of the distributors) (Kowalski, 2003). By forgiving, the victim tries to understand the reason for the other party behaving in this way, accepts that everyone can make a mistake, and hopes that there will be no more infidelity incidences in the future. Forgiving involves the victim releasing the hostility and resentment originating from the infidelity and giving up legitimate reasons for taking revenge (Tsarenko et al., 2019; Waldron & Kelley, 2005). The instigator's acceptance of responsibility facilitates forgiveness, while empathy from the victim is particularly helpful as it decreases tension in the relationship (Fife et al., 2013). The likelihood of forgiveness is higher when the infidelity is not so serious, the victim has made substantial investments in the relationship, and the instigator makes some positive amendments after the infidelity (Guerrero & Bachman, 2010).

5.4.2 Mild reactions

The victim may also respond in a mild way by adopting various *positive reassessment measures*, such as constructive discussions, compromise agreements, and business behavior improvement (Weiser & Weigel, 2014). Our survey results illustrate that 42.2% of the manufacturers opted to react in a mild way to the distributor's infidelity, while the corresponding incidence in the case of distributors that faced infidelity from their supplying manufacturers was 51.5%. Reassessment is usually associated with a reconsideration of the transgression by the victim (e.g., shifting the blame to external factors) in the light of excuses and justifications provided by the instigator (Tedeschi & Bond, 2001). Such reassessment measures are taken when: (a) the type of the infidelity committed is not very serious; (b) the costs of handling the ending process are high; (c) there are prohibitive exit barriers based on

legal, financial, structural, and other issues; and (d) the costs and the risks involved in building a relationship with a new partner are prohibitive (Tähtinen & Vaaland, 2006).

5.4.3 Aggressive responses

In severe cases of infidelity, the victim may *disengage from the relationship*, because the foundation on which both parties initiated, developed, and operated their business venture, is now damaged and distorted (Grünhagen et al., 2017). This was the case reported by 38.1% of the manufacturers and 38.4% of the distributors. This disengagement can take the form of passively separating from the violator by gradually slowing down the amount of resources devoted to the relationship, or drastically terminating the relationship by completely ceasing the transfer of resources to it. The decision to disengage is mainly the result of a cost-benefit analysis, where (a) on the costs side, the victim considers the financial losses incurred from terminating the relationship, the opportunity costs of having a better partner after releasing the instigator, and the undergoing psychological distress in the aftermath of infidelity; and (b) on the benefits side, the victim considers the avoidance of time, effort, and uncertainty associated with finding a new partner, as well as any long-term rewards that are expected to be gained from the existing relationship (Chen et al., 2013; Shackelford & Buss, 1997b).

The victim may also *impose punitive measures* against the violator (and sometimes against the illegitimate party), the purpose of which is to bring the latter back to conformity, prevent any similar actions from occurring in the future, and restore the balance of power in the relationship (this was mentioned by 30.9% of the manufacturers and 26.3% of the distributors) (Finkel et al., 2002). Such measures may take the form of withholding important support, delaying certain operational procedures, and even seeking financial compensation (Payan & McFarland, 2005). In some instances, the victim may threaten to terminate the relationship, derogate the instigator to potential new partners by spreading negative word-of-

mouth, or issue a credible threat to release confidential information to third parties that will harm the instigator (Buss et al., 2017).

As a last resort, the victim may *take revenge*, which can be expressed in various ways, such as disseminating bad news about the instigator in order to decrease its value to the business community, seeking financial compensation by legally suing the offending party, or engaging in various ambiguous or explicit forms of infidelity (Buss, 1988; Buss et al., 2017). This was stated by 17.5% of the manufacturers and 12.1% of the distributors. The hidden or masked nature of infidelity increases the intensity of reaction and shock when it is revealed, because the instigator turns out to be someone “leading a double life”, as opposed to the trusted and loyal partner of the victim (deMaris, 2013). Through revenge, the victim wants to get even by inflicting harm on the violator, by regaining its destroyed dignity and lost face, and finding relief from the anger felt about the infidelity incident (Haenel et al., 2019).

