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Are You Cheating on Me? Identifying Factors Contributing to the Use of Suspicion Confirmation and Avoidance Strategies

Daniel J Weigel & M. Rosie Shrout

This study integrates communication, motivational, and behavioral elements to identify factors that lead to the use of key information seeking strategies people employ to confirm or avoid suspicions about a partner's potential cheating. Individuals (N = 246) who suspected a partner's infidelity reported engaging in five general suspicion confirmation strategies: conversation, intrusion, snooping, surveillance, and avoidance. SEM results revealed that individuals who reported more suspicious partner behavior, greater suspicion and uncertainty about a partner's infidelity, suspicion-related anxiety, and a stronger desire to confirm their suspicions reported using the suspicion confirmation and avoidance strategies more often.

Keywords: conversation; snooping; surveillance; suspicion; uncertainty

Infidelity is one of the most serious transgressions in romantic relationships, and one that can have devastating emotional, physical, and relational effects (Fincham & May, 2017; Shrout & Weigel, 2018). Even the mere suspicion that a romantic partner might be cheating can take an emotional and physical toll on a person (Weigel & Shrout, 2021), create distrust, anger, and jealousy toward the partner (Feeney, 2005; Guerrero & Andersen, 1998), and increase relationship conflict and aggression (Guerrero & Andersen, 1998). Although some people may not want to know if

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a partner is cheating, others may have a strong desire to confirm their suspicions, alleviate their doubts, and move forward in their lives. Some may use direct communication and information seeking strategies to confirm their suspicion, while others use more covert tactics or even attempt to avoid the situation. Examining the various ways people attempt to confirm or refrain from confirming their suspicions can provide an important step forward in understanding how suspected infidelity impacts individuals and their relationships.

In this paper, we conceptualize suspicion confirmation as an active process whereby individuals choose to engage in direct and indirect communication and information seeking to either verify a partner's infidelity or avoid seeking verification. Research on suspicion confirmation has been limited in several ways. First, the literature has failed to incorporate existing theoretical frameworks that might inform suspicion confirmation. For example, the theory of motivated information management (TMIM: Afifi & Morse, 2009; Afifi & Weiner, 2004) and Brashers's (2001) uncertainty management framework highlight conditions in which people decide to seek or refrain from seeking information about an important topic on which they have some degree of uncertainty. Applying this logic to suspicion confirmation, we seek to identify the factors and conditions under which individuals engage in actions to confirm or refrain from confirming their suspicions of a partner's betrayal. We propose and test a suspicion model which incorporates elements of uncertainty management and TMIM, whereby perceptions of a partner's suspicious behavior can trigger a cascade of suspicion, uncertainty, distress, and a desire either to confirm or avoid suspicions which impact the use of various strategies in response to suspicion.

Second, we argue that suspicion confirmation involves communication, relational, behavioral, and motivational elements. Integrating these diverse elements into a single model may provide better understanding of suspicion confirmation decisions and provides a more holistic view of the confirmation process. Currently, to our knowledge, there is no conceptual model that proposes how such diverse viewpoints fit together to provide a more integrated view of suspicion processes in romantic relationships.

Finally, rather than viewing suspicion confirmation as a "one size fits all" approach, in this paper suspicion confirmation strategies are viewed as a suite of potential actions in response to suspicion. Such an approach better captures the mix of potential overt and covert, active and avoidant strategies people may employ in response to their suspicions. In these ways, the suspicion confirmation model described and tested in this study provides an advance in the suspicion confirmation literature. Next, we outline the tenets of the model and then present the results of a study that provides an initial test of its utility.

Suspicion Confirmation

When confronted with the possibility a partner may be cheating, people are faced with a decision—should they engage in information seeking to try to confirm their

suspicions or avoid finding out? TMIM describes a process that individuals go through when deciding whether to seek information about an important issue (Afifi & Weiner, 2004). In the initial interpretation phase, individuals first become aware of the level of uncertainty they have about the issue and the amount of uncertainty they desire. This uncertainty discrepancy leads to an emotional reaction, followed by an evaluation of their ability and desire to accept or alleviate that anxiety (evaluation phase). However, people do not always view uncertainty negatively nor are they always driven to reduce it (Brashers, 2001). Once assessments are made, an individual will choose an information management strategy (decision phase). Information management strategies include information seeking, information avoidance, or cognitive reappraisal (Afifi & Weiner, 2004).

Applying this uncertainty management and information management logic to suspected infidelity, we conceptualize that the confirmation process involves a suspicion phase, a motivation phase, and an action phase. The suspicion phase includes the growing awareness of a partner's potential infidelity via a partner's suspicious behavior, and the degree of suspicion and uncertainty discrepancy generated about the potential infidelity; the motivation phase is characterized by the general anxiety and distress created by one's suspicion and uncertainty, and a desire to alleviate that distress by confirming or choosing not to confirm suspicions; and the action phase, which involves the use of various strategies intended to either confirm or refrain from confirming a partner's betrayal. Figure 1 details the suspicion confirmation model tested in this paper.

