

Presenting a Model to Reduce Infidelity in Cyber Space with Phenomenological Analysis of Individual, Interpersonal and Social factors

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Mir Nemat Gheibi¹; Parviz Karimi Sani^{2*}; Qumarth Karimi³

¹ PhD student , Department of Counseling, Sanandaj Branch, Islamic Azad University, Sanandaj, Iran.

² Department of Counseling and Psychology , Shabestar Branch, Islamic Azad University, Shabestar, Iran.

Corresponding Author: karimisani@iaau.ac.ir

³ Department of Psychology, Mahabad Branch, Islamic Azad University, Mahabad, Iran.

Abstract

Aim: Marital infidelity is one of the important factors that threaten the marital bond between couples. Understanding the factors preventing marital infidelity is of great value in maintaining the stability and quality of marriage. The present study was conducted with the aim of explaining the effective individual, interpersonal and social indicators to reduce marital infidelity in virtual space with a qualitative approach and phenomenological method.

Method: The statistical population of the research included One of the wives with a history of marital infidelity in cyberspace, referred from the family court of Urmia city in 2022, and for this purpose, a sample of 18 participants (13 women and 5 men) were selected using a non-probability and purposeful method. The tool of the current research was a semi-structured interview. The data were coded and analyzed using Brown and Clark thematic analysis . Results : the results of this research showed that there are a total of 14 sub-themes in line with the three main concepts including: individual factors with 7 sub-themes including (differentiation, avoiding extremes and excesses in common life, thinking about the consequences of uncontrolled communication, crisis management, strengthening individual competencies, having physical and mental health, and adhering to family, moral and spiritual values), Interpersonal factors with 3 sub-themes including (the ability to establish effective verbal and non-verbal communication, presence of determination in life, and dimming of interpersonal differences) and social factors with 4 sub-themes including (nature of job and economic situation, rule of strict laws, promotion of healthy lifestyle, and existence of happy and healthy programs) are effective as deterrents from extramarital relationships in the final model.

Conclusion: It can be concluded that it is necessary to examine the factors that threaten the peace and stability of the family as the cornerstone of society. In the current research, it was found that a total of 14 sub-themes (including 7 sub-themes related to the individual factor, 3 sub-themes related to the interpersonal factor and 4 sub-themes related to the social factor) protect people from extramarital relationships. The results of this research can be used to help formulate preventive programs and interventions in the field of marital infidelity.

Keywords: Marriage, marital infidelity, Virtual space, Phenomenology.



Introduction

The increasing use of media leads to changes in individuals' perspectives and creates new mental images and ineffective attitudes (Heidari, 2018). Research findings indicate that media addiction targets belief-related behaviors and reduces romantic relationships between couples (Zhang, 2019). Excessive and unrestricted online relationships seriously undermine trust and loyalty between partners, leading to marital disputes, separation, and even infidelity (Filimon et al., 2021). Online relationships can be destructive in cases of infidelity related to cyberspace, even in the absence of physical and sexual contact (Bozuyan and Schmiedeberg, 2022; Roman, 2020). A significant number of couples report having cheated during their marriage. Estimates of infidelity vary depending on specific sources, ranging from 2% to 33% (Bhowmik, 2020). Recent studies indicate that about 22% to 25% of men and 11% to 15% of women in the United States reported having had sexual relations outside their marriage at least once, with men engaging in extramarital sex at twice the rate of women (Harris, 2018; Cornish et al., 2020). In Iran, the prevalence of this issue is not clearly defined, however based on conducted research, the occurrence of marital infidelity and its rising statistics are evident (Bahonar et al., 2022). The virtual space has altered all types of relationships, rights and duties related to roles within families, etc., and has likely led to decreased family connections and increased conflicts (Lopez-Fernandez & Kuss, 2020), resulting in numerous disputes, frequent criticisms, emotional disconnect, and unresolved problems (Loneragan et al., 2021).

Some of the individual factors related to marital infidelity include factors like sexual and emotional variety-seeking (Selterman et al., 2019), faith weakness and lack of religious constraints (Chopani et al., 2019), absence of commitment (Fye & Mims, 2018), and lack of genuine love (Selterman et al., 2019). In this regard, various researchers have identified factors such as emotional dissatisfaction (Chopani et al., 2019), sexual dissatisfaction and narcissism (Warach et al., 2018), insecure attachment styles (Beltrán et al., 2019), relational insecurity, and couple conflicts and turmoil (Shamala & Kanthy, 2021) as some of the main interpersonal factors. Other social factors that underpin marital infidelity, which are considered in this research, include issues like financial and economic problems, a desire for flashy and luxurious lifestyles, pursuit of higher social status, and mismatched or forced marriages (Karimi et al., 2017).

