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## **Look But Don't Touch?: Self-Regulation Determines Whether Noticing Attractive Alternatives Increases Infidelity**

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# Look But Don't Touch?: Self-Regulation Determines Whether Noticing Attractive Alternatives Increases Infidelity

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People regularly encounter tempting alternatives to their relationship partners, and it has been argued that paying attention to desirable alternatives increases the risk of infidelity. However, whether the temptation of noticing attractive alternatives leads to actual infidelity should depend on the ability to resist such temptation. More specifically, taking heed of attractive others should increase the likelihood of infidelity only when people lack self-regulatory ability. One experiment and one longitudinal study of newlyweds both demonstrated that the implications of attending to attractive alternatives for infidelity depended on participants' self-regulatory ability to resist such temptations. Specifically, the tendency to notice attractive alternatives was associated with greater infidelity among those with poorer self-regulatory ability, but not among those with greater self-regulatory ability. These results further understanding about how people can maintain and protect their relationships in the face of temptation.

*Keywords:* attractive alternatives, self-regulatory ability, infidelity, romantic relationships

"Temptation usually comes in through a door that has been deliberately left open."

—Arnold Glasow (1995)

"A girl can still admire, can't she? Even those who can't go in the store can still window-shop, right?"

—Colleen Houck (2011)

One of the most detrimental threats that people face is the temptation of attractive alternative romantic partners. Given that most people in committed romantic relationships are expected to be romantically and sexually exclusive to their partners (Conley, Moors, Matsick, & Ziegler, 2013), infidelity—that is, engaging in romantic behaviors with others while in a romantically exclusive relationship—can result in harmful individual and relational outcomes for both those who engage in infidelity (e.g., diminished self-concept clarity, greater psychological discomfort; Foster & Misra, 2013), as well as their primary partners (e.g., loss of trust, greater relational uncertainty; Charny & Parnass, 1995). Given such costs, it is not surprising that infidelity is the most common predictor of relationship dissolution (Amato & Previti, 2003).

Nevertheless, despite such harmful consequences, infidelity is surprisingly common, affecting an estimated 20 to 30% of relationships (Jones & Weiser, 2014).

Echoing Glasow's adage about temptation, it is argued that avoiding looking at desirable alternatives reduces the temptation, and thus likelihood, of infidelity (e.g., Maner, Gailliot, & Miller, 2009; Miller, 1997). Consistent with this idea, highly committed people spend less time looking at attractive others (Miller, 1997), and such actions appear effective: paying less attention to attractive alternatives reduces the risk of infidelity (McNulty, Meltzer, Makhanova, & Maner, 2018).

But does observing tempting alternatives always motivate people to pursue those alternatives? Or, as suggested by Houck, can people safely admire attractive others while resisting the temptation of pursuit? The present studies examine whether the implications of paying attention to attractive alternatives for infidelity depend on the self-regulatory ability to resist such temptations. To this end, the remainder of this introduction is organized into three sections. The first section reviews theory and research suggesting that paying attention to attractive others increases the risk of infidelity. The second section reviews theory suggesting that the self-regulatory ability to resist pursuing tempting alternatives should determine whether or not paying attention to tempting alternatives increases the likelihood of infidelity. Finally, the third section describes the goals and hypotheses of the present study.

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## Ignoring Attractive Alternatives Should Prevent Infidelity

Attractive people are hard to ignore. In particular, people are quicker to notice (Hoss, Ramsey, Griffin, & Langlois, 2005) and spend more time looking at (Aharon et al., 2001) attractive people compared to average or unattractive people. Given that people are more likely to pursue desirable things (e.g., delicious food) after

devoting attention to them (Harris, Bargh, & Brownell, 2009), it has been argued (Buss, 2016; Thornhill & Gangestad, 1999) that paying attention to desirable others motivates people to pursue relationships with them. At times, this tendency to notice, and thus pursue, attractive people can be adaptive, given that securing relationships with attractive people tended to promote survival outcomes through greater status (Frevert & Walker, 2014), access to resources (Townsend & Levy, 1990), and reproductive outcomes (Thornhill & Gangestad, 1999).

For people in an exclusive romantic relationship, however, noticing attractive others may be costly by increasing the likelihood of pursuing an extradyadic romantic relationship and thus threatening the stability of their established relationship. Thus, several theories of close relationships posit that people who are committed to maintaining their romantic relationships should be motivated to avoid attractive others. For example, interdependence perspectives (e.g., Rusbult, Olson, Davis, & Hannon, 2004) suggest that committed partners are motivated to engage in processes that protect their close relationships and thus are motivated to avoid attractive alternative partners. Similarly, contemporary evolutionary perspectives (e.g., Kenrick, Li, & Butner, 2003) emphasize the adaptive value of maintaining long-term relationships to ensure the survival of offspring and thus suggest that humans evolved psychological biases, such as ignoring attractive alternative partners, to protect their primary, long-term relationships. Extensive research is also consistent with the idea that people pay less attention to attractive others to the extent that they are committed to their current relationship partners (Birnbau et al., 2019; Maner et al., 2009; Maner, Rouby, & Gonzaga, 2008; Miller, 1997). Nevertheless, only one study has examined whether such attention actually increases the risk of infidelity. Specifically, McNulty and colleagues (2018) demonstrated in two 3-year longitudinal samples of newlywed couples that disengagement of attention from pictures of attractive alternatives decreased the probability that participants endorsed having sexual relations with anyone other than their spouse, having a romantic affair, or engaging in infidelity.