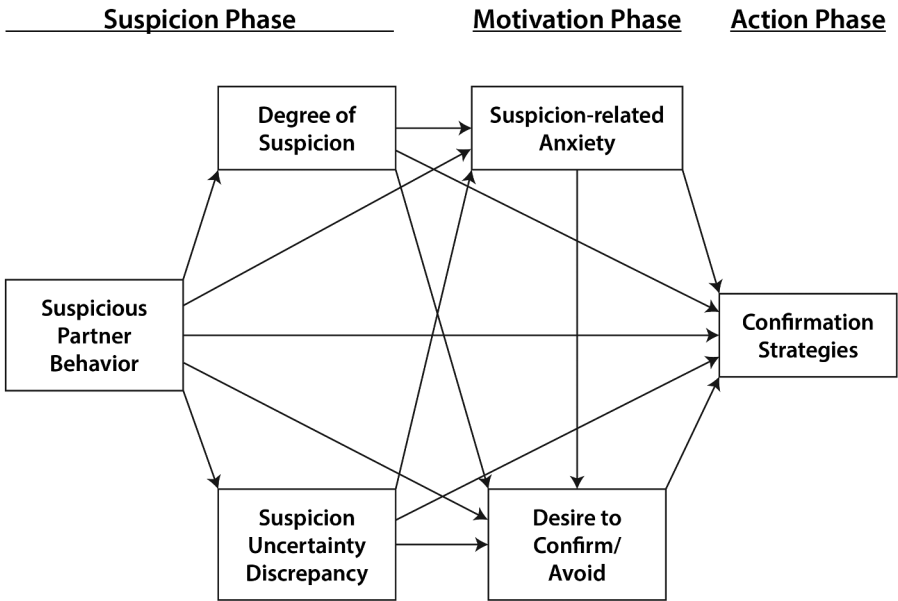


Figure 1 Proposed Model of the Infidelity Suspicion Confirmation Process

Suspicion Phase

Suspicious Partner Behavior

Suspicion occurs because something in the environment triggers an initial sense of doubt or concern about a partner's faithfulness. One particularly salient source of information regarding a potential betrayal is that partner's behavior. Research has identified a number of activities and behaviors that can suggest infidelity. Hanson Sobraske, Gaulin, and Boster (2014) asked individuals to list something a partner could do or say, or fail to do or say, that could make them feel jealous of a potential rival. Participants listed actions such as a partner flirting with another person, canceling a date to have dinner with an ex-partner, and catching a partner kissing another person. Also, a partner talking about people they find attractive, talking positively about past relationships, showing interest to someone else, giving a present to someone of the opposite sex, and spending time with an ex-partner might suggest infidelity (Cyanus & Both-Butterfield, 2004; Dijkstra, Barelds, & Groothof, 2010; Mattingly, Whitson, & Mattingly, 2012). Actions such as increased relationship conflict, loss of affection, avoiding interaction, and missing anniversaries and other special dates also can signal potential infidelity (Shackelford & Buss, 1997). Such behaviors are associated with greater experienced jealousy, lower relationship satisfaction and commitment, and less passionate love and affection (Goodboy, Horan, & Booth-Butterfield, 2012; Mattingly, Whitson, & Mattingly, 2012). Therefore, when someone notices something suspicious in a partner's behavior, it likely triggers suspicion and uncertainty about a partner's fidelity, and ultimately may stimulate engagement in strategies to confirm doubts raised by that suspicious behavior.

Suspicion of Infidelity

Suspected infidelity can be seen as concerns about a partner's real or imagined involvement with another person (Weigel & Shrout, 2021). Suspicion about a rival can challenge the relationship norms governing what is considered acceptable in a monogamous relationship (Watkins & Boon, 2016), signal the potential loss of the relationship (Barelds & Dijkstra, 2007), and imply that the partner is less invested (Leary, 2001). When individuals suspect their partners are cheating, they experience growing distrust of their partners (Feeney, 2005; Guerrero & Andersen, 1998), and suspicion can result in increased relationship conflict, aggression, retaliation, and dissolution (Guerrero & Andersen, 1998). In their communication responses to jealousy framework, Guerrero, Andersen, Jorgensen, Spitzberg, and Eloy (1995, 2011) found that people engage in a variety of communication responses to jealousy, including destructive, constructive, rival-focused, and avoidant communication. Therefore, we might expect that greater suspicion should move individuals to engage in communication and related activities to confirm those suspicions.

Suspicion-Related Uncertainty

In addition to increased suspicion, a partner's suspicious behavior likely heightens uncertainty about the partner's fidelity. Uncertainty raises concern about potential relationship threats and whether the partner might be looking for potential rivals (Guerrero & Andersen, 1998; Knobloch, Solomon, & Cruz, 2001), is associated with greater jealousy and worry about a potential rival (Afifi & Reichert, 1996; Kennedy-Lightsey, 2018), and influences whether and how one decides to engage in communication with a partner (Guerrero & Andersen, 1998). However, in the TMIM, Afifi and Weiner (2004; also Afifi & Morse, 2009) argue that rather than uncertainty per se, it is the discrepancy between what a person knows and what they want to know, i.e., uncertainty discrepancy, that can motivate information seeking. Sometimes individuals will choose to engage in information seeking to manage and reduce the discrepancy between what they know and what they want to know about an important topic. At other times they may choose to remain uncertain and avoid pursuing information seeking. They may experience high levels of uncertainty but be completely comfortable with such levels and will not pursue information-seeking behaviors to reduce the gap. In terms of suspicion, this suggests that the discrepancy between how certain one is that their partner is cheating and how certain they want to be about a partner's cheating can motivate one to use suspicion confirmation or avoidance strategies (see Figure 1).

Motivation Phase

Afifi and Weiner (2004) argued that the decision to seek information hinges upon several factors, two of which are germane to this study: a) anxiety and emotion concerning the uncertainty related to the situation or event and, b) an overall desire or motivation to resolve that uncertainty and anxiety.