5.5 Remedies of infidelity

Both manufacturers and distributors could protect a relationship against the infidelity threat by taking *pre-emptive measures* such as using direct and open communication, protecting the relationship, and maintaining a healthy atmosphere. Certain actions can *heal the relationship after infidelity* is revealed, namely, redefining the relationship on better grounds, rebuilding trust among partners, and establishing a crisis control mechanism.

5.5.1 Pre-emptive measures

About one half (51.5%) of the manufacturers and 59.6% of the distributors reported that *maintaining direct and open communication*, whereby reliable, timely, and in-depth information is exchanged on a constant basis between the interacting parties, is vital to prevent infidelity incidences in their relationships. Communication acts as the ‘glue’ that keeps the members of the relationship together, by boosting confidence about the value of the

relationship, enhancing belief in the honesty of the transactions made, and offering transparency concerning each other's intentions or actions (Eckerd & Hill, 2012). It also helps to identify problems at the early stage of their development (e.g., misunderstandings), that can lead to infidelity actions and mobilize parties toward finding immediate solutions (Kowalski, 2003). Through regular communication (e.g., personal visits, telephone/electronic contact, social media interaction), the distance and uncertainty which exists in the relationship can be reduced and this will help a better understanding of each other's expectations.

Another way to prevent infidelity is to establish measures that *guard the relationship* against external temptations to find alternative business partners, which was reported by 43.3% of the manufacturers and 45.5% of the distributors (Buss, 1988). Examples of these measures may include: (a) devotion of a greater amount and the constant improvement of own resources in the relationship to maintain its value at high levels; (b) derogation of alternative partners in terms of their quality of offers, behavior, and performance; and (c) insertion of strict terms governing the contractual agreement, particularly the provision of sanctions if the exclusivity of the relationship is violated (e.g., Buss, 1988; Restuccia & Legoux, 2019).

To reduce the possibility of infidelity, it is also crucial to maintain a *healthy relationship atmosphere*, in which trust, commitment, cooperation, and satisfaction are kept at high levels between the interacting parties (reported by 25.8% of the manufacturers and 34.3% of the distributors). Analytically, heightened trust will help to improve the welfare of the relationship, enhance ethical principles, and avoid the violation of relational norms (Doney & Cannon, 1997; Mayer et al., 1995). Commitment implies a positive evaluation of the partner and the relationship, the negative assessment of alternatives, and protection of the investments made in the relationship (Tsiros et al., 2009). Cooperation denotes fulfilment of mutual obligations and responsibilities among the interacting parties and the channeling of resources to the dyad as opposed to third parties. Finally, satisfaction indicates that expectations from the relationship

are met or exceeded and that both parties constantly contribute to each other's performance (Leonidou et al., 2002).

5.5.2 *Post-hoc actions*

More than a third (37.1%) of the manufacturers and 44.4% of the distributors stated that they *redefined their relationship on a more solid basis* after the infidelity incident (Dant & Gleiberman, 2011). This involves taking a number of actions: (a) restating the norms and rules governing the working relationship in order to increase predictability of intentions or actions, enhance the cohesion of the relationship, and increase its performance outcomes; (b) setting realistic goals regarding the relationship, enhancing reciprocal support, encouraging communication of relational problems, and resolving relational conflicts in an amicable way; (c) formulating a code of conduct for the working relationship to discourage any infidelity episodes in the future; and (d) cultivating the expectation among the interacting parties that working together offers better rewards and returns as opposed to other alternative relationships (Fife et al., 2008; Kowalski, 2001).

