

Consequences of Online Extramarital Relationships from the Men's Perspective: A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The aim of this study is to qualitatively analyze the consequences of online extramarital relationships from the perspective of men.

Method: This research was conducted using a qualitative approach, employing content analysis. Based on the principle of theoretical saturation, twelve men participated in this study. Semi-structured interviews were used for data collection, and MAXQDA software was used for coding and categorizing the data.

Findings: The consequences of online extramarital relationships among men can be classified into two main categories and five subcategories. The results indicate that hiding the relationship while maintaining marital life, public disclosure, divorce, and separation are among the consequences of online extramarital relationships from the men's perspective.

Conclusion: In conclusion, this study highlights the complex dynamics of online infidelity among men in Mashhad, Iran, revealing key themes such as relationship concealment, marital dissatisfaction, and the impact on trust and family stability. The findings underscore the importance of understanding cultural and individual factors in the context of extramarital relationships and provide a foundation for future research on the psychological and relational consequences of online infidelity.

Keywords: online extramarital relationships, men, qualitative research.

1. Introduction

According to researchers, extramarital relationships are one of the most significant threats to the stability of marital relationships and a major cause of divorce across various cultures. Extramarital relationships have a profound impact on the functioning and stability of marital relationships, often resulting in emotional reactions such as depression, anger, shame, and distress in many women

whose husbands engage in these relationships (Hosseini et al., 2020). Extramarital relationships encompass a wide range of behaviors. From the perspective of therapists, these relationships often emphasize the concepts of infidelity and sexual diversity. Such relationships may include behaviors like cybersex, varying levels of physical and non-sexual intimacy, pornography consumption, and even emotional intimacy with another individual (Gordon et al., 2004; Khorrami Nobandi & Yaghoubi Pour, 2024).

With the expansion of technology and new communication tools, such as the internet and mobile phones, individuals now have new opportunities to engage in a wider range of relationships with more people. In social networks and chat rooms, individuals can easily meet a broad spectrum of potential partners with whom they can form connections. The presence of couples in the virtual space has led to changes in their perceptions of one another, often causing disillusionment and dissatisfaction. In such situations, each partner feels trapped in the marital relationship. The increasing use of virtual networks has led to the development of incorrect values, causing individuals to question their traditional values, family roles, and the way they interact with their spouses (Hosseini et al., 2020; Hosseinneshad Hallaji et al., 2021; Khorasaniyan, 2022).

The issue of extramarital relationships, due to the conflicts and turbulence they create in the lives of couples and the resulting consequences, requires a comprehensive and in-depth examination of the subject. First, the published statistics on extramarital relationships and their consequences, and second, the large body of empirical literature that has emerged on this topic. Existing statistics related to extramarital relationships are noteworthy and vary over time and across different locations. The statistics on extramarital relationships are concerning, particularly due to their negative effects in various societies. Moreover, in the literature on extramarital relationships, such behaviors have been linked to a decrease in psychological well-being (Dew et al., 2022; Fouladian et al., 2020), and they have been identified as a contributing factor to sexually transmitted diseases. Additionally, knowledge of a spouse's extramarital relationship can lead to negative reactions, such as physical assault, suicide, or even murder (Ghafoorian Nourozi et al., 2018; Ghafoorian et al., 2018). Between 20-40% of men and 14-25% of women have reported infidelity at least once, and 45% of men and 26% of American women admit to having extramarital affairs (Hassanabadi et al., 2011; Hosseini et al., 2020). Harris (2018) reports that 50-65% of couples therapy cases are related to issues of extramarital relationships. Gordon and Michael (2020) state that extramarital relationships occur in approximately 25% of marriages and are associated with various negative outcomes for individuals (such as depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress), for relationships (such as financial losses, increased conflict, and aggression), and for children (e.g., internalizing and externalizing behaviors) (Iamni Rad et al., 2021; June, 2020).