Suspicion Anxiety

According to TMIM (Afifi & Morse, 2009; Afifi & Weiner, 2004), uncertainty discrepancy about what a person knows about a situation and what they want to know can create a number of emotions, one of which is anxiety. Indeed, suspicion and jealousy are often accompanied by a sense of anxiety and distress (Guerrero & Andersen, 1998; Weigel & Shrout, 2021). A real or imaginary extradyadic rival poses a threat and can signal the potential loss of the relationship (Barelds & Dijkstra, 2007), a highly stressful and traumatic event (Field, Diego, Pelaez, Deeds, & Delgado, 2013). The loss of a romantic partner to a rival also constitutes rejection, which can lower self-esteem (DeSteno, Valdesolo, & Bartlett, 2006). Likewise, a partner's possible betrayal can suggest that the partner views the relationship as less valuable (Leary, 2001) and potential cheating likely sends the signal that the partner is less invested in the relationship. In TMIM (Afifi & Weiner, 2004), when individuals have a desire to alleviate uncertainty-related anxiety regarding what they know and what

they want to know about a given situation, they are more likely to engage in active information seeking. Regarding suspected infidelity, suspicion-related uncertainty, in addition to greater suspicion of a partner's cheating, may generate higher levels of suspicion-related anxiety and a stronger desire to confirm suspicions, and ultimately a greater likelihood of engaging in suspicion confirmation or avoidance to alleviate the doubts and anxiety. However, in some instances, individuals choose not to attempt to relieve the anxiety (Afifi & Weiner, 2004) and may avoid active information seeking.

Desire to Confirm/Avoid Suspicion

When deciding whether to confirm one's suspicions, we argue that it is not enough to notice suspicious partner behavior, and have high levels of suspicion, uncertainty, and suspicion-related distress; rather, one must have a desire or motivation to act on those suspicions. According to both the uncertainty management framework and TMIM, motivation plays a central role in how individuals decide to manage important information. When having a strong desire to alleviate their doubts and uncertainty, some individuals are more likely to engage in active information seeking behavior (Afifi & Weiner, 2004; Brashers, 2001). Conversely, even in the face of doubt and uncertainty, others may prefer to restrain from gathering information to remain uncertain about the situation. Applied to suspicion, when faced with the possibility that their partners might be cheating, people decide whether to engage in strategies to verify those suspicions. Some may have a strong desire to confirm their suspicions and actively engage in communication activities that will resolve it. Others may prefer to remain uncertain whether a partner is cheating and take an avoidance approach. Even so, we would expect that the greater the desire to find out if a partner is cheating, the more likely some will be to engage in confirmation strategies.

Action Phase

Suspicion Confirmation or Avoidance Strategies

The final element of the proposed model is the reported use of suspicion confirmation or avoidance strategies. According to TMIM, individuals may decide to use various strategies to seek information directly or indirectly, or to actively avoid information when information seeking would be risky, or the information would be useless or not likely to reduce negative affect (Afifi & Weiner, 2004). Similarly, research on communication responses to jealousy (e.g., Guerrero, Andersen, Jorgensen, Spitzberg, & Eloy, 1995; Guerrero, Hannawa, & Babin, 2011), infidelity accommodation (Weiser & Weigel, 2014), intrusive behavior (e.g., Vinkers, Finkenauer, & Hawk, 2011), snooping (e.g., Derby, Knox, & Easterling, 2012; Whitford & Howells, 2000), and mate guarding (e.g., Buss et al., 2008; Neal & Lemay, 2014) suggests a variety of direct and indirect information seeking strategies people may employ to confirm or avoid confirming their suspicions. Individuals may use more direct conversational strategies, such as sharing their

concerns with a partner and explaining their feelings. Sometimes people will ask partners about their whereabouts, what they have been doing, or call them unexpectedly to see where they are at. Rather than directly engaging a partner, people may use more indirect or covert strategies, such as snooping through their partner's possessions, e-mails, and phone calls. They may use other surveillance strategies, such as secretly following their partner, spying on what the partner is doing, or listening in on conversations. Rather than attempting to confirm one's suspicions, others may choose not to intentionally discover whether a partner is cheating and instead use avoidance strategies, such as pretending nothing is wrong or emotionally withdrawing from a partner. These individuals may not be comfortable with their uncertainty but may be more worried about what they might find out; therefore, uncertainty and avoidance are better than having their suspicions confirmed. Overall, except for avoidance, these strategies suggest attempts to either directly or indirectly verify whether a partner is cheating and communicate a degree of concern about the partner's fidelity.

Methods

Procedures and Participants

A total of 246 individuals who suspected a partner's infidelity were recruited from the research subject pool at a mid-sized Western university in the United States to complete an online questionnaire for partial fulfillment of research participation credits. Before starting the questionnaire, participants were informed, "You are being asked to participate in a study on reactions to suspected infidelity in romantic relationships. You must currently be in a committed relationship (dating or married), suspect that your current partner is cheating on you or has cheated on you in the past 3 months, and be at least 18 years old to participate." Only those that answered "Yes" to these screening questions proceeded to the study. As an additional check, the survey contained a suspicion scale and if individuals responded to the items indicating no suspicion, they were excluded from the data analysis. Three months was chosen because we expected that the suspicion of a partner's cheating would still be fresh in their minds. Consistent with past research, we allowed participants to self-define cheating given the wide variation in behaviors people consider as infidelity (Weiser, Lalasz, Weigel, & Evans, 2014). All procedures were approved by the university Institutional Review Board.

Participants ranged in age from 18 to 47 years ($M = 21.69$, $SD = 4.18$), and characterized their relationships as married or engaged (8.1%, $n = 20$), dating exclusively and living together (17.1%, $n = 42$), or dating exclusively but not living together (74.8%, $n = 184$). Most were in different-sex relationships (93.9%, $n = 231$) while 15 (6.1%) reported being in same-sex relationships. Relationships ranged from one month to 17 years ($M = 1.83$, $SD = 2.29$). The majority were women (61%, $n = 148$) and described themselves as White (59.9%, $n = 145$), followed by Latinx/Mexican/Hispanic (21.1%, $n = 51$), Asian or Pacific Islander (7.0%, $n = 17$), Black (6.6%, $n = 16$), Multi-ethnic (4.1%, $n = 10$), Native American (.4%, $n = 1$), and 2 (.8%) who selected other.