### Self-Regulatory Ability May Determine the Implications of Noticing Alternatives

Still, whether noticing attractive others leads to infidelity should depend on the ability to resist pursuing such temptations. Specifically, paying attention to attractive others should increase the risk of infidelity only when people lack self-regulatory ability—that is, the ability to resist initially satisfying impulses (e.g., infidelity) that hinder distal goals (e.g., maintaining an exclusive relationship; Carver & Scheier, 2004). Self-regulatory ability helps people resist a variety of tempting behaviors (e.g., gambling, unhealthy eating; Baron & Dickerson, 1999), and is influenced by both dispositional and situational factors. In particular, although individual differences in self-control are somewhat stable over time (Hay & Forrest, 2006), self-regulatory ability can also be temporarily impaired when people are intoxicated, ill, stressed, or recovering from deep, prolonged concentration (Hagger, Wood, Stiff, & Chatzisarantis, 2010). Although issues regarding theoretical perspectives of self-regulation are still being debated, such as the manner in which self-regulatory ability is replenished (see Lange & Eggert, 2014), the idea that impaired self-regulatory ability increases the likeli-

hood of engaging in tempting behaviors is well supported (see Vohs & Baumeister, 2016).

Self-regulatory ability may also help people avoid pursuing the attractive alternatives that they notice. Noticing attractive alternatives presents the temptation to initiate a romantic or sexual relationship that must be resisted by people who want to maintain an exclusive primary relationship. Thus, self-regulatory ability should influence whether or not people resist the temptation to pursue relationships with attractive alternatives that they notice. Research is consistent with the idea that low self-regulation is associated with poorer ability to resist infidelity (Ciarocco, Echevarria, & Lewandowski, 2012; Gailliot & Baumeister, 2007). However, research has yet to examine whether self-regulatory ability determines whether or not paying attention to attractive alternatives increases the risk of infidelity.

### Hypotheses and Overview of the Current Studies

The present studies examined whether people in romantic relationships are more likely to engage in infidelity as a result of initially attending to attractive alternatives, and whether the implications of attending to attractive alternatives depend on self-regulatory ability. Given that paying attention to attractive alternatives introduces the temptation of infidelity, we predicted that paying attention to such alternatives would increase the risk of infidelity among those who struggle to resist such temptations (i.e., who possess poorer self-regulatory ability). In contrast, we predicted that paying attention to attractive alternatives would not increase the risk of infidelity among those who possess greater self-regulatory ability.

We conducted two studies to test our ideas. Study 1 was an experiment intended to provide internal validity; participants in romantic relationships reported their attention to attractive alternatives, were randomly assigned to complete tasks that either did or did not impair their self-regulatory ability, and were then given the option of engaging in two behaviors that typically precede and contribute to infidelity: (a) expressing the desire to pursue attractive alternatives and (b) registering for dating software designed to promote infidelity. Study 2 was a longitudinal study intended to provide ecological validity; newlywed couples reported dispositional self-control, completed a task assessing their tendency to avoid attending to attractive others, and reported any acts of infidelity six times over the following 2 years.

These studies are novel and thus expand our knowledge about the determinants of infidelity in two important ways. First, although it has been previously argued (Karremans, Pronk, & van der Wal, 2015; Lydon & Karremans, 2015) that the likelihood of infidelity should depend on the interaction of both attention to alternatives and self-regulatory ability, previous research has examined the implications of these constructs in isolation. The current studies are the first test of the interactive effects of these constructs. Second, most prior research on this topic has relied on reports of the hypothetical probability or quasi-acts of infidelity (Ciarocco et al., 2012; Gailliot & Baumeister, 2007; Ritter, Karremans, & van Schie, 2010) from people who were not in relationships (Gailliot & Baumeister, 2007; Ritter et al., 2010), which may not reflect the actual likelihood of infidelity. For instance, Ritter and colleagues (2010) demonstrated that self-regulatory ability was associated with lower interest in pictures of attractive

others in a sample that contained both participants who were single and dating.

## Study 1

The goal of Study 1 was to provide an experimental test of our predictions. Undergraduate students in romantic relationships first reported their attention to attractive alternatives. Next, they were randomly assigned to complete two tasks that either did or did not impair their self-regulatory ability. Finally, they evaluated and expressed interest in registering for a dating application designed to help people engage in infidelity. We predicted that people's attention to attractive alternatives would be associated with a greater interest in pursuing attractive alternatives and a higher likelihood of registering for the dating app among participants in the impaired self-regulatory condition, but not among participants in the control condition.

## Method

**Participants.** Two hundred undergraduate students (49 men, 148 women, 3 transgender) who were in a romantic relationship for at least 3 months were recruited from a university in the southeastern United States. This sample size was obtained because an a priori power analysis based on small-to-medium effect sizes ( $r = .20$ ) indicated that the power to detect an association between the interactive effect of attention to alternatives and self-regulatory ability would be greater than .80. Given that our predictions likely do not generalize to people in sexually nonexclusive relationships (who are thus unmotivated to avoid extradyadic sexual behavior), we excluded 23 participants who reported being in sexually nonexclusive relationships.