Given the widespread prevalence of online extramarital relationships in society, both theoretical and empirical literature clearly indicates the destructive psychological, interpersonal, and environmental consequences of this phenomenon on couples and their families. This highlights the need for the present study. On the other hand, cultural taboos, the hidden nature of this issue, individuals' reluctance to participate in research, and the difficulty in identifying these individuals make researching extramarital relationships particularly challenging. As a result, there is a lack of comprehensive and constructive literature on this topic, especially in the Iranian context, which underscores the need for extensive studies in this area. Such studies, by clarifying the dimensions of this issue, can help in the formulation of preventive and therapeutic programs. Finally, the limited studies in this field have mostly relied on quantitative methods and structured tools, with little attention given to the internal experiences and perceptions of individuals who have engaged in extramarital relationships. Therefore, this study aims to qualitatively analyze the consequences of online extramarital relationships among men.

2. Methods

In this study, a qualitative approach was used because it is suitable for exploring individuals' experiences in depth. Qualitative methods allow researchers to gain detailed insights into individuals or situations and deeply engage with the actual experiences of research participants. One of the reasons for choosing a qualitative approach is that exploring topics such as marriage and extramarital relationships requires examining these details. Although the qualitative approach offers various strategies, the strategy selected for this study is content analysis. Since the aim of this study is to gain a deep and detailed understanding of individuals' experiences of extramarital relationships, semi-structured interviews were conducted.

The participants in this study were men involved in online relationships who reside in Mashhad and volunteered to participate in the research in response to a call through social media platforms. The inclusion criteria for the study were: 1) willingness to participate in interviews and cooperate in the research, 2) having at least a high school education, and 3) having experience with online extramarital relationships. The exclusion criteria included: 1) unwillingness to continue cooperating in the study. The sampling method was purposive, continuing until data saturation was reached.

Data collection and analysis continued until the categories were fully developed. The process of identifying participants, preparing, and conducting interviews resulted in a final sample of 12 participants.

To examine the credibility and validity of the study, factors such as credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability were considered. 1) **Credibility:** In this study, the criteria for data credibility were long-term engagement and sufficient time spent by the researcher in data collection, as well as reviewing the coded interview transcripts by the participants. The participants reviewed and confirmed the interview transcripts and the extracted codes. Additionally, any ambiguous points or misunderstandings regarding the participants' intentions were clarified through feedback to the participant via phone. 2) **Dependability:** To enhance the dependability of the study, a reviewer was employed to carefully examine the data. 3) **Confirmability:** To increase confirmability, the researcher made efforts to thoroughly explain all stages of the study, including data collection, analysis, and the formation of the main categories. This allowed readers to assess the validity of the research by reviewing the results. Furthermore, this process was reviewed by several professors and research experts to confirm the accuracy of the study's implementation. 4) **Transferability:** In this study, efforts were made to gather information from men with varied life experiences. Differences in participants' age, education, occupation, and number of children were also considered to enhance the transferability of the research findings.

To assess reliability, the test-retest method was used, which refers to the consistency of data categorization over

time. This index can be calculated when a coder categorizes a text at two different time points. For the test-retest reliability calculation, three interviews were selected as samples, and each was coded twice by the researcher within a short and defined time interval. Then, the codes identified at the two time points were compared for each interview. The retesting method is used to assess the consistency of the researcher's coding. In each interview, the codes that matched across the two time intervals were labeled as "agreement," and the mismatched codes were labeled as "disagreement."

The total number of codes at two one-week intervals was 63, the total number of agreements between the codes at these two times was 48, and the total number of disagreements was 15. The test-retest reliability for the interviews in this study was 76%. Considering that the reliability is greater than 60%, the reliability of the coding process is confirmed.