Measures

Partner's Suspicious Behavior

The measure of a partner's suspicious behavior was created for this study based on the work of Hanson Sobraske, Gaulin, and Boster (2014). In their research, Hanson Sobraske and colleagues asked participants to identify behaviors that would generate concern about a potential rival. The researchers then refined those behaviors into a list of 24 items, such as "Your partner obviously enjoyed when another potential romantic partner pursued a relationship with him/her," "Your partner talks about casual flings she/he had with men/women," and "Your partner flirts with other potential romantic partners when she/he thinks you aren't looking." In the present study, we converted the list into a measure and respondents rated each item on a scale from 1 (*never*) to 7 (*all of the time*) in terms of how often each item happened in their current relationship. We excluded three items that were deemed to constitute some level of cheating: "Your partner spends the night at another potential romantic partner's house," "You catch your partner kissing another man/woman," and "Your partner tells you she has been having sex with another man/woman." Exploratory factor analysis with promax rotation with the remaining 21 items resulted in three factors with eigenvalues over 1.0, however, the scree plot indicated one dominant factor which accounted for 51.6% of the variance, with the second and third factors only accounting for 6.58% and 5.72% of the variance, respectively. Given the dominance of the first factor, we chose to use it as our measure of suspicious partner behavior. The scale consisted of 15 items and had an α of .94, with higher scores indicating more reported suspicious behaviors by the partner ($M = 2.94$, $SD = 1.32$).

Suspicion of Infidelity

To measure suspicion of a partner's infidelity, we used five items from the cognitive jealousy subscale of the Multidimensional Jealousy Scale (Pfeiffer & Wong, 1989). The items were: I suspect that my partner is secretly seeing someone else, I suspect that my partner may be attracted to someone else, I think that someone else may be romantically interested in my partner, I think that my partner is secretly developing an intimate relationship with someone else, and I suspect that my partner is interested in someone else. Participants rated the items using a scale of 1 (*disagree strongly*) to 7 (*agree strongly*). Higher scores indicated greater suspicion about a partner's cheating ($M = 4.62$, $SD = 1.27$, $\alpha = .87$).

Suspicion-Uncertainty Discrepancy

Based on TMIM (Afifi & Morse, 2009; Afifi & Weiner, 2004), suspicion-uncertainty discrepancy was measured using an index created by subtracting participants' response to the question "How certain are you about whether your partner is or has cheated on you?" from "How certain do you want to be about whether your partner is or has cheated on you?" (both measured on 1 = *completely uncertain* to 7

= *completely certain* scales). Discrepancy scores ranged from -6 to 6 , with positive scores indicating a desire for more certainty about whether their partner is cheating ($M = 1.25$, $SD = 2.53$). In general, participants expressed a desire for more certainty about their partner's possible cheating.

Suspicion-Related Anxiety

On a scale from 1 (*disagree strongly*) to 7 (*agree strongly*), suspicion-related anxiety was assessed using an adapted version of the 16-item Break-Up Distress Scale (Field et al., 2009). Items were modified to assess the level of perceived anxiety related to partner's suspected infidelity rather than a breakup (e.g., I think about my partner cheating on me so much that it's hard for me to do things I normally do; Thinking about my partner cheating on me upsets me). Higher scores indicating more suspicion-related anxiety since they began suspecting that their partner is or has cheated on them ($M = 4.34$, $SD = 1.25$, $\alpha = .93$).

Desire to Confirm/Avoid Suspicion

Three items were used to measure participants' desire to confirm their suspicions of their partner's infidelity: "I definitely want to know whether my partner is cheating or has cheated on me" and "It is important that I know whether my partner is cheating or has cheated on me" (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*), and "How motivated are you to find out if your partner is cheating" (1 = *not motivated at all* to 7 = *extremely motivated*). The three items were combined to create a scale score with an α of .86. Higher scores indicated a stronger desire to know whether a partner was cheating while a lower score suggests a desire to remain uncertain ($M = 5.61$, $SD = 1.34$). Given the relatively high mean, it appears that most participants wanted to confirm rather than avoid their suspicions.

Suspicion Confirmation and Avoidance Strategies

To assess the types of strategies people may use to confirm their suspicions, we began by adapting relevant items from existing scales designed to measure intrusive and surveillance behaviors (Whitford & Howells, 2000), as well as prosocial and avoidant responses to jealousy (Guerrero, Andersen, Jorgensen, Spitzberg, & Eloy, 1995; Guerrero, Hannawa, & Babin, 2011). We chose these constructs because they were most closely aligned with the concept of strategies individuals could intentionally use to confirm a romantic partner's infidelity. We generated additional items to elaborate on potential confirmation strategies to create an initial pool of 31 items. Participants rated the items as to: "How often have you engaged in the following behaviors since you became suspicious that your partner is or may be cheating on you?" from 1 (*never*) to 7 (*very often*). An exploratory factor analysis using promax rotation ($KMO = .93$) resulted in a five-factor solution accounting for 67.55% of the variance. To be considered a viable factor, we required that it must have a least three items with factor loadings greater than .40. Five items did not meet the criteria and

were removed from the final measures. Table 1 presents the items in each factor. The first factor, Snooping (6 items, $M = 3.31$, $SD = 1.60$, $\alpha = .93$), consists of items focusing on individuals actively searching through partners' devices and belongings for signs of infidelity. The second factor, Surveillance (4 items, $M = 2.97$, $SD = 1.47$, $\alpha = .87$), involves activities to secretly keep tabs on partners and their activities. Intrusion, the third factor (7 items, $M = 3.88$, $SD = 1.37$, $\alpha = .87$), pertains to efforts to more overtly intervene or force oneself into a partner's activities. The fourth factor, Conversation (4 items, $M = 4.11$, $SD = 1.40$, $\alpha = .85$), entails having discussions with partners and openly sharing concerns and feelings. Rather than trying to actively resolve suspicions, the fifth factor, Avoidance (5 items, $M = 3.97$, $SD = 1.38$, $\alpha = .81$), encompasses a desire to avoid searching for clues or avoiding the partner.

