

Infidelity, self-esteem and jealousy

Master thesis

Infidelity, self-esteem, and jealousy: the moderating role of relationship-contingent self-esteem in young adulthood

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### **Abstract**

Infidelity is estimated to occur in 20-25% of marriages and nearly 30% of dating relationships. It can have a large impact on people's health and well-being; it can lead to more jealousy and it can challenge someone's feelings of self-worth. This research aimed to gain more insight into these effects in young adulthood, so that couple therapists can help couples better in practice. This research addresses to what extent relationship-contingent self-esteem (i.e., self-esteem that is dependent on the relationship) moderates the relationship between the experience of the infidelity of a partner on the one hand and self-esteem and jealousy on the other hand. The present study predicted that the experience of infidelity is associated with a lower self-esteem and more jealousy. Additionally, this study predicted that RCSE will reinforce these relationships. In this thesis, these hypotheses were tested through an online survey in Qualtrics that investigated whether young adults had experienced infidelity. Of the participants ( $N = 245$ ) 65 experienced infidelity of a partner. A regression analysis showed that young adults who experienced infidelity did not report a lower self-esteem. In addition, the results revealed that the experience of infidelity is not associated with a higher jealousy level among young adults. Moreover, RCSE did not strengthen the effect between infidelity and self-esteem and infidelity and jealousy. Follow-up research with multiple measurements is needed to investigate the role of infidelity on self-esteem, jealousy, and RCSE.

*Keywords:* infidelity, self-esteem, jealousy, relationship-contingent self-esteem, young adulthood

## Introduction

Establishing an exclusive, permanent love relationship is a key component of mature development and psychological health for young adults (Schmookler & Bursik, 2007). An important aspect of close relationships is that many people expect monogamy from their romantic partners, that is to have agreements on exclusive intimate contact with no one other than the romantic partner. However, it turns out that infidelity—defined as a partner who does not keep agreements about intimate contact with others, ranging from kissing to sexual intercourse—is estimated to occur in 20-25% of marriages in Euro-American countries and in nearly 30% of dating relationships (Fincham & May, 2017; Hertlein & Piercy, 2006). Violating this rule of conduct can have a large impact on people's overall health and well-being. Infidelity is detrimental to individuals' conceptions of the self and may even cause symptoms of depression, anxiety, PTSD, or stress (Allen & Atkins, 2012; Amato & Previti, 2003; Sharpe et al., 2013). Moreover, infidelity has major implications for high-intensity emotions that the betrayed partner will experience, such as betrayal, shame, sadness, and anger (Butler et al., 2021; Fife et al., 2008, 2013; Shrout & Weigel, 2018). The experience of being betrayed by a romantic partner can challenge someone's feelings of self-worth, can lead to more jealousy, and can generally have a negative impact on a person's psychological well-being (Butler et al., 2021; Valentova et al., 2020).

Given these consequences, the investigation of correlations of infidelity within romantic relationships is of great importance. Relatively little research has been done on the extent to which infidelity is related to concepts such as self-esteem and jealousy in young adulthood. Since most studies to date have focused on adults and have taken place within a marital context (Morgan & Van Dulmen, 2021), it is important that the age group of 18 to 30 also is considered. Infidelity can be even more traumatic for young adults compared to married couples, because young adults have less experience with managing distressing events in relationships (Roos et al., 2019). The purpose of this study is to better understand the relationship between the experience of the infidelity of a partner on the one hand and self-esteem and jealousy on the other hand. In a relationship, one's self-esteem may become dependent on the relationship. Therefore, the person may tend to become dependent on that relationship for personal validation. The dependency created is called relationship-contingent self-esteem (RCSE; Knee et al., 2008). This study will examine whether RCSE moderates the relationship between infidelity and self-esteem as well as between infidelity and jealousy. Therefore, this study can

lead to new insights for therapists, who can help couples in practice. Taken together, the research question of this research is: “Does RCSE moderate the relationship between the experience of infidelity of a partner on the one hand and self-esteem and jealousy on the other hand?”

### **Infidelity from the perspective of the betrayed partner: self-esteem and jealousy**

When people experience infidelity, they often experience emotional and psychological distress due to infidelity, which results in decreased self-esteem. Self-esteem is defined as having a stable sense of self-worth, self-liking, and self-acceptance (Rosenberg, 1965). During the developmental transition from adolescence to young adulthood someone’s self-esteem changes (Chung et al., 2017). In adolescence, there is often a decrease in self-esteem due to puberty changes and changing school contexts, whereas in the transition to young adulthood there is an increase in self-esteem due to maturational and social changes (Orth & Robins, 2014). One’s self-views develop in these periods from interactions with others and how they think others see them (Cooley, 1902; Harter, 2012). In doing so, attachment patterns become individualized “manuals” on how to treat yourself and others (Furman & Flanagan, 1997). These earlier attachment patterns are likely to influence how people relate to those with whom they will later have a romantic relationship (Duba et al., 2008).

Infidelity is one of the most serious and damaging relationship violations, explaining the reduction in self-esteem (Bird et al., 2007; Gordon et al., 2004; Rokach & Philibert-Lignières, 2015). Josephs (2018) suggests that these consequences derive from the fact that infidelity is, on the one hand, an attachment injury that undermines secure attachment and, on the other hand, an injury to one's self-esteem. This impairment of self-esteem may cause victims of infidelity to question their romantic desirability in comparison to other potential partners and may cause the victim of infidelity to blame themselves for the infidelity (Josephs, 2018). In addition, the sociometer theory indicates that when others appreciate us and value our relationships, self-esteem is high. When people feel that others have no interest in them and do not care if they are part of their lives, self-esteem is low (MacDonald & Leary, 2012). This makes people sensitive to signals of exclusion and rejection, which causes people to dislike themselves more (Leary, 2012). This negative effect emerges when one’s partner is hurt because of the other partner’s behavior, which is the case with infidelity (Merolla, 2008). Based on the previous research, the following hypothesis arises: infidelity is negatively associated with self-esteem.