The remaining 177 participants (36 men, 138 women, 3 transgender) had a mean age of 19.07 years ( $SD = 2.67$ ) and were in a relationship for an average of 18.40 ( $SD = 15.98$ ) months. One hundred and 44 (81%) participants were dating exclusively, 23 (13%) were dating casually, six (3%) were engaged, and 4 (2%) were married. Sixty-nine participants (39%) identified as Black or African American, 68 (38%) identified as White or Caucasian, 16 (9%) identified as Hispanic or Latino/a, 10 (6%) identified as Asian, and the remaining 14 (8%) identified as another ethnicity or two or more ethnicities. The majority of participants ( $n = 150$ ; 85%) identified as heterosexual, 17 (10%) identified as bisexual, four (2%) identified as gay or lesbian, and six (3%) identified as other or did not know.

**Procedure.** After providing their informed consent, participants were told that they would be participating in three ostensibly unrelated studies. They were told that the first study involved filling out several questionnaires and, during which, they completed measures of attention to attractive alternatives and demographic information.

In the second ostensibly unrelated study, which participants were told was unrelated to their romantic relationship, participants were randomly assigned to an impaired self-regulatory ability or control condition. Given the current debate regarding the strength of brief self-regulation manipulations (see Baumeister, Tice, & Vohs, 2018; Friese, Loschelder, Gieseler, Frankenbach, & Inzlicht, 2019), participants completed two different lengthy tasks—a restricted writing task (Schmeichel, 2007) and a working memory

task (Oswald, McAbee, Redick, & Hambrick, 2015)—which tend to provide more meaningful change in participants' self-regulatory ability than do brief (e.g., 5-min) tasks (see Sjästad & Baumeister, 2018). For the restricted writing task, all participants wrote a story for 15 min about a recent trip they took. Participants in the impaired condition were not allowed to use the letters *a* or *n* when writing their story. Given that these letters appear in many English words, this task requires considerable concentration and thus taxes self-regulatory ability (see Hagger et al., 2010). Participants in the control condition were not allowed to use the letters *q* or *x* when writing their story. Given that these letters appear in fewer English words, this task is easier and does not tax self-regulatory ability. For the working memory task, all participants were instructed to remember a sequence of three to seven letters and were required to input the letters they recalled at the end of each sequence. Each letter appeared on the computer screen for 2 seconds, and participants completed roughly 25 sequences of letters. Participants in the impaired condition were required to solve math problems between the presentation of each letter. Given that it is difficult to recall a series of letters when completing an unrelated cognitive task between each letter, this task requires focus and multitasking, thus impairing self-regulatory ability (see Redick, 2016). Participants in the control condition only needed to remember the series of letters. Given that it is easier to sustain attention when free from distractions (i.e., not solving math problems), this task is easier and does not tax self-regulatory ability.

In the third ostensibly unrelated study, participants were asked to evaluate a mobile phone dating application that was being developed. Participants used this app to view profiles of 50 people of their preferred gender for as long as they desired and indicate whether or not they would be interested in meeting each person. Participants were told their responses were vital to develop a major innovation of this app—an algorithm that selects potential matches based on responses to previous matches—to motivate participants to honestly indicate their interest in pursuing each person. After viewing the profiles, participants were told that they could receive a free premium version of the app by providing their e-mail address in appreciation for their feedback on how the app could be improved. Prior to asking participants if they wanted to sign up for the app, participants were informed about several security features of the app (e.g., password protection, blocking anyone from their extant social network) that prevents romantic partners from discovering the app and thus would facilitate infidelity. Finally, participants were debriefed and given course credit for their participation. All procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro [#17-0521].

## Measures.

**Attention to alternatives.** Attention to alternatives was assessed with the Passive Awareness subscale of the Attention to Alternatives Index (Miller et al., 2010). This measure requires individuals to report the extent to which they agree with seven items that assess the extent to which they notice attractive others (e.g., “good-looking people always catch my attention,” “I can't help but notice when attractive people are around”) using a 5-point Likert response scale from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*always*). Internal consistency was acceptable ( $\alpha = .89$ ).

**Infidelity.** Two behaviors that contribute to the pursuit of infidelity were assessed during the study. The first behavior was

whether or not participants registered for the dating app that was designed to promote infidelity (0 = *did not register for the app*, 1 = *did register for the app*). The second behavior was the number of people who participants indicated they would want to pursue through the dating app.

## Results

**Descriptive statistics and preliminary analyses.** Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations appear in Table 1. Men ( $M = 22.14$ ,  $SD = 6.17$ ) reported attending to attractive alternatives more than women ( $M = 19.80$ ,  $SD = 5.92$ ),  $t(172) = 2.10$ ,  $p = .038$ ,  $d = .39$ , and men ( $M = 15.69$ ,  $SD = 11.41$ ) were interested in pursuing more alternatives on the dating app than were women ( $M = 10.73$ ,  $SD = 10.39$ ),  $t(172) = 2.50$ ,  $p = .013$ ,  $d = .45$ . In contrast, men (64%) and women (57%) did not differ in how likely they were to register for the dating app,  $\chi^2(1) = 0.64$ ,  $p = .425$ ,  $\Phi = 0.06$ . Those in the impaired condition ( $M = 13.37$ ,  $SD = 11.19$ ) were interested in pursuing more alternatives than were those in the control condition ( $M = 9.81$ ,  $SD = 10.03$ ),  $t(175) = -2.23$ ,  $p = .027$ ,  $d = .34$ , however, those in the impaired condition (60%) were no more likely than those in the control condition (57%) to register for the dating app,  $\chi^2(1) = 0.14$ ,  $p = .713$ ,  $\Phi = 0.03$ .