Covariates

We also included several covariates that might play a role in the confirmation process. First, having previous discussions and agreements about the meaning of fidelity in the relationship might color people's expectations and reactions to a potential betrayal (Watkins & Boon, 2016). Four items from Watkins and Boon (2016) were used to measure prior fidelity discussions (e.g., "My partner and I have discussed our expectations for each other's fidelity"). Items were rated from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*), with higher scores indicating a greater likelihood to have had previous discussions about fidelity expectations ($M = 4.83$, $SD = 1.66$, $\alpha = .93$). Second, when people hold higher expectations for monogamy, they may be particularly devastated when they suspect a partner's infidelity because it violates their core value of monogamy (Watkins & Boon, 2016). Belief in the importance of fidelity was assessed with a single item from Watkins and Boon (2016). On a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*), participants reported whether "Complete faithfulness in a serious, committed relationship is very important to me." A higher score indicated complete faithfulness was important ($M = 6.41$, $SD = 1.099$). Third, if cheating has occurred previously in the relationship (i.e., self or partner has cheated), it could be seen as more normal and less inhibiting or, conversely, heighten vigilance to a potential rival (Boon, Watkins, & Sciban, 2014; Buunk & Bakker, 1995). Participants were asked if they had ever cheated on their current partner (1 = *no*, 2 = *yes*) and if their current partner had ever cheated on them (1 = *no*, 2 = *yes*). Sixty-two (25.6%) respondents reported that their current partner had previously cheated on them and 32 (13.2%) reported having cheated on their current partner. Fourth, infidelity often occurs at times of relationship dissatisfaction and distress (Fincham & May, 2017). Relationship satisfaction was measured with the 3-item Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale (Schumm et al., 1986), adapted to romantic relationships in general, with a higher score indicating greater satisfaction (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*; $M = 4.16$, $SD = 1.51$, $\alpha = .92$). Finally, some research has shown that women feel more insecure, anxious, disappointed, depressed, and helpless following a partner's suspected or actual infidelity than men (Shackelford, LeBlanc, & Drass, 2000; Sweeney & Horwitz, 2001), while

Table 1 Eigenvalues, Variance and Primary Factor Loadings for the Suspicion Confirmation Items

Factor	Eigenvalue	% of variance	Loading
Snooping	14.32	46.22	
1. Checked my partner's belongings (e.g., wallet/purse, bags, or pockets)			.83
2. Looked through my partner's personal communication (e.g., text messages, e-mails, social media) without him/her knowing			.81
3. Went through my partner's phone to see who he/she had recently called			.78
4. Went through my partner's property (e.g., car, home, office) to look around			.77
5. Looked through my partner's drawers, handbags, pockets			.74
6. Checked my partner's clothing for signs of cheating			.61
Surveillance	2.66	8.57	
1. Secretly followed my partner to see where she/he was going			.84
2. Secretly listened to my partner's conversations from another room			.74
3. Secretly watched from a distance to see what my partner was doing			.73
4. Read my partner's personal mail without him/her knowing			.47
Intrusion	1.51	4.87	
1. Asked my partner where he/she had been and what they had been doing			.80
2. Contacted (e.g., call, text message) my partner to check up on where she/he was			.70
3. Questioned my partner about his/her telephone calls			.69
4. Kept an eye on what my partner is saying and doing while socializing			.64
5. Arrived at places unexpectedly to see what my partner was doing			.61
6. Joined in whenever I see my partner talking to someone else			.56

(Continued)

Table1 (Continued)

Factor	Eigenvalue	% of variance	Loading
7. Called my partner unexpectedly, just to see if she/ he is there			.51
Conversation	1.36	4.38	
1. Explained my feelings to my partner			.98
2. Discussed the situation with my partner			.86
3. Let my partner know I was upset			.77
4. Shared my jealous feelings with my partner			.42
Avoidance	1.05	3.51	
1. Pretended nothing was wrong			.95
2. Stopped talking to my partner			.64
3. Became silent			.61
4. Gave my partner the "silent treatment"			.51
5. Physically pulled away from my partner			.45

men are less likely to react emotionally (Baum, 2003). Other research, however, has found few significant sex differences in infidelity and jealousy (Drigotas, Safstrom, & Gentilia, 1999; Harris, 2000; Wiederman & Hurd, 1999). Given the mixed findings, we explored potential gender differences in the suspicion confirmation process, with males coded as 0 and females as 1. We controlled for these covariates in the analyses.

Results

We used SEM (AMOS 27) to test the model presented in Figure 1 (bivariate correlations between variables are presented in Table 2). SEM allows one to test all the predicted associations simultaneously in a model. Goodness-of-fit was assessed based on $\chi^2/df < 3.0$, CFI and IFI greater than .95, and RMSEA less than .08 (Kline, 2011). We controlled for the effects of prior fidelity discussions, importance of fidelity, partner cheated before, self cheated before, relationship satisfaction, and gender on the endogenous variables. We computed separate models for each suspicion confirmation strategy and the resulting models displayed good fit (see Table 3). The CFI for the surveillance model dipped slightly below .95 but the remaining goodness-of-fit measures exceeded the threshold. The models accounted for significant amounts of variance in the suspicion confirmation strategies, ranging from 36% to 45%.