Another important concept included in this study is jealousy. When people experience a threat to their relationship, they may feel jealous (Davis et al., 2018). Romantic jealousy is described as “a complex of thoughts, feelings, and actions which follows from threat to self-esteem and/or threat to the existence or the quality of the relationship, when those threats are generated by the perception of a real or potential attraction between one’s partner and a – perhaps imaginary – rival” (White, 1981, p. 24). In adolescence, levels of jealousy are significantly higher than in young adulthood. This appears to derive from the fact that long relationships in adolescence are often perceived as turbulent and that jealousy decreases with age (Lantagne & Furman, 2017).

When a person knows or suspects that a partner has committed infidelity, this will result in jealousy in most men and women (Buss & Shackelford, 1997) and is shaped by emotions like anger, hurt and anxiety (Parrott & Smith, 1993). Previous research shows that differences arise between how men and women respond to infidelity. Some studies show that men report greater jealousy in response to the sexual aspects of infidelity, while women report greater jealousy in response to the emotional aspects of infidelity (Edlund et al., 2006; Valentova et al., 2020). However, Sagarin et al. (2003) report no gender differences in how men and women respond to infidelity. Yet, there still appears to be ambiguity in this link, because most studies look at hypothetical infidelity instead of actual infidelity experiences. The current research focuses on actual infidelity experiences and therefore helps to clarify the association between infidelity and jealousy. Moreover, it appears that people whose partners have been unfaithful in the past, experience more jealousy in their current relationship (Zandbergen & Brown, 2015). Based on the aforementioned literature, this thesis expects that infidelity is positively associated with jealousy.

### **Relationship-contingent self-esteem**

For some individuals, the consequences of infidelity may be even stronger for their self-esteem than for others. For some, self-esteem is dependent on whether someone has a partner and on the nature of that romantic relationship. This unhealthy form of self-esteem is called relationship-contingent self-esteem (RCSE; Knee et al., 2008). People with high RCSE are hypersensitive to signs of relational success and failure so that even relatively small negative relationship events that have little significance for the self may have a strong impact (Knee et al., 2008). A positive relationship event boosts self-esteem and a negative event damages self-esteem. In this way, events that take place within the relationship are interpreted as something

about the quality of the self (Rodriguez et al., 2016). As a result, negative relationship events may even affect the likelihood that individuals with high levels of RCSE will display risky or harmful behaviors. Previous research shows that individuals with high levels of RCSE are more likely to drink alcohol as a coping strategy, because they have more cognitive rumination about a partner's infidelity (DiBello et al., 2015).

This study will examine a person's relationship contingent self-esteem and how this moderates the association between the experience of infidelity of a partner and their self-esteem. Research shows that RCSE is significantly correlated with lower self-esteem (DiBello et al., 2015; Knee et al., 2008). People with a higher RCSE have larger fluctuations in self-esteem after daily events in their current relationship. Besides, negative relationship events are associated with a lower self-esteem following the occurrence, mainly for those higher in RCSE (Knee et al., 2008). Therefore, it is expected that RCSE will reinforce the negative relationship between the experience of infidelity and self-esteem.

In addition, this study explores the moderating effect of RCSE on the association between the experience of infidelity and someone's jealousy. To date, there has been little research on the association between RCSE and jealousy (Dibello et al., 2015). However, it is plausible that RCSE boosts the association between jealousy and infidelity, as individuals high in RCSE might be affected more by negative relationship events such as infidelity, which might cause them to feel more jealous (Dibello et al., 2015). However, this hypothetical relationship has so far only been theoretical (Pines & Aronson, 1983; Zandbergen & Brown, 2015). Accordingly, it is assumed that RCSE reinforces the positive relationship between the experience of infidelity and jealousy. Since there has currently been no empirical evidence for this relationship, this research can contribute and can provide new insights.

### **Current research**

Research shows that betrayed partners often experience a decrease in their self-esteem (Russell et al., 2013; Stanford, 2012). In addition, the experience of infidelity can also lead to jealousy (Buss & Shackelford, 1997). Based on previous research, the present research tested the prediction that experiences of infidelity are negatively associated with self-esteem and positively associated with jealousy. This thesis expects that the relationship between infidelity and self-esteem and infidelity and jealousy is stronger when people have relationship-contingent self-esteem.

## Hypotheses

In the current research the following hypotheses will be tested:

1. Experiences of the infidelity of a partner are negatively associated with self-esteem
2. Experiences of the infidelity of a partner are positively associated with jealousy
3. The association between the experience of infidelity and self-esteem will be more negative when RCSE is high than when RCSE is low
4. The association between the experience of infidelity and jealousy will be more positive when RCSE is high than when RCSE is low

To test these hypotheses, an online survey was conducted in Qualtrics with questions about these concepts. The hypotheses in the model are outlined below in figure 1. This study controls for time since the act of infidelity, the relationship length of the romantic relationship, gender, and age. Previous research showed that more positive affect and less negative affect were found when infidelity took place a longer time ago (Kluwer & Karremans, 2009). This study examined the relationship length of the romantic relationship because people had to be in a current relationship. In addition, previous research has shown that infidelity occurs after some time in the relationship (Ziv et al., 2018). Finally, this study controls for gender, because it has been shown that gender can impact the understanding and imagination of infidelity, and furthermore there are differences in the response to infidelity (Millar & Baker, 2017; Williams & Knudson-Martin, 2013).