3. Findings and Results

In order to achieve the primary goal of the research and based on the data collected through interviews, the content analysis process was applied to the data. The data were analyzed using MAXQDA software. Based on the qualitative analysis of the interview data with participants, along with the coding and content analysis of the interview transcripts, and their alignment with theoretical foundations, the main and sub-categories related to the formation of online extramarital relationships in men are presented in **Table 1:**

Table 1

Main and Sub-Categories Related to the Formation of Online Extramarital Relationships in Men

Main Category	Sub-Category	Raw Data
Concealment of the Relationship and Continuation of Marital Life	Continuation of marital life and fulfillment of desires through other women	"I prefer to continue living with my wife while fulfilling my needs through other women" (Interview 11).
	Efforts to manage both marital and extramarital relationships secretly	"I do not intend to ruin my marriage or destroy my life. I am just temporarily in this relationship to see how long my wife will continue with her behavior" (Interview 1).
	Disclosure, Divorce, and Separation	"The impact on your life and your spouse is very bad. This issue leads to the collapse of the family" (Interview 2).
	Official divorce from spouse	"If it is exposed and the wife and children find out, it causes marital problems and a lack of trust in the person who had these relationships, or perhaps even divorce" (Interview 5).
Disclosure, Divorce, and Separation	Disclosure and its consequences (divorce, marital problems)	"Since my wife found out about my secret relationship with someone else, she never trusted me again. She always checks on me, and I know she has lost her trust in me" (Interview 8).
	Spouse's mistrust	"It's true that my wife has caught me several times, and my life is very chaotic now" (Interview 2).
	Disclosure of the relationship and family breakdown	

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this research provide insight into the dynamics of online extramarital relationships in men, shedding light on both the behaviors and emotional patterns that contribute to such relationships. The participants' experiences revealed several key themes: concealment of relationships, the continued pursuit of marital satisfaction alongside extramarital involvement, the consequences of infidelity, and the potential for family breakdown. These findings are consistent with previous studies, which highlight how online infidelity, often facilitated by digital platforms, can significantly affect marital relationships (Azkhosh et al., 2024; Radulović et al., 2023).

The theme of "concealment of the relationship and continuation of marital life" emerged strongly among the participants. Many expressed a desire to maintain their marriages while engaging in extramarital relationships, seeking to fulfill unmet needs without disrupting their primary relationships. This finding aligns with previous research on the strategic management of extramarital affairs (Rodrigues, Lopes, & Pereira, 2017), where individuals compartmentalize their relationships to maintain stability in their marriages while pursuing other sexual or emotional connections. The participants' motivation to "secretly manage both marital and extramarital relationships" without disrupting their lives reflects an effort to preserve family structure while simultaneously seeking emotional or sexual fulfillment outside the marriage. This finding supports the idea that infidelity, especially online, often involves complex justifications aimed at balancing personal desires with perceived marital obligations (Mayeli & Allahyari, 2022; Rezakhaniha & Ashkan, 2022).

Moreover, the theme of "disclosure, divorce, and separation" found in this study resonates with the growing body of literature on the consequences of infidelity. Previous studies have shown that when extramarital affairs become public, they often lead to significant marital discord, divorce, and a loss of trust between partners (Kanani & Alijani, 2022; Khamsean et al., 2021; Lainez & Nguyen, 2020). In this study, participants shared the destructive consequences of their affairs being discovered by their spouses, including the breakdown of trust and the risk of divorce. This finding is particularly relevant in the context of online infidelity, where digital platforms can make the discovery of such affairs more immediate and damaging, potentially accelerating the collapse of relationships (Fouladian et al., 2020; Ghafoorian

Nourozi et al., 2018; Jahan et al., 2017; Sharaffoddin & Salehi Zadeh, 2016).

Furthermore, participants' experiences with online infidelity illustrate the impact on marital trust. Many reported that once their spouses discovered their extramarital relationships, trust was irrevocably damaged, a sentiment echoed in other studies on infidelity (Ghafoorian et al., 2018; Khorrami Nobandi & Yaghoubi Pour, 2024). This finding underscores the critical role trust plays in marital satisfaction and stability. In fact, the breach of trust was cited as one of the most painful and irreparable consequences of extramarital relationships, particularly when they occurred online, where emotional and physical boundaries can be more easily blurred.