Direct Effects

The direct associations among suspicious partner behavior, degree of suspicion, suspicion uncertainty discrepancy, suspicion-related anxiety, and desire to confirm

Table 2 Intercorrelations, Means, and Standard Deviations for Study Variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Suspicious partner behavior	—											
2. Suspected infidelity	.41***	—										
3. Uncertainty discrepancy	.27***	.22***	—									
4. Suspicion anxiety	.24***	.29***	.15*	—								
5. Desire confirm/avoid	-.06	.32***	-.17*	.29***	—							
6. Conversation	.25***	.29***	.12	.46***	.32***	—						
7. Intrusion	.44***	.36***	.18**	.46***	.25***	.68***	—					
8. Snooping	.50***	.24***	.26***	.45***	.14*	.59***	.76***	—				
9. Surveillance	.57***	.26***	.30***	.38***	-.02	.46***	.63***	.79***	—			
10. Avoidance	.44***	.34***	.11	.50***	.18**	.57***	.68***	.63***	.59***	—		
11. Fidelity discussions	-.07	.01	.02	-.08	.13*	.28***	.09	.04	.02	-.05	—	
12. Fidelity importance	-.10	.31***	-.04	.30***	.31***	.17*	.19**	.01	-.04	.10	.25***	—
13. Rel. satisfaction	-.28***	-.26***	.13*	-.18**	-.05	-.13	-.17*	-.12	.13	-.24***	.20**	-.01

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Table 3 Fit Statistics for SEM Models Predicting Use of the Suspicion Confirmation and Avoidance Strategies

Strategy	χ^2	df	p	χ^2/df	CFI	IFI	RMSEA
Conversation	43.23	23	.007	1.88	.95	.96	.062 [.032, .090]
Intrusion	44.02	23	.005	1.91	.96	.96	.063 [.034, .094]
Snooping	46.25	23	.003	2.01	.95	.95	.066 [.038, .063]
Surveillance	50.15	23	.001	2.18	.94	.95	.072 [.044, .099]
Avoidance	41.52	23	.010	1.81	.96	.96	.059 [.028, .088]

were nearly identical across the five models. Table 4 shows that more suspicious partner behavior was positively associated with higher suspicion, uncertainty discrepancy, and suspicion-related anxiety, and weaker desire to confirm. Higher degree of suspicion and lower suspicion uncertainty discrepancy were related to greater desire to confirm but unrelated to suspicion-related anxiety. Finally, greater suspicion-related anxiety was associated with a stronger desire to confirm one's suspicions.

Table 5 presents direct effects on the various confirmation strategies. More suspicious partner behavior and greater suspicion-related anxiety were related to greater reported use of all five of the strategies. A stronger desire to confirm one's suspicions was associated with greater use of conversation and intrusion, the two more overt strategies. Degree of suspicion and suspicion uncertainty discrepancy were not directly associated with the use of any of the suspicion confirmation strategies.

A few significant effects also were found for the control variables. Those reporting previous fidelity discussions with a partner expressed greater use of conversation ($b = .29, p < .001$) and intrusion ($b = .11, p < .05$). A stronger belief in the importance of fidelity importance was associated with greater suspicion ($b = .31, p < .001$), suspicion-related anxiety ($b = .23, p < .001$), and desire to confirm one's suspicions (b

Table 4 Direct Effects Among Model Predictors

	Suspicion	Uncertainty discrepancy	Suspicion anxiety	Desire to confirm/ avoid
Suspicious partner behavior	.36***	.13*	.18*	-.23***
Suspicion			.12	.32***
Uncertainty discrepancy			.06	-.21**
Suspicion-related anxiety				.21**

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. Coefficients are standardized and are composites across the five models as coefficients were nearly identical in every model.

Table 5 Direct Effects of Predictors on the Suspicion Confirmation and Avoidance Strategies

	Conversation	Intrusion	Snooping	Surveillance	Avoidance
Suspicious partner behavior	.15**	.33***	.42***	.47***	.30***
Suspicion	.04	.08	-.09	-.06	.09
Uncertainty discrepancy	.02	.02	.10	.10	-.07
Suspicion-related anxiety	.36***	.27***	.30***	.22***	.35***
Desire to confirm/avoid	.18**	.15*	.10	-.02	.04
R ²	.39	.38	.41	.44	.36

Note.* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. Coefficients are standardized.

= .22, $p < .001$). Whether one had cheated on the partner previously had no significant associations in the model, but if a partner had cheated in the relationship previously, participants were more likely to report using intrusion ($b = .12$, $p < .05$), snooping ($b = .17$, $p = .01$), and surveillance strategies ($b = .18$, $p < .001$). Lower relationship satisfaction was associated with greater suspicion-related anxiety. Finally, women reported greater suspicion-related anxiety ($b = .17$, $p = .008$) and more frequent use of intrusion ($b = .15$, $p = .010$).

Indirect Effects

Several indirect pathways also were specified in the model. We tested these indirect effects using Hayes (2017) SPSS PROCESS v3.4 macro with 10,000 bootstrapped samples and 95% confidence intervals for the indirect effects. Effects are considered significant if the 95% confidence intervals do not contain zero. It is important to be aware, however, that some of the significant indirect effects had smaller effect sizes, as shown in coefficients near $\pm .000$. Significant results are presented in Table 6 and reveal that suspicious partner behavior had significant indirect associations with conversation and intrusion through suspicion-related anxiety and desire to confirm/avoid. Both degree of suspicion and suspicion uncertainty discrepancy had significant indirect effects on all five confirmation strategies through suspicion-related anxiety, except for degree of suspicion with avoidance. Finally, suspicion uncertainty discrepancy was indirectly related to conversation through desire to confirm/avoid.

Several significant indirect effects through multiple mediators also were found. Suspicious partner behavior was indirectly associated with conversation and intrusion through degree of suspicion then desire to confirm/avoid. Suspicious partner

Table 6 Significant Indirect Effects of Relationship Uncertainty, Suspicious Partner Behavior and Degree of Suspicion on the Suspicion Confirmation Strategies