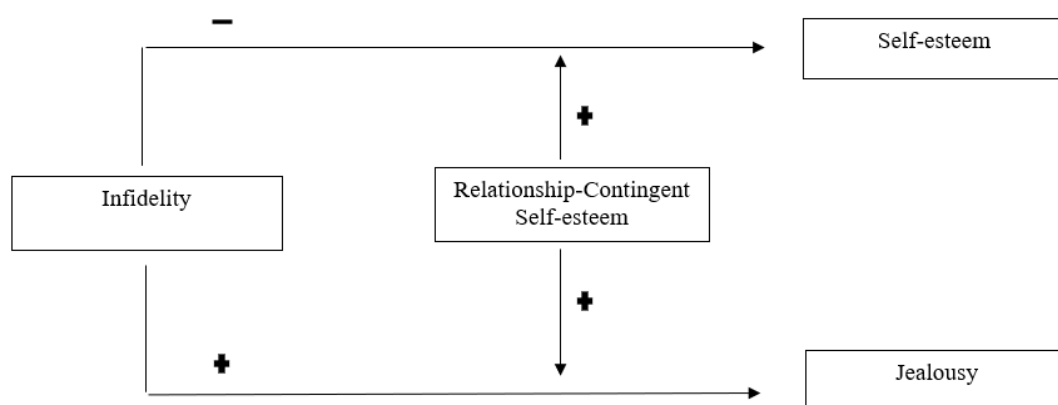


Figure 1. Model of the relationships between infidelity, self-esteem, jealousy, and relationship-contingent self-esteem

## Method

### Procedure

Data were collected through online surveys in Qualtrics, both in English and in Dutch. The participants were individuals aged between 18 and 30 in a committed romantic relationship for at least six months. People who ever experienced infidelity in their previous or current relationship were compared with those who never experienced infidelity. Participants were recruited via social media such as LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram, and Whatsapp. Several announcements were posted on the internet with the following text: “Are you between 18 and 30 years old and currently in a relationship longer than 6 months? Join our research! For our Master’s Thesis, we are looking for participants to join our online questionnaire about romantic relationships. In this study questions were asked about relationship satisfaction, coping with stress, social support, self-esteem, relationship-contingent self-esteem, jealousy, and infidelity. The questionnaire will take 10 to 15 minutes of your time.”

Only participants with fully completed questionnaires were included in the study. Moreover, participants had to be in a romantic relationship for at least 6 months and they had to be between 18 and 30 years old. If participants did not meet the criteria, their data were not included in the analysis. By means of the informed consent and the information letter, the participants were informed of the fact that the data were collected anonymously, confidentially and that their participation was voluntary. All these points were shown at the start screen of the online questionnaire. All procedures and materials were reviewed and approved by the Faculty Ethics Review Board of Utrecht University (FERB).

### Participants

A power analysis for multiple regression analysis ( $\alpha = .05$ , 80% power, 6 potential predictors) showed that the study needed a minimum of 98 participants and 25 participants per condition to determine small effects (G\*Power; Faul et al., 2009). Due to the fact that not every participant had experienced infidelity, more participants had to be recruited. In total, there were 279 participants of which 261 completed the informed consent. As a result of outliers in the age condition, one more person (aged 31) was excluded from the data set. Given the mean age of my participants ( $M = 23.55$ ), the likelihood of having a relationship for 15 or more years is unlikely. This would mean that the participants were about 8 years old when they got into their relationship. Therefore, 15 participants were excluded from the study. In addition, two participants indicated that they had given incorrect answers, so these answers were removed and



amended according to their statements. As a result, analyses were conducted with the remaining 245 participants.

The participants were between 18 and 30 years old ( $M = 23.55$   $SD = 2.33$ ). Of the 245 participants who participated in the study, 39 were men (15.9%) and 206 were women (84.1%). The participants did not indicate for gender that they were non-binary or that they preferred not to say, so these conditions were not included in the analysis. 76.7% of the participants had a male partner, 22.9% of the participants had a female partner and 0.4% had a non-binary partner. Three out of 39 men had a homosexual relationship compared to twenty out of 206 females who had a homosexual relationship. In addition, one woman had a relationship with a nonbinary person. Besides, 3 participants were married, 100 participants who lived together, 139 participants who did not live together, and one participant answered other. On average, most participants were in a monogamous relationship (97.6%) followed by 1.2% who had an open relationship<sup>1</sup> and 1.2% filled in other. The average length of the participant's current relationship was 3.50 years ( $SD = 2.49$ ). In addition, there were 2 participants whose highest education was general secondary education/preparatory secondary vocational education, 19 participants with secondary vocational education, 10 with senior general secondary education/pre-university education, 66 with higher professional education, 69 with an undergraduate/bachelor's degree and 79 participants with a master's degree. Of the participants, 84.5% had paid work and 63.7% were studying.

### **Measurements**

A quantitative method including an online questionnaire was used in the research and the following variables were measured<sup>2</sup>: experience of infidelity in a previous or current relationship, self-esteem, relationship-contingent self-esteem, and jealousy. The questionnaire can be found in Appendix A.