**Did the implications of attention to alternatives for behaviors that contribute to infidelity depend on self-regulatory impairment?** To address our primary hypothesis that attention to attractive alternatives would be associated with behaviors that contribute to infidelity only among those whose self-regulatory ability was impaired, we conducted two regression analyses. First, to examine the implications of attention for registering for the dating app, we conducted a logistic regression in which a dummy-code indicating whether participants registered for the dating app (0 = *no*, 1 = *yes*) was regressed onto their mean-centered attention to alternatives scores, a dummy-code for condition (0 = *control*, 1 = *impaired*), and the Self-Control Condition  $\times$  Attention interaction. Results are presented in the top of Table 2. As the table reveals, the Self-Control Condition  $\times$  Attention interaction significantly predicted the likelihood of registering for the dating app (see Figure 1, Panel A). Consistent with predictions, participants' attention to attractive alternatives was associated with a greater likelihood of registering for the dating app among those in the impaired self-regulatory ability condition,  $b = 0.12$ ,  $SE = 0.04$ ,  $Wald(1) = 8.72$ ,  $p = .003$ , Odds Ratio ( $OR$ ) = 1.12, but not among those in the control condition,  $b = 0.00$ ,  $SE = 0.04$ ,  $Wald(1) = 0.00$ ,  $p = .991$ ,  $OR = 1.00$ .

Second, to examine the implications of attention for the number of people that participants reported being interested in pursuing,

Table 1  
Descriptive Statistics and Correlations Among Variables in Study 1

Variable	1	2	3	4	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
(1) Attention	—				20.23	6.07
(2) Self-control condition	.03	—			50%	—
(3) Frequency of interest	.06	.17*	—		11.60	10.75
(4) Registered for dating app	.18*	.03	.20**	—	58%	—

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .

Table 2  
Effects of Attention to Alternatives, Self-Control Condition, and Their Interaction on Interest in Attractive Alternatives and Registering for the Dating App in Study 1

Predictor	Registering for the dating app <sup>a</sup>			
	<i>b</i>	Wald	<i>p</i>	Odds Ratio
Attention to alternatives (AA)	.00	.00	.991	1.00
Condition (C)	.15	.22	.637	1.16
C $\times$ AA	.12	4.38	.036	1.12
	Frequency of interest <sup>b</sup>			
	<i>b</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	$\beta$
Gender	-2.03	-2.03	.044	-.15
Attention to alternatives (AA)	-.31	-1.48	.141	-.17
Condition (C)	3.28	2.06	.041	.15
C $\times$ AA	.57	2.13	.035	.25

<sup>a</sup>  $df = 1$ . <sup>b</sup>  $df = 169$ .

we regressed participants' frequency of interest scores onto their mean-centered attention to alternatives scores, the dummy-code for condition, and the Self-Control Condition  $\times$  Attention interaction, and controlled for a dummy-code for participants' gender (-1 = *male*, 1 = *female*), given that preliminary analyses revealed that men were interested in more alternatives. Results are presented in the bottom of Table 2. As the table reveals, those in the impaired condition were interested in pursuing more alternatives than were those in the control condition. Nevertheless, this association was qualified by a significant Self-Control Condition  $\times$  Attention interaction (see Figure 1, Panel B). Participants' attention trended toward being associated with being interested in greater alternatives among those in the impaired self-regulatory ability condition,  $b = 0.27$ ,  $SE = 0.17$ ,  $t(169) = 1.54$ ,  $p = .125$ ,  $\beta = .15$ , but trended toward being associated with being interested in fewer alternatives among those in the control condition,  $b = -0.31$ ,  $SE = 0.21$ ,  $t(169) = -1.48$ ,  $p = .141$ ,  $\beta = -.17$ . Supplemental analyses revealed that the Self-Control Condition  $\times$  Attention interaction remained significant when participants' gender was not controlled,  $b = 0.54$ ,  $SE = 0.27$ ,  $t(173) = 2.04$ ,  $p = .043$ ,  $\beta = .20$ .

## Discussion

Study 1 provides initial evidence that the association between attention to attractive alternatives and infidelity depends on self-regulatory ability. Although attending to attractive alternatives was associated with interest in pursuing more alternatives and a greater likelihood of registering for a dating app designed to promote infidelity among participants whose self-regulatory ability was inhibited, it was not associated with those behaviors among participants whose self-regulatory ability was not inhibited. Nevertheless, Study 1 is limited in at least two respects. First, Study 1 relied on self-reports of attention to attractive alternatives, which may be biased due to self-presentational concerns or lack of insight (see Fincham & May, 2017). Thus, in Study 2, we objectively assessed the extent to which participants attend to attractive alternatives using a visual dot probe reaction time (RT) measure.