Despite this, various research results have shown that having certain characteristics can create marital stability among couples and eliminate the grounds for infidelity (including online cheating). In this regard, studies have noted that there is a relationship between couples' differentiation and their constructive interactions (Clyde et al., 2020), emotional capability and higher adaptability (Woldarsky, 2006), individual religious affiliations and their lack of inclination towards marital infidelity (Atkins et al., 2005), work environment and a healthy lifestyle (Gemmer, 2013), lack of sexual experience before marriage and absence of marital infidelity (Gemmer, 2013), emotional maturity and absence of marital infidelity (Rajabi and Abbasi, 2018; Barzgar and Honarparvaran,

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2019), intimacy and absence of marital infidelity (Pananakhonsap, 2019); having mental and psychological health and lack of inclination towards marital infidelity (Vidourek & Burbage, 2018) as well as financial problems and inclination towards extramarital relationships (Dew et al., 2022). It is worth mentioning that most research conducted so far has each studied the role of certain psychological traits regarding infidelity or lack thereof, and there is no comprehensive study that examines the various individual, interpersonal, and social factors impacting the reduction of marital infidelity, especially in the online space. On the other hand, most studies in this area have been quantitative, and the few qualitative studies conducted have only looked at the factors influencing an individual's inclination towards online cheating, with no comprehensive research exploring individual, interpersonal, and social factors to prevent the tendency towards infidelity in the online space available. Hence, this study aims to phenomenologically investigate the role of individual, interpersonal, and social factors in reducing marital infidelity within the online context, thereby filling a research gap and providing a comprehensive picture of the role of various factors by presenting a model to prevent online infidelity, so that necessary knowledge can be provided for families and couples to prevent engaging in online infidelity for the enhancement of family life in the Iranian-Islamic culture.

Methods

This research was conducted using a qualitative method with a phenomenological approach, focusing on the experiences and opinions. One of the wives regarding infidelity in the online space. The statistical population of this study included One of the wives seeking divorce due to extramarital relationships in the virtual world who, in 2022, willingly referred themselves to psychological counseling centers in Urmia city, through a referral from the Family Intervention and Divorce Reduction Center and the Social Emergency Department (123). The samples were selected purposefully. The sampling process continued until data saturation and finally included 18 people (13 women and 5 men). Interviews were conducted individually and face-to-face, centered on the context of marital infidelity online. To adhere to ethical principles, the purpose of this research was thoroughly explained to the participants at the outset. The conditions for entering the interview were: having extramarital relationships in the virtual world, Not divorced, an age range of 20-50 years, and being referred from the Family Intervention and Divorce Reduction Center and the Social Emergency Department (123).

In executing the research process, participants were first asked for their consent to participate in the study at the counseling and psychological services centers (Bakhish) in Urmia. Then, participants were selected based on Inclusion criteria from among the attendees. In accordance with ethical principles, the following points were taken into consideration: 1) Information obtained from the interviews was used without disclosing names. 2) Confidentiality of information was announced at the start of the interviews. 3) Participants were assured that the information gathered would not be used against them at any time. 4) Additionally, research questions were asked in various ways Using the techniques of exposure and tracking the participants' statements and with additional

... explanations to maintain the accuracy and reliability of the data in this study and to reduce the likelihood of incorrect data from participants. Interviews were conducted individually and face-to-face. Semi-structured interviews were carried out by a doctoral student specializing in counseling at the center (Bakhish), with questions such as: Can you describe infidelity in the online space? How did your relationship with the third party in the virtual world begin? In your view, in your opinion, what characteristics in a person can be effective in preventing marital infidelity in cyber space? In your opinion, is the quality of communication between people, especially life partners, effective in preventing cheating in cyberspace? How does the quality of communication between life partners affect the prevention of their betrayal in cyber space? In your opinion, how can the society be affected by the occurrence of marital infidelity in cyber space? Can you talk about the most important actions of the society in order to reduce marital infidelity in cyber space?

and continued with followed up questions with the interviewer's probing and tracking. These questions stemmed from the research background and were in line with the theoretical frameworks. The interviews were transcribed and coded in written form, and this process continued until data saturation was reached. Finally, thematic analysis was used to analyze the data, and the process of analyzing codes was reviewed in collaboration with counseling professors. Credibility, confirmability, and reliability criteria were employed to ensure the accuracy of the data.