### ***Infidelity***

Questions of the experiences with partner infidelity questionnaire were used (Kluwer & Karremans, 2009). Originally, this scale had 12 items to assess previous experiences with infidelity but we used a modified and lengthened version of 14 items. This questionnaire was adapted to include questions focused on infidelity with the current partner and in a previous

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<sup>1</sup> The people in an open relationship did not experience infidelity

<sup>2</sup> Since there were several researchers collaborating on this questionnaire, several concepts were measured in this questionnaire that are not included in the present study: relationship satisfaction, dyadic coping and social support

relationship. Examples were “Has your current partner ever been unfaithful to you?” or “Has a partner from a previous relationship ever been unfaithful to you?” Different aspects of the infidelity were measured, including the type of infidelity (in love with another person, kissing another person, having sex with another person, being in love and having sex with another person or other), time since the infidelity (in years), and duration of the infidelity (one-time, for several weeks, for several months and longer than several months). In addition, items were added to test the impact of infidelity. Participants were asked how often they thought about the infidelity (daily, weekly, monthly, annually or I don’t think about this anymore) and we asked to what extent the event had an effect on them (1 = *no influence* to 5 = *tremendous influence*). Additionally, we asked whether the person themselves had ever been unfaithful.

### ***Self-esteem***

The self-esteem of the participants was measured by using the 10-item Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965). These 10 items relate to general feelings of self-acceptance and self-worth. Examples are “I feel that I have a number of good qualities” and “On the whole, I am satisfied with myself” (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). Higher scores represented a higher self-esteem. The internal consistency was .869. Self-esteem was also measured with the Single-Item Self-Esteem Scale (SISE) (Robins et al., 2001). This item was: “I have a high self-esteem” (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). The SISE and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale displayed strong convergent validity and the correlation between these two was .720. Due to the strong correlation, the study focused on the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale.

### ***Relationship-Contingent Self-Esteem***

Using the 11-item Relationship-Contingent Self-Esteem Scale (Knee et al., 2008) participants were asked about their feelings and thoughts in their own romantic relationship. Examples of these items were: “When my relationship is going well, I feel better about myself overall,” and “I feel better about myself when others tell me that my partner and I have a good relationship” (1 = *not at all like me*, 5 = *very much like me*). Higher scores on this scale indicated more RCSE ( $\alpha = .837$ ).

### ***Jealousy***

The jealousy of the participants was measured by a Short Form of the Multidimensional Jealousy Scale, consisting of 17 items (Elphinston et al., 2011; Pfeiffer & Wong, 1989). Participants had to fill in how cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally jealous they were. The

5-item cognitive jealousy subscale asked participants how often they had a certain thought, such as, “I suspect that my partner may be attracted to someone else” (1 = *never*, 5 = *always*). The cognitive jealousy rating scale was inverted to control for response acquisition bias (Pfeiffer & Wong, 1989). Secondly, the 6-item emotional jealousy subscale asked participants how they would react emotionally to a range of situations. An example of a situation is, “Your partner is flirting with someone else” (1 = *not upset at all*, 5 = *very upset*). Lastly, the 6-item behavioral jealous subscale asked participants how often they exhibit behaviors. An example of these behaviors are actions such as, “I call my partner unexpectedly, just to see if s/he is there” (1 = *never*, 5 = *always*). The scale showed good internal consistency ( $\alpha = .753$ ). Higher scores indicate higher levels of jealousy.

## Results

### Statistical analysis

To estimate the effect of infidelity on self-esteem and jealousy and the moderating effect of relationship contingent self-esteem, a moderated regression analysis was performed. Before interpreting the results of the moderated regression analysis, the assumptions were checked. First, it was not possible to test for the linearity assumption due to the use of the dummy variables. Furthermore, examination of the normal probability plot of standardized residuals as well as the scatterplot of standardized residuals against standardized predicted values indicated that the distribution was approximately normal. However, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test showed that the distribution was the assumption of normality was violated with 0.08 ( $df = 245$ ,  $p < .001$ ). For that reason, the log10 transformation was included in the analyses. Additionally, the linear regression is sensitive to outliers. The outliers in the study were determined using a boxplot. In a boxplot, a value was considered an outlier when the value was more than three standard deviations from the mean (Leys et al., 2019). In this dataset, 15 outliers were found. It was chosen in this case to not remove these outliers, because there were no cases with extreme scores and the outliers were not influential. Lastly, the assumption of homoscedasticity was checked with a scatterplot. The scatterplot showed that there was equal variance, this implies homoscedasticity of residuals.

### Infidelity Features

Of the participants, 65 experienced infidelity of a partner (26.5%). Fifteen participants experienced infidelity in the current relationship, 53 in a previous relationship, and three participants experienced infidelity in the current and a previous relationship. The different

groups of infidelity are too small to analyze separately, so it was decided to divide respondents into two groups: the infidelity group and the no-infidelity group. The infidelity occurred on average 5.3 years ago ( $SD = 3.02$ ) and the impact of this event was on average rated 2.6 ( $SD = 1.32$ ), implying that the participants experienced it somewhat negative to neither negative nor positive. The infidelity had occurred once (44.2%), for several weeks (29.4%), for several months (13.2%), or longer than several months (13.2%). The participants reported different types of infidelity in the relationship, such as being in love with another person (16.5%), kissing with another person (39.2%), having sex with another person (24%), having sex and being in love with another person (11.4%) and other like meeting with others (8.9%). Finally, participants indicated how often they thought back on the infidelity in the relationship: weekly (5.9%), monthly (25%), annually (26.5%), or not anymore (42.6%). The participants were also questioned whether they had ever been unfaithful themselves, but this question was not included in the results of this study due to a methodological error. Only a limited proportion of participants were shown this question.