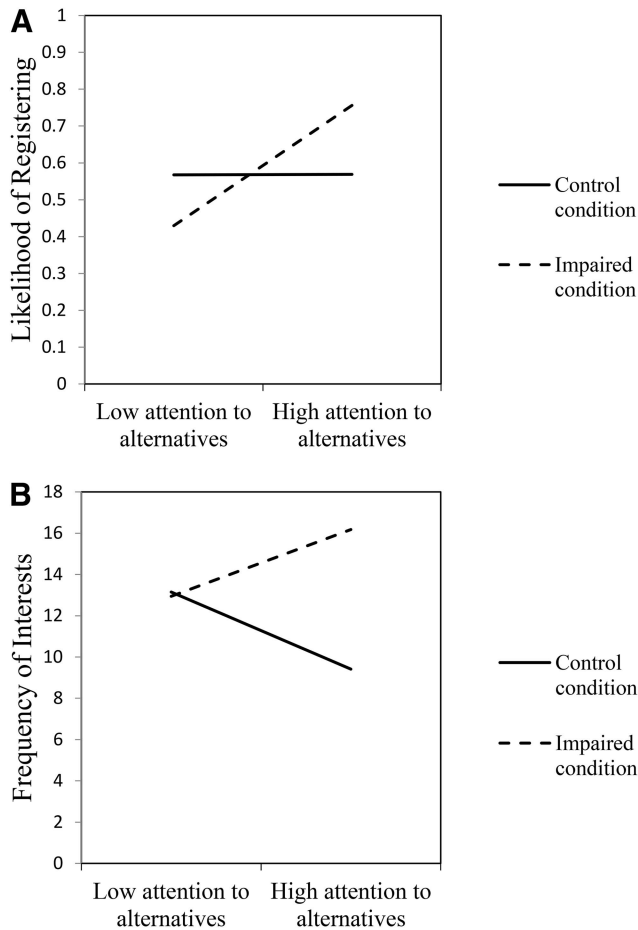


Figure 1. Interactive effects of attention to attractive alternatives and self-control on behaviors that contribute to infidelity in Study 1.

Second, although Study 1 assessed behaviors that often precede and contribute to the pursuit of infidelity (e.g., registering for a dating app designed to promote infidelity), actual infidelity was not assessed. Thus, in Study 2, we assessed participants' engagement in extradyadic sexual behaviors.

## Study 2

The goal of Study 2 was to provide an ecologically valid test of our predictions. At Baseline, newlywed couples completed a task that objectively assessed their tendency to avoid attending to attractive alternatives, and reported the extent that they attend to attractive alternatives and their dispositional self-regulatory ability. Next, participants reported whether or not they engaged in various sexual behaviors with someone other than their spouse (i.e., infidelity) six times over the following 2 years. We predicted that both objective and self-reported attention to attractive alternatives would be associated with infidelity among participants low in self-regulatory ability, but not among participants high in self-regulatory ability.

## Method

**Participants.** One hundred and one newlywed couples (93 heterosexual couples, 7 lesbian couples, 1 gay couple) participated

in a broader study of marriage. Participants were recruited through invitations sent to eligible couples who had applied for marriage licenses in the county where the study took place (in central North Carolina). Couples who responded were screened in a telephone interview to ensure they met the following eligibility criteria: (a) they had been married for less than 3 months, (b) they were at least 18 years of age, and (c) they spoke English and had completed at least 10 years of education (to ensure comprehension of the questionnaires). This sample size was the maximum number of couples we had the funds to recruit.

Husbands were 32.66 years old ( $SD = 8.72$ ) on average. Sixty-two percent were White or Caucasian, 28% were Black or African American, and the remaining 9% were another or two or more ethnicities. Wives were 32.08 years old ( $SD = 8.74$ ) on average. Sixty-five percent were White or Caucasian, 26% were Black or African American, and the remaining 11% were another or two or more ethnicities.

**Procedure.** Couples first completed a series of questionnaires that included measures of the extent they attend to attractive alternatives, their self-regulatory abilities, demographic information, and other questionnaires unrelated to the current hypotheses. All measures were completed online using Qualtrics survey software. Participants then attended a laboratory session where they completed a visual dot probe task that assessed their tendency to divert attention from attractive individuals of their preferred gender(s). Couples were paid \$100 for their participation at Baseline. Six times over the following two years, at roughly 4-month intervals, couples were emailed a packet of questionnaires that included a measure of infidelity. No data were collected from participants who informed us their relationships had dissolved. Couples were paid \$25 for each follow-up assessment. All procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board at Institutional Review Board at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro [#15-0368].