Indirect path	Conversation		Intrusion		Snooping		Surveillance		Avoidance	
	B	CI	b	CI	b	CI	b	CI	b	CI
Suspicious partner behavior										
-> Suspicion-related anxiety	.075	[.001, .145]	.062	[.006, .127]						
-> Desire to confirm/avoid	-.035	[-.087, -.003]	-.038	[-.086, -.004]						
-> Degree of suspicion ->Desire to confirm/avoid	.017	[.002, .041]	.014	[.001, .038]						
> Suspicion uncertainty discrepancy->Desire to confirm/avoid	-.012	[-.030, -.001]								
-> Suspicion-related anxiety ->Desire to confirm/avoid	.013	[.001, .225]								
Degree of suspicion										
-> Suspicion-related anxiety	.101	[.010, .206]	.087	[.011, .187]	.116	[.007, .242]	.098	[.009, .213]		
Suspicion uncertainty discrepancy										
-> Suspicion-related anxiety	.037	[.003, .080]	.030	[.002, .067]	.042	[.004, .089]	.034	[.003, .079]	.043	[.006, .091]
-> Desire to confirm/avoid	-.024	[-.051, -.003]								
Suspicion-related anxiety										
-> Desire to confirm/avoid	.032	[.001, .075]								

Note: Full results including non-significant effects available from the first author.

behavior also had indirect effects with conversation through suspicion uncertainty discrepancy then desire to confirm/avoid, as well as through suspicion-related anxiety then desire to confirm/avoid.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore factors associated with various strategies individuals use to try to confirm or avoid confirming whether a partner is cheating. Applying several tenets of TMIM (Afifi & Morse, 2009; Afifi & Weiner, 2004) and uncertainty management (Brashers, 2001) to suspected infidelity, we proposed a model that included suspicion, motivation, and action phases in the suspicion confirmation process. The results generally supported predictions, demonstrating the initial utility of the suspicion model and expanding the literature by creating a better understanding of the multiple factors involved in the suspicion confirmation and avoidance process. Next, we discuss the specific findings and consider implications of the research for the study of suspicion confirmation in romantic relationships.

Suspicion Confirmation as a Multifaceted Process

Suspicion Phase

The suspicion phase concerns the initial awareness that a partner could be cheating. The findings highlight the importance of suspicious partner behavior, whereby noticing more suspicious behavior by one's partner was associated with greater suspicion, uncertainty, and reported use of all five confirmation or avoidance strategies. The results suggest that when people notice more suspicious partner behavior, it is associated with greater suspicion and uncertainty about what one knows about the potential betrayal, both of which relate to anxiety and a desire to confirm one's suspicions. Further, although degree of suspicion and uncertainty discrepancy did not have direct associations with the confirmation strategies, they were indirectly related through suspicion-related anxiety and desire to confirm, which is consistent with the tenets of TMIM (Afifi & Morse, 2009; Afifi & Weiner, 2004).

Motivation Phase

The motivation phase captures both the anxiety generated by one's suspicions and uncertainty discrepancy, as well as the resulting desire to alleviate that anxiety with a desire to confirm, or not confirm, those suspicions. Suspicion-related anxiety had significant direct links to all five confirmation strategies. These findings correspond to TMIM, in which Afifi and Weiner (2004) contend that people engage in information seeking as a way to reduce anxiety and doubt. In addition, in some instances, the desire to confirm one's suspicion was a motivational factor linking perceptions of suspicious partner behavior, and general degree of suspicion, uncertainty

discrepancy, and anxiety with engagement in suspicion confirmation or avoidance. As such, a desire to confirm adds an important function which provides a motivational component to the confirmation process. Interestingly, a stronger desire to confirm had a non-significant direct effect on the use of avoidance strategies in the structural model, which makes sense considering a person that was using avoidance behaviors in the face of a partner's possible infidelity would likely not have a strong desire to confirm their suspicions.

Action Phase

The action phase involves the use of various strategies intended to either confirm or avoid confirming a partner's cheating. The study identified five general strategic information management responses to suspicion: conversation, intrusion, snooping, surveillance, and avoidance. Previous research has focused on individual strategies, such as snooping (Derby, Knox, & Easterling, 2012; Whitford & Howells, 2000), however, the current study extends this earlier work by providing a more comprehensive list of different strategies people use to either confirm or refrain from confirming their suspicions. These strategies correspond to previous research (e.g., Derby, Knox, & Easterling, 2012; Guerrero, Andersen, Jorgensen, Spitzberg, & Eloy, 1995; Vinkers, Finkenauer, & Hawk, 2011; Weiser & Weigel, 2014; Whitford & Howells, 2000), and include active and avoidant, as well as overt and covert strategies. Further, some of the strategies engage the partner in face-to-face interaction, while other strategies are not face-to-face or do not engage the partner, what Guerrero, Andersen, Jorgensen, Spitzberg, and Eloy (1995, 2011) classified as integrative vs. general behavioral responses. Although not information seeking behavior, avoidant strategies still represent a strategic response to suspicion and uncertainty. Overall, the suspicion confirmation and avoidance strategies correspond to TMIM, which proposes that information seeking and information avoidance are two common information management strategies (Afifi & Weiner, 2004).

Interestingly, across the sample, participants reported using more conversation, intrusion, and avoidance confirmation strategies, with somewhat less use of snooping and surveillance. Conversation and intrusion can be seen as both active and overt strategies that directly engage with a partner, either through direct communication or intentionally intruding upon their activities. Snooping and surveillance, although involving active behavior, can be considered covert in terms of searching for evidence without a partner's knowledge. Apparently, a potential betrayal is serious enough that people prefer responding with more direct action, such as conversation and intrusion, rather than relying on indirect strategies which could be less conclusive, such as snooping and surveillance. Avoidance involves behaviors intending to not directly engage with a partner or intentionally withdrawing from the relationship. The more frequent use of avoidance strategies reflects the decision to refrain from confirming, which is consistent with both TMIM (Afifi & Morse, 2009; Afifi & Weiner, 2004) and uncertainty management (Brashers, 2001) frameworks. Although this study identified several specific suspicion confirmation and

avoidance strategies, people may use additional strategies that were not included in this study, such as direct accusation or enlisting the help of one's social network. Further development of the suspicion confirmation strategies construct is needed.