### **Preliminary Analyses**

Table 1 provides means, standard deviations, and correlations between the variables. From this, it can be concluded that there was a negative significant correlation between self-esteem and RCSE. Moreover, there was a significant positive correlation between jealousy and RCSE. There were no significant correlations between infidelity and self-esteem, jealousy, and RCSE. Furthermore, gender was positively and significantly correlated with jealousy. Women reported more jealousy than men. There was a significant negative correlation between jealousy and age. On top of that, self-esteem and gender were negatively significantly correlated. Accordingly, it can be said that women report less self-esteem compared to men. Self-esteem was also significantly positively correlated with age and relationship length. Besides, the time since infidelity was experienced is positively correlated with infidelity. Lastly, there is a positive correlation between infidelity and age, which means that older respondents more often reported infidelity.

**Table 1***Descriptive Statistics and Correlations*

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Infidelity (0-1) <sup>a</sup>	.27	.44	1.00							
2. Jealousy (1-5)	1.89	.32	.027	1.00						
3. Self- esteem (1-5)	3.80	.62	-.039	-.179**	1.00					
4. RCSE (1-5)	-.00	1.01	-.055	.252**	-.252**	1.00				
5. Gender (1-4) <sup>b</sup>	1.84	.37	.059	.125*	-.186**	.140*	1.00			
6. Age (18-30)	23.55	2.33	.209**	-.179**	.190**	-.080	-.143*	1.00		
7. Relationship length (0.5 – 14)	3.50	2.49	.022	-.074	.142*	.061	.111	.326**	1.00	
8. Time since infidelity (0 – 11)	1.40	2.81	.834**	-.001	.011	-.008	.021	.319**	.158*	1.00

*Note:* \*\*  $p < .01$  (2-tailed); \*  $p < .05$  (2-tailed);  $N = 245$ ; RCSE = relationship-contingent self-esteem; relationship length = time in the relationship in half and whole years; time since infidelity = how long ago did the infidelity happen in half and whole years.

<sup>a</sup> 0 = no infidelity, 1 = infidelity.

<sup>b</sup> 1 = male, 2 = female.

**The effects of infidelity on self-esteem and jealousy**

A multiple regression analysis was conducted to predict self-esteem from infidelity, relationship-contingent self-esteem and the interaction between infidelity and relationship-contingent self-esteem. These variables significantly predicted self-esteem (see Table 2). First, the hypothesis was tested that the experience of infidelity of a partner was negatively associated with self-esteem. The regression analysis showed that the main effect of infidelity on self-esteem was negative and not significant. Thus, there is no significant difference in self-esteem between those that experienced infidelity and those that did not. The significant main effect of RCSE on self-esteem showed that when the participants reported a higher RCSE this was related to a lower self-esteem. Furthermore, it was considered whether RCSE would strengthen the relationship between infidelity and self-esteem. The regression analysis showed that the interaction effect was not significant.

**Table 2**

*Results of Regression Analyses Self-esteem*

	$\beta$ ( <i>b</i> )	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i> ( <i>p</i> )
Self-esteem			
Infidelity	-.009	.010	-.899 (.370)
RCSE	-.022	.005	-4.019 (< .001)
Infidelity x RCSE	.012	.010	1.174 (.242)
$F(3, 241) = 6.006, p < .001, R^2 = .070$			

The regression model of jealousy was significant (see Table 3). The hypothesis that the experience of infidelity of a partner was positively associated with jealousy was tested. The analysis showed that the effect of infidelity on jealousy was not significant. As the jealousy scale consisted of three subscales (cognitive jealousy, behavioral jealousy and emotional jealousy), the effects of infidelity were examined on each subscale but there were no significant effects (cognitive jealousy,  $b = .025, p = .564$ ; emotional jealousy,  $b = .043, p = .652$ ; behavioral jealousy,  $b = -.010, p = .868$ ). The significant main effect of RCSE on jealousy showed that when participants reported a higher RCSE, this was related to a higher jealousy level. Moreover, the hypothesis was tested that relationship-contingent self-esteem

would strengthen the relationship between infidelity and jealousy, but this was not the case as the interaction term had no significant effect on self-esteem.

**Table 3**

*Results of Regression Analyses Jealousy*

	$\beta$ ( <i>b</i> )	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i> ( <i>p</i> )
Jealousy			
Infidelity	.006	.010	.559 (.577)
RCSE	.014	.005	2.706 (.007)
Infidelity x RCSE	.016	.010	1.594 (.112)
$F(3, 241) = 6.755, p < .001, R^2 = .078$			

**Relationship between the main variables and gender, age, relationship length and time**

In the data analysis the control variables gender, age, relationship length and time since infidelity were also included (see Table 4). The main effect of infidelity on self-esteem did not change significantly after the inclusion of controls. In addition, the interaction effect did not change either, which means that the controls were not confounding variables. In the regression analysis, a negative significant effect between gender and self-esteem was found. This implies that women generally scored lower on self-esteem. Male participants had significantly higher self-esteem scores ( $M = 4.06$ ) compared to female participants ( $M = 3.75$ ). There was no relationship between the other control variables and self-esteem. Similarly, for jealousy, the main effect and the interaction effect did not change after the inclusion of the control variables (see Table 4). However, an effect was found between jealousy and age. Age added statistically significantly to jealousy. Therefore, it can be concluded that as the participants increased in age, they reported less jealousy.