## Measures

**Attention to alternatives.** Two measures assessed the extent to which participants attend to attractive alternatives. First, spouses completed the Passive Awareness subscale of the Attention to Alternatives Index (Miller et al., 2010) described in Study 1 ( $\alpha = .93$ ). Second, during their laboratory session, participants completed a visual dot probe task (e.g., Maner et al., 2006, 2008) that assessed how quickly they shift attention away from attractive faces. This computer task first instructed participants to focus their attention on a fixation cross (X) that appeared for 1,000 ms in the center of the computer screen. Next, a picture of either an attractive male, average male, attractive female, or average female face appeared for 500 ms in one of the four quadrants of the screen. An independent group of undergraduate students established that the attractive faces were significantly more attractive than the average faces (see Maner, Gailliot, Rouby, & Miller, 2007). Next, a picture of a categorization object (circle or square) appeared in one of the quadrants of the screen. Participants were instructed to press the *a* (circle) or *k* (square) key when they identified the categorization object. The speed with which participants respond reflects the attention captured by the face on the screen. Participants completed a practice block of 20 trials and then a block of 20 target trials. An index of spouses' attention to alternatives was formed by averaging their RTs to trials in which they saw an attractive face of their preferred

gender(s). Higher scores indicate that participants took longer to divert their attention from attractive faces of their preferred gender(s). We excluded trials in which participants categorized the stimulus incorrectly (3%) and people whose average response latency was greater than 3 *SDs* above the sample mean ( $n = 3$ ; see Maner et al., 2007).

**Self-regulatory ability.** Participants completed the Self-Control Scale (Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004) to assess their dispositional ability to regulate their behavior. This measure requires individuals to report the extent to which they agree with 13 items that assess self-control (e.g., "I am good at resisting temptation") using a 5-point Likert response scale from 1 (*not at all agree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Appropriate items were reversed and all items were summed. Internal consistency was acceptable ( $\alpha = .84$ ).

**Infidelity.** Six times over the following 2 years, participants reported whether or not they engaged in 14 sexual behaviors (e.g., kissing on the lips, performing or receiving oral sex, sexual intercourse, sharing nude pictures of yourself, talking dirty) with someone other than their spouse (0 = *no*, 1 = *yes*) in the past 4 months. Given that spouses engaged in relatively few acts of infidelity at each time point and the frequency of such behaviors were highly skewed (Skew = 6.26), we maximized power by using a dummy-code that indicated whether or not participants engaged in any act of infidelity over the course of the study (0 = *no*, 1 = *yes*).

## Results

**Descriptive statistics and preliminary analyses.** Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations appear in Table 3. Men and women did not differ in self-reported or objective attention to alternatives, self-control, or rates of infidelity (all  $ps > .172$ ). Fifteen men (18%) and 18 women (19%) reported engaging in at least one act of infidelity. While the bivariate association between self-reported and objective attention to alternatives was not significant, self-reported attention was positively associated with objective attention after controlling for the average RT to nonattractive faces,  $b = 0.03$ ,  $SE = 0.01$ ,  $t(96) = 2.24$ ,  $p = .028$ ,  $\beta = .43$ , supporting the convergent validity of both measures.

**Did the implications of attention to alternatives for infidelity depend on self-regulatory ability?** To address our primary hypothesis that attention to attractive alternatives would be associated with infidelity only among those low in self-regulatory ability,

we estimated two separate two-level models using the HLM 7.03 computer program in which a dummy-code for spouses' infidelity was regressed onto mean-centered self-control scores, either their mean-centered (a) objective attention to alternatives scores, controlling for their mean-centered average RT to nonattractive faces, or (b) self-reported attention to alternatives scores, and the Self-Control  $\times$  Attention interaction. Because the dependent variable was binary, we specified a Bernoulli outcome distribution. The nonindependence of couples' data was controlled in the second level of the model with a randomly varying intercept.

Results are presented in Table 4. The first model examined the implications of objective attention to alternatives. In this model, the Self-Control  $\times$  Attention interaction was significantly associated with infidelity (see Figure 2, Panel A). Consistent with predictions, spouses' attention to attractive alternatives was associated with greater infidelity among spouses low in self-control,  $b = 0.01$ ,  $SE = 0.01$ ,  $t(80) = 2.09$ ,  $p = .040$ ,  $OR = 1.01$ , but not among spouses high in self-control,  $b = -0.00$ ,  $SE = 0.01$ ,  $t(80) = -0.47$ ,  $p = .640$ ,  $OR = 1.00$ . The second model examined the implications of self-reported attention to alternatives. In this model, the Self-Control  $\times$  Attention interaction was significantly associated with infidelity (see Figure 2, Panel B). Consistent with predictions, spouses' attention to attractive alternatives was associated with greater infidelity among spouses low in self-control,  $b = 0.20$ ,  $SE = 0.05$ ,  $t(83) = 4.01$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $OR = 1.23$ , but not among spouses high in self-control,  $b = 0.02$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ ,  $t(83) = 0.27$ ,  $p = .785$ ,  $OR = 1.02$ .

## General Discussion

Does noticing attractive alternatives increase the risk of infidelity? An experiment and a longitudinal study provide evidence that the role of attention to attractive alternatives in the pursuit of infidelity depends on the ability to resist such temptations. In particular, attending to attractive alternatives was associated with (a) expressing interest in more alternatives, (b) a greater likelihood of registering for a dating app designed to promote infidelity, and (c) engaging in actual infidelity among people low in dispositional self-control (Study 2) or whose self-regulatory ability was impaired (Study 1). In contrast, attending to attractive alternatives was not associated with these outcomes among participants with greater self-regulatory ability. Thus, the tendency to notice attractive alternatives predicted a greater risk for infidelity and behaviors that contribute to infidelity only when people lacked the ability to resist such temptations.