Theoretical Implications and Future Directions

Given the surprisingly high rates of infidelity (Fincham & May, 2017) and the fact that even the suspicion of infidelity can have devastating effects on emotional, physical, and relational health (Weigel & Shrout, 2021), better understanding of the suspicion confirmation process takes on added importance. The model helps advance theory and research on suspicion in several ways. First, the results demonstrate that people's decisions on confirming or avoiding confirming their suspicions is based on communication, motivational, and behavioral factors. In particular, the findings indicate that perceptions of a partner's suspicious behavior are linked with suspicion, suspicion uncertainty, distress, and a stronger desire to confirm, all of which are associated in some degree with the use of various suspicion confirmation strategies. To our knowledge, this is the first empirical model to provide a comprehensive, integrative view of the suspicion confirmation process, thereby creating a more powerful tool in explaining the suspicion confirmation process.

Second, the results highlight the value of building upon central concepts of existing theoretical frameworks, such as TMIM (Afifi & Morse, 2009; Afifi & Weiner, 2004) and uncertainty management (Brashers, 2001). Those frameworks emphasize conditions in which people decide to seek or refrain from seeking information about an important topic on which they have some degree of uncertainty. Inclusion of central concepts from those frameworks, namely uncertainty discrepancy, anxiety, and motivation to seek or avoid information regarding the uncertainty, provides theoretical grounding for the predictions offered in the model and also presents further corroboration and application of those theories to the suspicion confirmation context.

Finally, similar to Guerrero's (Guerrero, Andersen, Jorgensen, Spitzberg, & Eloy, 1995; Guerrero, Hannawa, & Babin, 2011) communication of jealousy and Buss and colleagues (2008) mate guarding concepts, in the model examined here we found that suspicion confirmation strategies are multifaceted, thereby affording a more nuanced view of suspicion processes than is currently available in the literature. Although more work needs to be done, the model provides a conceptual step forward in understanding suspicion confirmation as more than just a yes/no approach, thereby offering a guide for future research in this area.

The findings also highlight several avenues for future research. First, this initial version of the suspicion confirmation model does not include additional concepts found to play roles in other information seeking research. Further research with the model should include elements such as one's assessment of the potential outcomes of confirmation, perceived efficacy in one's ability to confirm suspicions and cope with the ramifications, and whether the potential infidelity is seen as negative or positive

(Afifi & Weiner, 2004; Guerrero & Andersen, 1998). Second, there is a need to create a better understanding of the finding that greater uncertainty discrepancy was related to lower desire to confirm. It is possible that uncertainty discrepancy predicting a lower desire to confirm reinforces the likelihood that some individuals may be more interested in remaining uncertain than wanting to confirm their suspicions. Research is needed to investigate how the model functions in situations where individuals choose to avoid seeking information about whether a partner might be cheating. A third question is whether the confirmation process is best conceptualized by a desire to alleviate suspicion-related anxiety or suspicion-related uncertainty, or both. One might argue that confirming that a partner is indeed cheating may reduce uncertainty but not distress. Although the results indicate that suspicion-related anxiety and suspicion-related uncertainty were similarly related to desire to confirm or avoid suspicions, suggesting that both processes may be important to the overall desire to confirm or avoid suspicions, additional research and refinement to the model is needed. A fourth consideration for future research is that several covariates were related to various elements in the model, which suggests additional avenues for further refinement and expansion of the conceptual model. Having strong beliefs in the importance of fidelity, prior discussions with a partner about expectations of fidelity, lower relationship satisfaction, and a partner that has cheated before were associated with various factors in the model. Additional research will want to more directly determine whether these elements should play more formal roles in the confirmation model. Fifth, although the purpose of this study was to identify factors associated with the use of suspicion confirmation and avoidance strategies, future research might follow-up on how successful those strategies are in determining whether an infidelity occurred and its subsequent impact on the relationship. Longitudinal studies might reveal that some of the strategies are more effective in confirming a partner's infidelity than others or determining which strategies are more helpful or detrimental to the relationship. Lastly, it is interesting that the study revealed few differences between women and men. When included as a covariate, the results revealed that women reported greater suspicion-related anxiety and more frequent use of intrusion. Previous studies reporting gender differences in infidelity perceptions often distinguish between sexual and emotional infidelity and jealousy, and have found that both men and women are concerned about sexual infidelity but women are more disturbed by emotional infidelity than men (Buss, 2018). Future research using the suspicion model may want to distinguish between a suspected sexual or emotional betrayal.

Limitations

The study has limitations that should be noted. Participants were college students mostly in dating relationships, however, given that 65%-75% of college students have reported engaging in some form of infidelity while in a dating relationship (Shackelford, LeBlanc, & Drass, 2000), they may be an ideal population to examine

infidelity suspicion. Even so, we cannot assume that this study's participants represent the broad range of characteristics, backgrounds, and experiences of the general population (Henrich et al., 2010). Second, the study used a one-time survey to capture the reported use of suspicion confirmation and avoidance strategies, and even though the results supported the model, causal inferences should not be made. Moreover, the conceptual model proposed a phasic process which cannot fully be captured in a one-time survey. Additional research is needed to better tease out the pathways within the confirmation process. Third, given that only those potential participants that suspected a current partner was cheating or may have recently cheated completed the survey, we do not know how many people initially clicked on the study link but did not meet the inclusion criteria. Similarly, we did not measure whether participants had already confirmed their suspicions before taking part in the study. It is possible that those in the initial stages of feeling suspicious could respond differently than those who had their suspicions confirmed or refuted.

Conclusion

Despite these limitations, this study highlights suspicion confirmation as a multifaceted process and integrates several empirical perspectives to present a more integrated view of suspicion confirmation. The study identifies several suspicion confirmation and avoidance strategies, which include overt and covert, active and avoidant strategies, and offers a number of theoretical advancements and avenues for future research. The suspicion confirmation model furthers our understanding of the suspicion, and represents a process where people likely feel uncertainty and distress and can either seek to confirm or avoid confirming their suspicions.

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