**Table 4***Results of Regression Analyses with Controls*

	$\beta$ ( <i>b</i> )	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i> ( <i>p</i> )
<b>Self-esteem</b>			
Infidelity	-.015	.019	-.800 (.425)
RCSE	-.020	.005	-3.798 (< .001)
Infidelity x RCSE	.012	.010	1.158 (.248)
Gender	-.028	.013	-2.175 (.031)
Age	.004	.002	1.617 (.107)
Relationship length	.004	.002	1.849(.066)
Time since infidelity	.001	.003	.191 (.849)
$F(7, 237) = 4.910, p < .001, R^2 = .127$			
<b>Jealousy</b>			
Infidelity	.012	.019	.652 (.515)
RCSE	.013	.005	2.424 (.016)
Infidelity x RCSE	.017	.010	1.681 (.094)
Gender	.013	.013	1.058 (.291)
Age	-.005	.002	-2.420 (.016)
Relationship Length	-.001	.002	-.530 (.596)
Time since infidelity	.000	.003	-.096 (.924)
$F(7, 237) = 4.496, p < .001, R^2 = .117$			

### General discussion

The purpose of this study was to increase the understanding of how the experience of infidelity is associated with one's self-esteem and jealousy levels. Based on earlier self-esteem research, it was expected that the experience of infidelity of a partner is negatively associated with self-esteem. The current study showed no significant association between infidelity and self-esteem, in contrast to previous findings which showed that after experiencing infidelity people's self-esteem decreased (Russell et al., 2013; Stanford, 2012). A possible explanation for the non-significant effect can be the fact that the infidelity took place a long time ago on average ( $M = 5.29$ ). As a result, the experience of infidelity may no longer be fresh and accurate in a participant's memory. It can therefore be the case that the



effects of infidelity in the past no longer affect the participant any longer. Research indicated that when people distance themselves from the past transgressions committed against them, these experiences have less impact on their current selves (Wohl & McGrath, 2007). By doing so, negative feelings may be more present right after the infidelity and positive feelings may be more stable over time and per situation (Kluwer & Karremans, 2009). Therefore, it is possible that the infidelity from the past will no longer have an effect on one's current self-esteem. When infidelity occurred in the recent past, less than one year ago, this might be associated with self-esteem ( $p = .074$ ). Since there are only seven participants in this study who have experienced infidelity in the past year, follow-up research is necessary with multiple measurements.

Another explanation why no significant association was found may be the fact that self-esteem of the participants in general was quite high ( $M = 3.80$ ). Partners with high self-esteem often have more tools to manage stress. As a result, they are better at self-regulation, see less threat in stressful events and believe that they are more capable of controlling stress (Carver et al., 2008; Cast & Burke, 2002). Therefore, after infidelity, the betrayed partners with high self-esteem may be better able to cope with the damaging effects of this event and stress will be reduced. Individuals with low self-esteem are less able to muster the personal resources to deal with infidelity-related stress, which increases the impact of infidelity (Shrout & Weigel, 2020; Stinson et al., 2008). It is important in the future to investigate which role self-esteem has in this process.

Furthermore, and similarly, there was no effect of the experience of infidelity on jealousy, even though earlier studies showed that men and women report jealousy after they know that their partner committed infidelity (Buss & Shackelford, 1997; Valentova et al., 2020). This could be explained by several factors. First, the jealousy level of the participants was in general quite low ( $M = 1.89$ ). Looking at the Multidimensional Jealousy Scale, this may indicate that people in the sample are less jealous. It is also possible, as previously described, that people do not remember the infidelity well enough and therefore report lower levels of jealousy. In addition, it can be the case that people find it difficult to admit jealousy. Research shows that people feel embarrassed when they express jealousy (Mollon et al., 2018). Therefore it is possible that people reported socially desirable answers. Jealousy may be considered as a sensitive topic and participants may have filled out answers based on how they wish to come across. In the future it is recommended to focus on implicit measures of

jealousy like fMRI/EEG, eye tracking, skin conductance, reaction time and heart rate, to uncover the unconscious thoughts of the participants (Vandeberg, 2014).

Moreover, the study further examined the moderating effect of RCSE on infidelity and self-esteem and infidelity and jealousy. Prior research has shown that when people experience a negative event in the relationship this would result in lower self-esteem, especially for those higher in RCSE (Knee et al., 2008). In the present study, no significant moderating effect was found, showing that the association between the experience of infidelity and self-esteem was not more negative when RCSE was high. Earlier research suggested that the association between the experience and jealousy would be more positive when RCSE was high. There is no support for this showing that this was only theoretical (Knee et al., 2008; Pines & Aronson, 1983; Zandbergen & Brown, 2015). Thus, the main effects of infidelity on self-esteem and infidelity on jealousy were not strengthened by RCSE.

When looking at a possible explanation for this outcome, a clarification was found. Many theories about the development of romantic relationships suggest that during the period of emerging adulthood one is able to develop an intimate romantic relationship (Collins, 2003). However, recent research shows that romantic relationships of many adults people are quite different. The level of commitment and the interdependence within these relationships is delayed and they have more short-term encounters or non-committed relationships. Since young adulthood relationships are likely to be shorter in duration and less committed, this may therefore cause one to feel less dependent on the other person and their self-esteem may depend less on the relationship (Shulman & Connolly, 2013). As a result, relative inexperience with long-term emotional and sexual relationships may cause young adults to respond differently to infidelity than more experienced older populations (Sabini & Green, 2004). Due to the not diverse and small sample, it is important to pay more attention to this in future research, as no correlation is found yet in the present study.