Obviously, any infidelity action will reduce trust in the working relationship and cause disappointment, anger, and suspicion of the offending party. This will bring instability, insecurity, and lack of confidence in the relationship, with all the negative effects that this may entail for future viability. It is important, therefore, for both parties to take steps to *rebuild trust* in the relationship, which was emphasized by 28.8% of the manufacturers and 34.3% of the distributors. On the one hand, the offending party should offer an apology and express its regret for what happened, promise that its unacceptable behavior will not be repeated with the same or another external partner, and express its willingness to offer compensation for any financial, material, and other costs incurred by its infidelity to the other party. On the other hand, the victim should question the faults on both sides and acknowledge its own responsibility if necessary, try to show some understanding and empathy for the reasons that led the other party

to commit infidelity, and consider the infidelity as a non-intentional, one-off, and non-repeatable incident (Reina & Reina, 2015).

The establishment of a *crisis resolution mechanism*, which will encourage members of the relationship to handle serious problems in a constructive, progressive, and mutually beneficial way, can also be therapeutic in the case of infidelity (noted by 26.8% of the manufacturers and 26.3% of the distributors). This mechanism will help: (a) to spot any abnormalities in the collaboration between the interacting parties and understand the reasons for what has gone wrong in the relationship (b) to prevent the partners from making a quick decision on the basis of their initial reactions to the infidelity incident; (c) to examine the possibility of making changes in the relationship that will re-establish confidence and trust between the interacting parties; and (d) to decide how to proceed with the relationship in order to prevent any future infidelity actions (Snyder et al., 2008).

6. Conclusions and implications

The previous analysis has amply demonstrated the deleterious, destructive, and devastating effects that infidelity can have on an exclusive M-D relationship. The unethical nature of infidelity violates the basic relational assumptions that the partner is reliable and trustworthy, the exchange process is predictable, and the relationship is controllable (Gordon et al., 2008). Obviously, the relationship will not be the same as it was before the infidelity is revealed, as the history of learning, adaptations, and investments lose their meaning and many costs are incurred in order to heal the relationship or start a new one. Although, finding, attracting, and selecting an appropriate business partner is a critical stage in a promising M-D relationship, the retention of the partner against various threats, such as infidelity, remains a serious challenge over its lifetime. Our empirical study has shown that, with very few exceptions, there are no significant differences between manufacturers and distributors with regard to the

perceived frequency of the motives, symptoms, manifestations, consequences, and remedies of infidelity committed by their relational partners.

Both parties stressed the role of low partner commitment, disappointment with the relationship, and high levels of relational uncertainty as frequent motives behind infidelity. They also stressed as common symptoms of infidelity the partners' anger and criticality, as well as showing indifference of important issues concerning the relationship. Both manufacturers and distributors reported various frequent forms of manifesting infidelity, namely contacting direct competitors to explore the possibility of doing business, actually negotiating with competitors to do business, and telling lies to hide intentions for switching partner. Some of the most frequently cited consequences of infidelity is seeking accommodation and continuation of the collaboration, resolving the causes of pushing the partner to seek another partner, or terminating the relationship. Finally, with regard to remedies to infidelity, the most frequently proposed are to enhance communication and redefine the relationship on more healthy grounds.

Our study offers important theoretical and managerial implications. *Theoretically*, we have shown that various ideas and concepts developed within the sphere of social psychology can be transferred, with some modifications, to a business context. This stresses the important role of metaphoric transfers in encouraging creative and useful conceptualization based on input from the source domain (i.e., interpersonal relationships) to the target domain (i.e., M-D relationships) (Chen et al., 2013; Hunt & Menon, 1995). Although infidelity has hitherto been examined from the perspective of interpersonal relationships, we have made it clear that it can equally be applied (under certain circumstances) to an inter-organizational relationship and affect its prosperity, continuation, or termination. In light of the fact that the field of social psychology has given considerable attention to the study of infidelity (as well as to its

antecedents and outcomes) more input can be derived from this discipline by marketing researchers.