One of the most striking aspects of the findings is the participants' complex emotional responses to their extramarital affairs. Many did not express a desire to end their marriages, indicating that their online infidelities were, in their view, an outlet for unmet emotional or sexual needs rather than a sign of dissatisfaction with their marital relationships. This finding is consistent with the results of studies on emotional infidelity, which suggest that individuals often engage in online affairs to satisfy unmet emotional needs rather than purely for sexual reasons (Mayeli & Allahyari, 2022; Radulović et al., 2023; Rezakhaniha & Ashkan, 2022).

The results of this study also highlight the role of the internet and social media platforms in facilitating extramarital relationships. This study's findings reinforce the idea that online infidelity is not just about physical encounters, but also includes emotional and psychological engagements that may be less detectable but equally damaging to marital relationships (Azkhosh et al., 2024; Ghafoorian Nourozi et al., 2018; Khorasaniyan, 2022). The ease of access to potential partners through online platforms allows for the normalization of extramarital behaviors, making it more difficult for individuals to perceive the severity of their actions until the consequences become apparent (Gordon et al., 2004).

5. Suggestions and Limitations

Despite the valuable insights provided by this study, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study's sample was limited to men living in Mashhad, Iran, which may not be representative of the broader population. Cultural differences and regional variations in attitudes toward marriage and infidelity might affect the

generalizability of the findings. Furthermore, the reliance on self-reported data, particularly when participants were discussing sensitive topics such as infidelity, may have led to social desirability bias. It is possible that participants underreported or minimized the extent of their extramarital behaviors, particularly given the stigma associated with such actions in conservative societies. Additionally, the study's focus on a qualitative approach, while offering rich insights into personal experiences, lacks the ability to quantify the prevalence of online infidelity or generalize findings across larger populations.

Another limitation concerns the study's methodology. The use of semi-structured interviews allowed for in-depth exploration of participants' experiences, but the data might have been influenced by the interviewer's personal biases or the participants' interpretations of their own behaviors. The analysis was also based on the subjective interpretation of interview transcripts, which can introduce researcher bias. To address these limitations, future studies could adopt mixed methods, incorporating both qualitative and quantitative approaches, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the prevalence and psychological mechanisms behind online infidelity.

Given the complexity of the topic and the limitations of this study, there are several avenues for future research. One promising direction is to expand the sample to include women, as the current study only focused on male participants. Gender differences in the motivations, experiences, and consequences of online infidelity could provide valuable insights into how men and women engage with digital platforms differently. Additionally, future research could explore the role of cultural and religious factors in shaping attitudes toward online infidelity, particularly in non-Western societies. Given that this study was conducted in Iran, it would be interesting to compare these findings with similar research in Western contexts, where attitudes toward infidelity may differ significantly.

Another potential direction for future research is the longitudinal study of online infidelity and its long-term consequences on marital relationships. While this study focused on the immediate emotional and relational effects of online affairs, a longitudinal approach would provide a deeper understanding of how infidelity affects couples over time and how relationships can recover or deteriorate after the disclosure of extramarital activities. Researchers could also investigate the role of online infidelity in divorce cases, examining the psychological, emotional, and social consequences for both partners and any children involved.

In light of the findings of this study, it is essential to emphasize the importance of open communication in marital relationships. Couples should be encouraged to foster trust and transparency, which may help to prevent the emotional disconnection that often leads to online infidelity. Relationship counseling and therapy could play a crucial role in helping couples address underlying issues of dissatisfaction before they manifest in extramarital affairs. Given the increasing prevalence of digital platforms in everyday life, relationship educators and therapists should also be equipped to address the specific challenges posed by online infidelity, including the potential for emotional or sexual relationships to form through social media and other digital tools.

Practitioners in the field of mental health and family therapy should consider integrating discussions of digital behavior into their therapeutic work, particularly when addressing relationship dissatisfaction. By recognizing the potential for online infidelity and exploring its emotional and psychological consequences, therapists can better support individuals and couples dealing with the aftermath of such behaviors. Additionally, outreach programs could be developed to educate the public about the risks of online infidelity and promote healthy, communicative relationships, particularly in the digital age.

Authors' Contributions

All authors have contributed significantly to the research process and the development of the manuscript.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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