Furthermore, it is possible that the participant's current relationship may contribute to the effects between infidelity, self-esteem, jealousy and relationship-contingent self-esteem. The majority of the participants experienced infidelity in the past and not in the current relationship. Research shows that the level of commitment declines when partners break up (Koenig Kellas et al., 2008). Because commitment is lower in the previous relationship, research shows that people report less negative affect with the ex-partner's infidelity than with the current partner's infidelity (Kluwer & Karremans, 2009). In doing so, the current

relationship may cause the effect of past infidelity to diminish and that the participants feel less dependent on the past relationship. When people start a new relationship they will develop higher self-esteem and this continues within a longer relationship (Luciano & Orth, 2017). A successful stable romantic relationship may have a positive effect on people's mental and physical being (Gómez-López et al., 2019). When one is satisfied in their relationship, one may experience fewer risks within the current relationship (Rauer et al., 2008). As a result, it is possible that one's jealousy level will be lower, as is the case in our sample. Future research should therefore examine whether the participant still feels committed to the relationship with the ex-partner and whether the negative effects of infidelity disappear after entering a new relationship.

Despite not having found a moderating effect, it could be that RCSE has a different role in this analysis. In the present study a significant effect was found between RCSE and self-esteem, consistent with previous research (Knee et al., 2008). When participants reported a higher RCSE this was related to lower self-esteem. As a result, daily events can lead to greater fluctuations in self-esteem in people with a high RCSE (Knee et al., 2018). In addition, an effect of RCSE on jealousy was found, which showed that when participants report a higher RCSE this was related to a higher jealousy level. This shows that individuals with a high RCSE are more affected by relationship events, which might cause them to feel more jealous. Based on earlier research, this positive association between RCSE and jealousy was expected (Dibello et al., 2015). As mentioned earlier, infidelity and RCSE may not be related in this study, because infidelity often occurred a longer time ago and one feels less connected to the ex-partner (Kluwer & Karremans, 2009). Thus, relationships within the model were found, but not in the way that was expected. One reason could be that RCSE directly impacts one's self-esteem or jealousy level and that infidelity must have taken place a shorter time ago to have an effect on RCSE. Since little empirical evidence has been found, future research is needed to show the precise relationship between RCSE, self-esteem, jealousy and infidelity.

### **Methodological limitations**

There are several methodological limitations that may have an effect on the results of our research. First, the gender ratio was very unbalanced (15.9% men and 84.1% women). This imbalance makes it difficult to generalize the results. Previous findings by researchers show that women are generally more likely to participate in research about relationships

(Kluwer & Karremans, 2009). In addition, figures from CBS (2019) show that women generally use more social media than men. Since participants were mainly recruited through these channels, this may contribute to the skewed distribution.

Secondly, high educated participants were overrepresented compared to less educated participants. Thus, the generalizability of the results must be carefully considered taking into account education level.

Thirdly, the sample of the infidelity group was small ( $N = 65$ ). As a result, it is possible that there was a significant effect, but it may not emerge due to a small sample size. A too small sample is not a good representation of the entire population, which reduces the level of reliability and accuracy of the study (Howell, 2014).

Fourth, a large part of the literature is based on heterosexual relationships, and our study is also based on this literature. In the future, it will be important to see if there are differences in the effects of infidelity on homosexuals and heterosexuals. Indeed, it has been found that homosexual men are more affected by emotional infidelity, while lesbians label sexual infidelity as the most shocking event (Dijkstra et al., 2001). It is important to look beyond gender and also zoom in more on differences in sexual orientation.

Fifth, due to the cross-sectional design of the study, no causal links can be established. In consequence, future research should be focused on prospective and longitudinal study designs. For example, through a diary or questionnaires, longitudinal data could be collected on fluctuations in the effects of infidelity over time.

As a final point, it may be valuable to include different age groups in future research. Earlier it is mentioned that it is possible that young adults feel less committed to their relationships, because they are more likely to have short-term encounters or non-committed relationships (Shulman & Connolly, 2013). Inexperience with sexual and emotional relationships may contribute to their responding differently to infidelity. It is important to consider whether an effect between infidelity and self-esteem and infidelity and jealousy can be found in an older or younger age group. Adults are more likely to be committed to their romantic relationship because, for example, they are married or have children with their partner (Negash & Morgan, 2016). This may cause that in this age group, the effects of infidelity are more present and their self-esteem is more dependent on the relationship. Future research should rule out whether this link actually exists.

Despite these limitations, the present study provides insights for future research on infidelity's aftermath. The present research went beyond the existing literature that focused on hypothetical infidelity to explore actual experiences with infidelity. Moreover, the present research extends earlier work by focusing on young adulthood, while much of the extant literature is focused on older age groups. Additionally, the relationships between the infidelity, jealousy, self-esteem and RCSE had not yet been examined in this way and very little is known about the association of relationship-contingent self-esteem on other constructs.

### **Conclusion**

Taken together, this research shows that infidelity is not related to less self-esteem or a higher jealousy level, in contrast to previous work. Furthermore, the results indicate that the level of relationship-contingent self-esteem had no significant effect on the relationship between infidelity and self-esteem or the relationship between infidelity and jealousy. In addition, a significant effect between RCSE and both self-esteem and jealousy was found. When participants reported a higher RCSE this was related to lower self-esteem and to a higher jealousy level. Moreover, older participants expressed less jealousy and women reported a lower self-esteem. The results could suggest that it is important for therapists to look at the effect of relationship-contingent self-esteem on factors such as self-esteem and jealousy. This effect could be relevant for therapists to help couples or individuals in practice. Follow-up research is needed with larger samples, samples with participants with different levels of education and multiple measurements to better investigate the role of infidelity on self-esteem, jealousy and RCSE.