Several aspects of the present studies increase our confidence in the current results. First, these results replicated across different operationalizations of attending to attractive alternatives (i.e., self-report and objective RTs), infidelity (i.e., self-report and behaviors that contribute to infidelity), and self-regulatory ability (i.e., dispositional ability and experimentally impaired situational ability), reducing the likelihood that the results were due to operationalization of these variables. Second, the results replicated across individuals in both married and dating relationships, helping to ensure that the results obtained were not unique to individuals in certain types of romantic relationships (Russell, Baker, & McNulty, 2013). Third, Study 1 experimentally manipulated self-regulatory ability, enhancing our confidence that self-regulatory ability causes the behavioral implications of attention to alterna-

Table 3  
Descriptive Statistics and Correlations Among Variables in Study 2

Variable	1	2	3	4	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
(1) Self-reported attention	<b>.12</b>	.00	-.20*	.37**	18.70	6.84
(2) Objective attention	.00	<b>.01</b>	.08	.24*	542.38	116.53
(3) Self-control	-.11	-.06	<b>.06</b>	-.14	44.11	9.15
(4) Infidelity	.28*	.30*	-.37**	<b>-.15</b>	19%	
<i>M</i>	19.99	520.79	42.95	18%		
<i>SD</i>	6.47	113.44	7.97			

*Note.* Descriptive statistics and correlations are presented above the diagonal for women and below the diagonal for men; correlations between spouses appear on the diagonal in bold.

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .

Table 4  
Effects of Objective and Self-Reported Attention to Alternatives, Self-Control, and Their Interactions on Infidelity in Study 2

Predictor	Infidelity <sup>a</sup>			Odds Ratio
	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	
Average reaction time	-.00	-.34	.733	1.00
Objective attention (OA)	.01	.96	.340	1.01
Self-control (SC)	-.08	-2.61	.011	.93
SC $\times$ OA	-.00	-2.64	.010	.99

Predictor	Infidelity <sup>b</sup>			Odds Ratio
	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	
Self-reported attention (SA)	.11	3.10	.003	1.12
Self-control (SC)	-.06	-2.10	.039	.94
SC $\times$ SA	-.01	-2.38	.020	.99

<sup>a</sup> *df* = 80. <sup>b</sup> *df* = 83.

tives, and Study 2 examined the longitudinal implications of attention to alternatives for actual acts of infidelity. Finally, our samples across the two studies were highly diverse in regard to ethnicity, age, and sexual orientation, increasing our confidence in the external validity of our findings.

## Implications

These findings have important theoretical and practical implications. First, the present study is among the first to show the behavioral implications of attending to attractive alternatives. Given that committed people avoid attractive others (Miller, 1997), it has long been posited (Rusbult et al., 2004) that avoiding attractive alternatives is a mechanism by which people can maintain their relationships. Nevertheless, only one study (McNulty et al., 2018) has demonstrated that avoiding tempting alternatives actually prevents infidelity. The current work not only replicates this important work, but extends it with a more nuanced perspective that suggests that the implications of attention to attractive others depend on the dispositional and situational self-regulatory ability to resist temptation. Furthermore, unlike previous research that has relied on reports of the hypothetical probability of infidelity from people who were not in relationships (Gailliot & Baumeister, 2007; Ritter et al., 2010), quasi-acts of infidelity (e.g., providing a phone number to a research assistant; Ciarocco et al., 2012; Gailliot & Baumeister, 2007; Ritter et al., 2010), or narrow assessments of infidelity (e.g., McNulty et al., 2018), the current studies relied upon participants in established, committed relationships (Studies 1 and 2) and examined reports of actual infidelity using a broader range of both indirect (e.g., sharing nude pictures) and direct (e.g., sexual intercourse) romantic behaviors (Study 2).

Second, the current research challenges the prevalent idea that paying attention to alternatives is always harmful by increasing the risk of infidelity (see Maner et al., 2009; Miller, 1997). Lay people appear to endorse this idea—they avoid looking at attractive others when in committed relationships (Plant, Kunstman, & Maner, 2010) and often feel jealous when their partners pay attention to attractive others (Kennedy-Lightsey & Booth-Butterfield, 2011).

Critically, however, the current results suggest that greater attention to attractive others does not increase the risk of infidelity among people who possess the self-regulatory ability to resist such temptations. Thus, if self-regulatory ability is maintained, the impulse to notice attractive alternatives does not need to be stifled. In fact, past research suggests that deliberately avoiding attractive others may have the opposite intended effect by increasing attention to attractive others and positive attitudes toward infidelity (DeWall, Maner, Deckman, & Rouby, 2011).