Results

First, the demographic information of the participants in the research is given, followed by the concepts obtained from the interviews.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the participants

28	guidance	women	housekeeper	9 years	A boy and a girl
27	diploma	women	housekeeper	7 years	A girl
32	guidance	women	hairstresser	14 years	-
45	Master's degree	men	teacher	16 years	A boy and a girl
42	Bachelor's degree	women	employee	17 years	two girls
38	Bachelor's degree	men	teacher	19 years	A boy and a girl
32	Bachelor's degree	women	housekeeper	10 years	A boy and a girl
32	Master's degree	women	housekeeper	10 years	A boy
39	Ph.D	men	teacher	10 years	A boy and a girl
33	diploma	women	housekeeper	15 years	A girl
25	Bachelor's degree	men	employee	4 years	A boy
43	Bachelor's degree	women	housekeeper	16 years	A boy
39	diploma	women	housekeeper	13 years	A girl
36	Bachelor's degree	women	employee	11 years	A boy and a girl
32	Bachelor's degree	men	employee	8 years	A boy and a girl
38	guidance	women	housekeeper	13 years	Two boys
28	Bachelor's degree	women	teacher	5 years	A girl
24	Bachelor's degree	women	housekeeper	6 years	A boy and a girl

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this research was conducted with the participation of 13 women and 5 men. The age range of the participants was from 20 to 50 years, with an average age of 34.05 years. The youngest participant was 24 years old while the oldest was 45. In terms of gender, the study included 13 women and 5 men. Most women were housewives, and most men were employees. In terms of education, 3 participants had completed middle school, 2 had a high school diploma, 11 held a bachelor's degree (BA), 1 had a master's degree (MA), and 1 had doctoral degrees (PhD). After analyzing the conducted interviews of 93 cods, 14 sub-themes were obtained in line with the 3 themes, which are presented below. Individual factors were highlighted among the indicators related to the factors affecting the reduction of infidelity in the virtual space. In relation to individual factors effective in preventing infidelity in the virtual space, it has been suggested that couples who possess emotional maturity can better control their sensual desires and regulate their psychological and emotional needs, take responsibility for their actions, and adhere to ethical standards (Rajabi & Abbasi, 2020).

The secondary concepts related to this indicator include differentiation, avoidance of extremism and wastage in shared life, forward-thinking, prevention of a crisis occurring in life, strengthening individual competencies, having physical and mental health, and possessing family, ethical, and spiritual competencies to protect individuals from the dangers of the virtual space, which are presented in Table 2, along with primary themes and sample statements from the interviewees.

Table2. Basic concepts, sub-concepts, and main concepts extracted from the analysis of interviews (individual indicator)

Main themes	Sub-concepts	Basic concepts	Examples of narratives/statements from interviewees
Individual	Differentiation in relation to being immersed in the landscape of virtual networks.	Having self-esteem and a positive self-image to steer clear of the false values of the virtual world, expressing feelings easily with a partner rather than venting frustrations with strangers online, managing a partner's presence in the digital space, maintaining a strong personality when interacting with the opposite sex online, entering marriages with awareness to avoid aimless browsing for	I think if a person has self-esteem, they won't be out there in the virtual space begging for love and validation anymore (participants 1,2, 3, 6, 13, 15, 16, and 17). I didn't have the courage to criticize my spouse's behavior, so I would just back off, and then later get caught up in the virtual space (participants 5 and 7).