Managerially, to minimize chances of infidelity in M-D relationships, firms should carefully select partners who are reliable, dependable, and trustworthy, as well as having compatible expectations, goals, and strategies. In addition, the fact that infidelity can be motivated by different reasons and manifested in various ways implies that there is a need to constantly monitor: (a) the quality and performance of the working relationship, by ensuring high levels of commitment, trust, cooperation, and satisfaction; (b) the movements of competitors and any attempts to approach the partner in the M-D relationship; and (c) any changes (e.g., market structure, economic conditions, legal framework) of the environment within which the relationship operates. Of particular importance is to establish a communication mechanism (which includes frequent, accurate, and clear exchange of information) that would help to develop sensitivity to potential relational problems, discover undesired behavior that could evolve to infidelity, and take measures to prevent infidelity. Interacting parties also need to base their working relationship on carefully crafted formal contractual agreements, that clearly specify the damages incurred (e.g., penalties) for engagement in infidelity acts.

7. Limitations and future research directions

Our findings should be seen within the context of certain limitations, which can also provide fruitful directions for future research. *First*, although our proposed organizing framework (which depicts how infidelity unfolds in exclusive M-D relationships) was refined with input provided by academics and practitioners specializing in the field, and was supported with empirical data collected from both manufacturing and distribution organizations, the various constructs in each of the five stages of the infidelity process (i.e., motives, symptoms,

manifestations, consequences, and remedies) were used in a generic form and measured in a dichotomous way (whether this was applicable or not). It is important, therefore, to proceed with a full operationalization of these constructs using already established scales or developing entirely new scales, as well as use interval scales (e.g., Likert scales).

Second, although the methodology adopted to carry out our quantitative study are robust, we acknowledge that a qualitative study taking the form of in-depth interviews and/or focus group discussions could provide more insights about the nature of the various dimensions and subdimensions of infidelity in M-D relationships shown in our organizing framework.⁶ This may also bring to the surface issues specifically related to inter-organizational infidelity that were not tackled by research at the interpersonal level. For example, there is evidence by Masella, Meier, and Zahn (2014) indicating that when a manufacturer challenges or even violates the sovereignty of a distributor, the latter may react negatively, with infidelity being one possibility. Also, using on single or multiple case analyses, coupled with adopting a matched-pair dyadic approach in data collection, will help to have a better understanding of the causal associations between constructs contained in our organizing framework.

Third, although this organizing framework provides a rich coverage of a wide range of variables involved in an inter-organizational infidelity process, future research could empirically test potential associations between these variables. For example, it would be illuminating to provide answers to the following research questions: (a) What specific motives and symptoms are associated with different types of infidelity? (b) What mediating roles do different symptoms play between infidelity motives and actualization? (c) Which types of infidelity are more likely to be forgiven, accommodated, reconsidered, or followed by aggressive reactions? (d) Which pre-emptive measures are more effective in preventing infidelity in a working relationship? (e) What actions need to be taken in order to rebuild trust in the aftermath of infidelity?

Fourth, inter-organizational relationships are not static, but are constantly changing, while the same is also true with regard to the infidelity process, which, as demonstrated in our study, passes through various phases. All these necessitate the use of longitudinal research that will help to monitor these changes over time. Some of the issues that could be addressed here are the following: (a) How do interacting parties keep or increase their own attractiveness over time in order to avoid the possibility of infidelity by their partners? (b) Is there a link between the motives, types, and consequences of infidelity and the stage of the working relationship? (c) How does infidelity affect future business relationships of the victim with regard to partner selection criteria, control mechanisms, and level of trust? (d) Will a change in the balance of power between interacting parties give rise or fall in infidelity attempts? (e) What is the role of age, value, and other characteristics of the working relationship on the development of infidelity incidences?