Finally, these studies have preliminary implications for practitioners helping couples to prevent infidelity. For example, given that people have different relationship expectations and beliefs (Snyder, Baucom, & Gordon, 2008), couples may first benefit from an explicit discussion about whether or not it is acceptable within their relationship to look at and/or pursue alternatives. Beyond simply reducing confusion or conflict about divergent standards, this conversation may also prevent infidelity given that people are more likely to meet their goals when they are clearly stated and expressed (Locke, 1996). Similarly, identifying and avoiding situations that tax self-regulatory ability (e.g., drinking at a bar with an attractive friend) may reduce the temptation of attractive others; indeed, anticipating such obstacles can help people avoid self-regulatory failure (Fishbach & Hofmann, 2015). Although avoiding these situations may ensure that people high in dispositional self-regulatory ability can safely look at attractive others, additional strategies may be necessary for people low in dispositional self-regulatory ability. For example, although it may

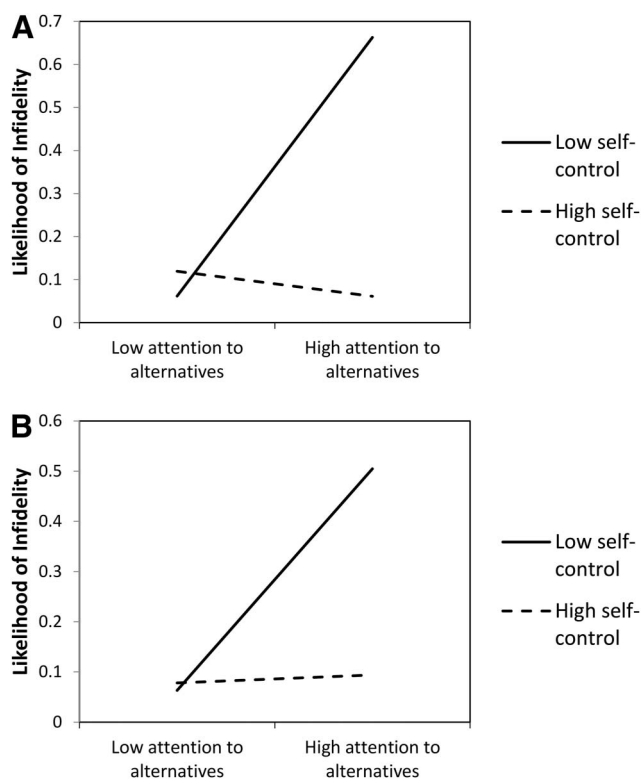


Figure 2. Interactive effects of attention to attractive alternatives and self-control on infidelity in Study 2. Panel A shows objective attention; Panel B shows self-reported attention.



be impractical to completely avoid attractive others, they might minimize their exposure (e.g., avoiding pornography). Further, given that they struggle with temptation, they might avoid situations ripe with temptation (e.g., a work trip with an attractive coworker). Finally, interventions that improve self-regulatory ability (e.g., such as committing to a work-out regimen) can produce broader improvements in self-regulation (Baumeister, Gailliot, DeWall, & Oaten, 2006) and may indirectly improve people's dispositional ability to resist tempting attractive alternatives.

### Limitations and Future Directions

Several factors limit the conclusions that can be drawn from these results until they can be replicated and extended. First, given that people often hesitate to disclose undesirable behavior or information that could jeopardize their current relationships (Fincham & May, 2017), participants in Study 1 may have underreported their interest in pursuing others whom they knew they would not meet and participants in Study 2 may have underreported actual acts of infidelity. Although our confidence in these results were bolstered by the similar pattern of results that emerged when predicting the likelihood of actually registering for a dating app that facilitates infidelity, future research might incorporate reports from romantic partners and close others who may be aware of acts of infidelity. Second, although the current studies demonstrated that both dispositional (Study 1) and situational (Study 2) self-regulatory ability determine the implications of attention, neither study assessed both. Future research might assess both dispositional and situational self-regulatory ability to examine whether people are particularly vulnerable to infidelity when low in both. Third, although Studies 1 and 2 varied in the type of relationship (i.e., dating vs. newlywed couples), neither study recruited couples that had been together for extended periods of time. Thus, future research should consider the role that relationship length has in the context of the current predictions. Finally, although the majority of newlyweds are in sexually exclusive relationships (Rubin, Moors, Matsick, Ziegler, & Conley, 2014), newlyweds in Study 2 did not report whether or not they were in sexually exclusive relationships and our predictions likely do not generalize to couples who do not have reasons to avoid the temptation of extradyadic sexual behavior. Thus, future research should assess whether participants are in sexually exclusive relationships. Similarly, future research should consider the role of sexual desire. Past research has shown that sexual desire predicts infidelity (Mark, Janssen, & Milhausen, 2011) and thus may account for the association between attention and infidelity.

### Conclusion

Consistent with Glasow's (1995) assertion that "temptation usually comes in through a door that has been deliberately left open," it is often argued that the temptation to engage in infidelity is magnified by the tendency to deliberately pay attention to attractive alternatives (e.g., Lydon & Quinn, 2013; Rusbult et al., 2004). But is there truth to Houck's (2011) quip that people can admire the attractiveness of others without pursuing them? The current studies suggest that people's self-regulatory ability to resist such temptations determines the accuracy of these two opposing perspectives. In particular, the current results revealed when self-

regulatory resources are lacking, people should not entertain the temptation of attractive alternatives by paying attention to them because it leads to a greater risk of infidelity. However, if people are capable of maintaining their self-regulatory ability, noticing or admiring attractive others does not increase the likelihood of infidelity. These results add to a growing literature on the topic of reducing potential threats to romantic relationships and further understanding about how people can maintain and protect their relationships in the face of temptation.

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