	lost connections, and shunning being misled by seductive behaviors in the virtual space.	
Staying away from extremes in shared life by drawing inspiration from social media networks.	Planning for leisure time in real relationships and not in virtual space, resisting unhealthy lifestyles and body changes in the digital world, monitoring life and relationships with others to control illicit relationships in the virtual space, and not overindulging in fun and entertainment, especially online.	My husband had turned his whole life into work, work, and more work. I was just at home, feeling lonely and lost in the virtual space (participants 3, 4, 5, 9, 10, 11, 13, 14, 16, 17, and 18). It's necessary to keep an eye on your partner sometimes; unfortunately, I didn't do that, and by the time I realized, it was too late (participants 1 and 10).
Contemplation in the area of uncontrolled communications in the virtual space	Awareness of the difficulties after divorce following the revelation of infidelity in social media, avoiding watching porn films, fear of reputation, and not seeking revenge on the spouse.	If a person thinks about divorce and the issues that come afterward, they won't go looking for these things on social media. (Participants 4, 5, and 9) My husband was involved in social media, and then I found out he was in touch with someone. No matter what I did, it didn't get any better, so I found someone and got my revenge. (Participants 3, 5, and 18)
Preventing a crisis in life	Not being addicted to avoid getting involved with treacherous people, having no tension in marital issues, the ability to have children, and satisfying emotional needs in the past to steer clear of fulfilling them in the virtual space.	I think addiction to drugs and alcohol can also destroy someone's life, and a person could end up looking to sell these things in the online world and come across some shady characters, leading to potential betrayal. This has happened in my life. (Participants 1, 2, 5, 12, 13, 16, and 17). I've always been the one asking for things in our marital issues, and my wife didn't care at all, constantly complaining instead. (Participants 3, 14, 16, 17 and 18).
Strengthening	Purposefulness and	"If a person has a goal and is



individual capabilities in dealing with the distractions of the virtual space.	responsibility in life, the presence of honesty and commitment in a shared life, having a job and investing energy in the right path, time management, having a high financial capacity before marriage, emotional satisfaction with each other, being equipped with problem-solving methods instead of seeking revenge, generating positive excitement in life, not being prideful and apologizing instead of avoiding problems, having a high level of education, being attractive, and not being overly demanding.	focused on their own progress and life, I don't think they would be looking for someone in the virtual space, and all their time and life would be dedicated to achieving their goal (participants 3, 4, 5, 7, 9, 11, and 13). If a husband and wife love each other and enjoy each other's emotional company, they would never look for their lost one in the virtual space (participants 8, 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 11, 12, 14, 17, and 18)."
Having physical and mental health	The absence of physical and mental disorders, having sexual satisfaction to avoid fantasizing about it in virtual space, not suppressing emotions and not expressing them in virtual space, not having sexual disorders, possessing a healthy identity, and the behavioral and sexual maturity of both parties.	"Most of the time, couples who have sexual issues and do not enjoy each other seek out the virtual space (participants 4, 5, 6, 9, and 11). I believe that if both parties have the necessary skills and behavioral and sexual maturity in their marital relationships, neither of them will look for someone else in the virtual space (participants 4, 7, 8, and 9)."
Possessing family, moral, and spiritual competence	Having religious beliefs, preserving individual and family identity and authenticity, respecting the boundaries of the family of origin, maintaining a healthy lifestyle and adhering to ethical standards, being conscientious in	"If a person has a proper family background, they won't look for betrayal, whether in the real world or in the virtual space (participants 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 and 11). A truly religious person will never betray their partner (participants 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 12, 13, 15, 16, 17, and 18)."

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the face of a partner's sacrifices, being truthful to each other in a shared life, and benefiting from proper family upbringing

One of the key indicators derived from interviews with research participants was the interpersonal index. It seems that individuals who fear intimacy do so because they lack inner experiences, including thoughts, feelings, and emotions that could be anxiety-inducing, leaving them neither understood nor able to understand. This causes each partner to feel unsatisfied with their close relationships, and that dissatisfaction can lead one or both partners to seek out extramarital affairs (Penanakhounsaf, 2019).

Sub-concepts of the interpersonal index include factors like the ability to express emotions to one another and marital intimacy, which lead to effective verbal and non-verbal communication in real life, as opposed to the tempting communications found in virtual spaces. This also diminishes the impactful interpersonal differences that can drive someone to fill voids in the online world. These concepts, along with initial ideas and sample statements from interviewees, are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Key concepts, sub-concepts, and main concepts extracted from interview analysis (interpersonal indicator)