Finally, inter-organizational relationships do not operate in a vacuum, but are influenced by various exogenous factors, such as market volatility, environmental uncertainty, and competitive intensity. This surrounding environment is responsible for either giving rise to or reducing the possibility of engaging to infidelity by interacting parties. For example, under an economic crisis situation, the norms governing the relationship may weaken, while pressures to secure organizational survival may increase temptations to commit infidelity. Since both manufacturers and distributors are part of a broader network of business relationships with other organizations, it would also be interesting to explore the way in which the various network members will react to infidelity actions by the manufacturer or distributor once these are made known (usually by the victim itself).

Notes

1. Infidelity is one specific form of betrayal, with the latter defined as a transgression involving deliberate violation of an implicit or explicit relationship-relevant norm, which is precipitated by someone who is trusted (Finkel et al., 2002; Jones et al., 2001). Some other forms of betrayal, include, *inter alia*, hiding critical information from or communicating half of the truth to the partner, taking advantage of a partner in difficult/disadvantageous situations, failing to provide an assistance when needed, and breaking promises without a good reason (Leonidou et al., 2018). While betrayal involves the violation of various central norms governing the relationship (e.g., trust, decency, and fairness), infidelity violates a very unique norm, namely that associated with the relational rule/expectation of having a legitimate exclusivity with a partner (Jones et al., 2001). The violation of this exclusivity (with the purpose of having a parallel relationship with another partner who is a competitor with the existing one) is considered the most severe form of betrayal, because: (a) it represents substantial harm from someone with whom one has deep trusting bonds; (b) it violates the expectations related to a close partner's loyalty, devotion, and purity; and (c) it raises serious moral concerns about the partner's ethical behavior (Haden & Hojjat, 2006; Rachman, 2010; Selterman et al., 2018). All these may ultimately lead to a termination of the relationship, with all the negative repercussions that this may entail.

2. Our organizing framework conceives infidelity as a process, whereby its five components (i.e., motives, symptoms, manifestations, consequences, and remedies) are developed in a step-wise fashion. Similar developmental processes have also been reported in the literature with regard to other relational constructs, such as conflict, where Pondy (1967) identified five stages, namely latent, perceived, felt, manifest, and aftermath. Although our organizing framework does not represent a conceptual model *per se*, the proposed categorization of constructs involved in the infidelity process provides a fertile ground for identifying antecedents, mediators, outcomes, or moderators in building alternative insightful conceptual models for empirical testing.

3. The fact that more than one in four manufacturers and approximately one in three distributors experienced at least one infidelity incident with their partners during the last five years indicates that this is a very serious problem encountered in business relationships that warrants a careful attention by both academics and practitioners. Notably, one would expect that in reality these incidence rates to be much higher, due to the tendency by some firms to avoid disclosing information that will expose the instigator, especially when the relationship with the latter is still in operation (Allen et al., 2005).

4. Infidelity acts are perpetrated by the actors/members of the manufacturing or distributing organization who are directly involved with the corresponding actors/members of the partner firm (rather than by organizations *per se*). However, since these actors/members represent their companies, any selfish or deceitful behavior, as in the case of infidelity, is usually reflected to their organizations as a whole. This should be kept in mind all the time while discussing the findings of our study regarding the various stages of the infidelity process.

5. Although the amount of power exercised in the working relationship with the other party was not captured in our study, this could be a useful addition in future research to better understand the dynamics of infidelity process in M-D relationships. The fact that approximately three-tenths of the firms in both the manufacturers' and distributors' samples cited low dependence as one of their partner's motives to be involved in infidelity, implies that infidelity incidences are more likely to occur in relationships where the victim has limited power (or control) over the instigator.

6. The advantage of our quantitative approach lies in the fact that: (a) it allows for collecting structured data from a relatively large number of representative cases; (b) it quantifies the data collected and enables to perform a statistical analysis to gain deeper insights; and (c) it facilitates generalization of the results obtained from a sample to the total population (Malhotra, 2015). However, despite its merits, and to make our analysis of infidelity in M-D relationships more insightful and complete, the results of our quantitative analysis have to be augmented with input derived from a qualitative research.

Conflict of interest: none

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