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## Appendix A

### 1. Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965)

Below is a list of statements dealing with your general feelings about yourself. Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with each statement.

Strongly	Disagree (2)	Neither Agree	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree
Disagree(1)		nor Disagree		(5)
		(3)		

1. I feel that I am a person of worth, at least on an equal basis with others
2. I feel that I have a number of good qualities
3. All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure (r)
4. I am able to do things as well as most other people
5. I feel I do not have much to be proud of (r)
6. I take a positive attitude toward myself
7. On the whole, I am satisfied with myself
8. I wish I could have more respect for myself (r)
9. I certainly feel useless at times (r)
10. At times, I think I am no good at all (r)

*Note.* r = reverse-scored item.

### 2. Single-Item Self-Esteem Scale (Robins et al., 2001)

To what extent does the following statement apply to you?

1. I have a high self-esteem

Rate the item using the following scale:

(1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=neither agree nor disagree, 4=agree, 5= strongly agree)

### 3. Relationship-Contingent Self-Esteem Scale (Knee et al., 2008)

The following statements are about your thoughts and feelings about yourself in your relationship. Please indicate the extent to which these statements apply to you.

Not at all Like Me (1) Not Much Like Me (2) Neutral (3) Somewhat Like me (4)  
 Very much Like Me (5)

1. I feel better about myself when it seems like my partner and I are getting along
2. I feel better about myself when it seems like my partner and I are emotionally connected
3. An important measure of my self-worth is how successful my relationship is
4. My feelings of self-worth are based on how well things are going in my relationship
5. When my relationship is going well, I feel better about myself overall
6. If my relationship were to end tomorrow, I would not let it affect how I feel about myself (r)
7. My self-worth is unaffected when things go wrong in my relationship (r)
8. When my partner and I fight, I feel bad about myself in general
9. When my relationship is going bad, my feelings of self-worth remain unaffected (r)
10. I feel better about myself when others tell me that my partner and I have a good relationship
11. When my partner criticizes me, or seems disappointed in me, it makes me feel really bad

*Note.* (r) = reverse-scored item.

4. A Short Form of the Multidimensional jealousy scale (Pfeiffer & Wong, 1989) by Elphinston, Feeney and Noller (2011)

In the questions below, with "another person" we mean another potential partner.

**How often do you have the following thoughts about your partner?**

1. I suspect that my partner is secretly seeing another person
2. I suspect that my partner may be attracted to another person
3. I suspect that my partner may be physically intimate with another person behind my back
4. I think that my partner is secretly developing an intimate relationship with another person
5. I suspect that my partner is crazy about another person

Rate the items using the following scale:

Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)

**How would you emotionally react to the following situations?**

1. Your partner comments to you on how great looking a particular man/woman is
2. Your partner shows a great deal of interested or excitement in talking to another person
3. Another person is trying to get close to your partner all the time
4. Your partner is flirting with another person
5. Your partner is dating another person
6. Your partner hugs and kisses another person

Rate the items using the following scale:

Not Upset At all	Little Upset	Quite Upset	Upset	Very Upset
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)

**How often do you engage in the following behaviours?**

1. I look through my partner's drawers, bag, or pockets
2. I call my partner unexpectedly, just to see if he/she is there
3. I question my partner about previous or present romantic relationships
4. I question my partner about his/her telephone calls
5. I question my partner about his/her whereabouts
6. I join in whenever I see my partner talking to another person

Rate the items using the following scale:

Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)

5. A Short and extended form of the Experiences with partner infidelity scale (Kluwer & Karremans, 2009)

The following questions are about your possible experiences with infidelity. By infidelity, we mean that a partner does not keep agreements in the relationship about intimate contact with others.

1. Have you ever experienced infidelity of a (current or previous) partner?

1. Yes
2. No

2. Has your current partner ever been unfaithful to you?

1. Yes
2. No

3. If yes, in what way has your partner been unfaithful? (you may click on more than one answer)

1. In love with another person without sexual contact
2. Kissing with another person
3. Having sex with another person, but not in love
4. In love with another person and sexual contact with this person
5. Other, namely.....

4. How long ago did the infidelity happen ?

\_\_\_\_\_ month(s)

5. How long did the infidelity last?

1. One-time
2. For several weeks
3. For several months
4. Longer than several months

6. When you think back on the infidelity , how much did this event affect you? On a scale of 1 (no influence) to 5 (tremendous influence)

\_\_\_\_\_

7. How often do you think about the infidelity?

1. Daily
2. Weekly
3. Monthly
4. Annually
5. I don't think about this anymore

8. Has a partner from a previous relationship ever been unfaithful to you?

1. Yes
2. No

9. If yes, in what way was your then partner unfaithful? (you can click on more than one answer)

1. In love with another person without sexual contact
2. Only kissing with another person
3. Having sex with another person, not in love
4. In love with another person and sex with this person
5. Other, namely.....

10. How long ago did this situation happen to you?

\_\_\_\_\_ month(s)

11. How long did the infidelity last?

5. One-time
6. For several weeks
7. For several months
8. Longer than several months

12. When you think back on this experience, how much did this event affect you? On a scale of 1 (no influence) to 5 (tremendous influence)

\_\_\_\_\_

13. This event is something I think back on:

1. Daily
2. Weekly
3. Monthly
4. Annually
5. I don't think about this anymore

14. Have you ever been unfaithful yourself?

1. Yes
2. No