Main concept	Sub-concepts	Basic concepts	Examples of narratives/statements from interviewees
Interpersonal	The ability to establish effective verbal and non-verbal communication	Pleasant verbal exchanges between couples strengthen healthy and strong interpersonal relationships, support each other's morale, and help avoid being drawn into infidelity in virtual spaces.	"When a person connects with their spouse and children instead of getting caught up in the virtual world, I think the marriage becomes more stable" (participants 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, and 14). "Weak relationships with those around you can sometimes lead a person to disconnect from everything and get caught up in the virtual world, leading to subsequent events" (participants 5, 6, 7, 8, 11 and 12).
		Not being suspicious of each other, having closeness in a shared life, drawing strength from each other, not being shy about showing affection to your partner in front of others, having sexual satisfaction in marriage, being	"In marriage, partners should not be suspicious or pessimistic toward one another, as skepticism can create a rift between them, leading them to seek what they are missing in the virtual space." (Participants: 3, 4, 6, 9, 13, 14, 17, and 18). "I always felt like I had lost everything in my life and had

		comfortable with your partner to express feelings, supporting each other emotionally, feeling happiness in life, not having a sharp tongue, and completely fulfilling needs are all important.	become depressed. I lost hope in everything and entered the virtual space." (Participant 9)
	Fading interpersonal conflicts affect the temptation to fill the voids in the online space	Having understanding in life, not having cultural differences, no conflicts between families to avoid runaway situations, a small age gap between spouses at the time of marriage, and no class differences.	"I think cultural differences increase the distances between each other, and the closer the tastes are, the more respect couples have for each other and they won't look for a third party" (participants 9, 15, 16, and 18). "My mother-in-law caused a rift between my husband and me, and it led to getting caught up in the online world, which resulted in further issues" (participants 2, 5, and 7).

Another indicator that emerged from the interviews with the participants was the social factor. In today's cultural and social context, couples need to smartly pay attention to each other's values, attitudes, needs, concerns, and problems to make accurate judgments about one another and ultimately assess the quality of their relationship, keeping in mind the moral value of striving for shared interests. The possession of moral values is essential for any kind of social participation, as the continuous presence of individuals in groups and their close interpersonal relationships depends on their perception of how this issue is respected.

The sub-concepts of the social indicator included the nature of work, the existence of strict laws regarding infidelity in society, the promotion of healthy lifestyles within the community, and the availability of various joyful programs, which are presented alongside the primary concepts and sample statements from the interviewees in Table 4.

Table 4: Key concepts, sub-concepts, and main concepts extracted from interview analysis (social indicator)

Main concept	Sub-concepts	Basic concepts	Examples of narratives/statements from interviewees
Social	The nature of the job and the economic situation have an impact on the tendency to seek companionship in the virtual space.	The type of job and business in the virtual world, night shifts, long periods away from home, and loneliness, along with healthy income and economic advancement, the absence of economic problems, and proper and logical cost management	"My spouse had a business and rented out villas for travelers and also advertised in the virtual space... this led him to establish a relationship with a lady online" (Participant 2). "My spouse's job often took him on missions, which led him to connect with women in virtual spaces due to the distance

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			from family" (Participant 8).
Strict laws regarding infidelity	The stigma of cheating hasn't gone away, and there are harsh legal penalties for illicit relationships in cyberspace.		"When an issue like cheating—whether in real life or online—loses its stigma, everyone easily gets involved in it" (Participants 4, 5, 8 and 9). "When someone cheats and the court and the law don't take any action, they easily pursue such activities, and the online space becomes the best hangout for that" (Participants 3, 4, 5, 11, 13, 14, 16, 17, and 18).
Promoting a healthy lifestyle in society	Not having sexual relationships before marriage, the absence of divorce being viewed as normal, the lack of inappropriate interactions with the opposite sex in online spaces, appropriate dressing in public, and setting good examples in the community.		"My husband always said, 'It doesn't matter if you're not around.' So many young women have gotten divorced and are looking for someone else, especially in the online world (Participant 13)." "Unfortunately, in our society, interacting with the opposite sex isn't too hard, and if you're a little clever, you'll get caught (Participants 3, 4, 5, 9, 10, 11, 13, 14, 16, 17, and 18)."
Having various fun and healthy programs in the community.	Properly relieving emotions in the community, holding authorized and enjoyable concerts in the community, and having healthy recreational activities in life.		"If a person's excitement is channeled in the right direction, like through studying, working, effective communication with family, and leisure activities, then there won't be any energy left for other things" (participants 4, 5, 6, 9, and 12). "Healthy recreation prevents a person from chasing a bunch of their dreams in the virtual space" (participants 5, 7, 8, 12, 14, and 15).

Finally, using the factors obtained from the interviewees regarding the prevention of marital infidelity in the online space, the model below was designed.



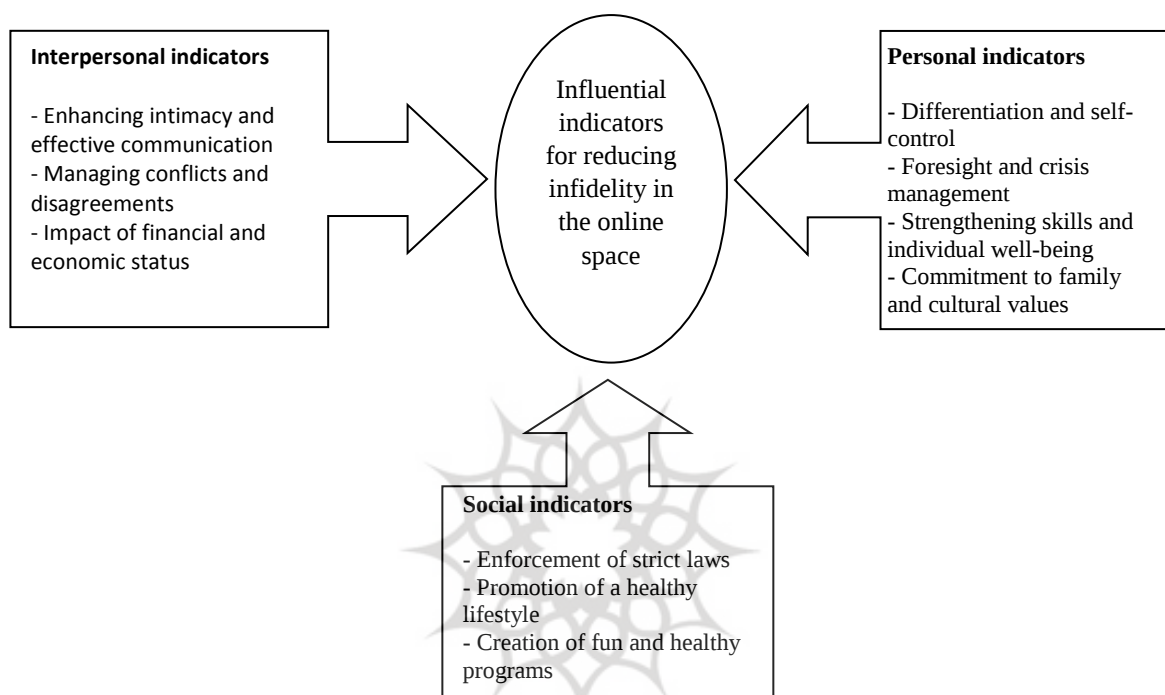


Figure 1. Proposed model for reducing online infidelity based on phenomenological analysis of individual, interpersonal, and social factors.

Discussion

This research was conducted by examining phenomenologically the role of individual, interpersonal, and social factors and proposing a model to reduce online marital infidelity among clients, who had a history of online infidelity, referred from the family court to counseling centers in Urmia city. Experts believe that individuals who spend a lot of time using online spaces may have certain personal characteristics, struggle in their relationships with others, especially family members, because having specific traits, abilities, and weaknesses, as well as interpersonal and familial communication styles, can lead to success or social harm, such as addiction to online spaces (Nowak, Rachubinska, Starczewska & Grochans, 2022).

Based on the model derived from interviews with research participants, it seems that individual characteristics such as differentiation and self-control, foresight and crisis

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management, strengthening skills and personal well-being, and commitment to family and cultural values could be factors that prevent the breakdown of the marital relationship and be effective in curbing online infidelity. Regarding the influential individual factors in reducing online infidelity, various research findings have indicated that higher differentiation is correlated with increased intimacy and marital satisfaction (Saemi et al., 2018; Plek and Grandy, 2019). More differentiated individuals are capable of applying their personal positions in relationships and paying attention to their thoughts and feelings, independent of their need to conform to others' expectations. Due to considering others' expectations while holding onto their personal stances, these individuals value their partners more in marital life and have a clear identity in relationships with others, leading to a lesser inclination toward infidelity (Safarzadeh Shirali & Bavi, 2019; Yusefpouri & Bahrami, 2021; Lampis, Cataudella & Agus, 2018). Additionally, a differentiated individual possesses the necessary control in dealing with life's issues and challenges and has the ability to approach them logically and rationally, which helps prevent emotional reactions to various life problems, including conflicts, infidelity, etc. (Ghandehari & Yaghoubian, 2023). The more emotionally reactive the couples are, the greater the increase in resentment and coldness in their relationship, which eventually leads to marital distaste (Moghimy et al., 2022). Marital infidelity potentially contributes to the dissolution of marriage. It doesn't really matter whether individuals are in friendly relationships or marriages; most people end their marital lives after their spouse's infidelity becomes clear. Sarmadi and Ahmadi Khodabakhsh (2021) ranked the consequences of marital infidelity into 10 types of harm, which include: coldness in the marital relationship, disputes, fights and conflicts, loss of intimacy, family tension, problems in family relationships, loss of reputation, thoughts and actions toward divorce, reduced emotional connections, boredom, and mental disturbance. In the interviews, participants stated that if they had considered the future before resorting to marital infidelity and were aware of its consequences, they would likely have avoided such relationships.

In line with these statements, Khazaei's (2023) study showed that the perception of problems following divorce [which likely occurs after marital infidelity] is one of the factors that can affect the stability of couples' relationships. Giesen and Treas (2000) also believed that individuals who had more opportunities for betrayal and did not think about the consequences were more likely to engage in such behavior. On the other hand, creating and maintaining intimate relationships and fulfilling emotional and psychological needs during marriage is an art and skill that, apart from mental health and healthy initial experiences, requires logical perspectives, communication skills, life skills, and fulfilling specific duties, a significant portion of which forms an individual's family heritage (Fathollahi Motlaq et al., 2022). Furthermore, researches have shown that factors such as friendship and love, respect and appreciation, trust and loyalty, good communication, fulfilling sexual relations, shared values, cooperation and mutual support, enjoying time together, the ability to be flexible when faced with change, spirituality, belief in the institution of marriage, the assumption of a lasting life



(Bachand & Caron, 2001), personality traits and responsibility, intimacy and the quality of sexual relationships, quality of shared life and leisure activities, the harmony and adaptability of couples, commitment and fidelity, having values, shared culture and spiritual experiences, as well as occupational and financial issues, are cited as factors that contribute to satisfying and sustaining marriages (Karaei et al., 2016). Additionally, based on the extracted model, the statements made by participants in interviews regarding the role of interpersonal factors in preventing infidelity in virtual environments were highlighted in aspects that reinforce intimacy and effective communication, conflict management and disputes, as well as financial status. Communication factors particularly emphasize the situations that occur specifically between couples and predict their level of intimacy across different dimensions. How much partners can satisfy each other emotionally and sexually, remain committed to one another, or, in cases of deficiencies in these areas, establish effective communication to resolve issues, practice forgiveness towards one another, and ultimately trust each other can significantly affect the strength of their relationship.

In this context, it's worth noting that researchers report that disruptions in interpersonal relationships, such as emotional dissatisfaction, sexual dissatisfaction, and an increase in negative interactions compared to positive ones, are causes of infidelity. They believe that cheating arises from deficiencies in the couple's relationship and only occurs in boring and turbulent partnerships (Amato & Anthony, 2014). In this regard, Cohen's study (2005) showed that the likelihood of committing infidelity in relationships where couples have greater intimacy is lower than in couples who have less intimacy in their romantic relationships. According to Sternberg's theory (1986), intimacy is part of love that has reached a state of union, which includes commitment, passion, and intense interest. These three characteristics of marital intimacy are closely related to individuals' attitudes towards cheating. When it is said that the marital intimacy of couples is high, we essentially believe that they are committed to one another, and the next assumption is that intimate couples have a strong passion and interest in each other (Bakhtiari, Al-Sadat Hosseini, Arefi, & Afshar-Nia, 2021). On the other hand, when couples face serious problems, they tend to communicate less, and conflicts remain unresolved since less information is exchanged, and the likelihood of misunderstandings increases. Thus, diminishing the quantity and quality of communication may increase the possibility of establishing a connection with a third party outside the marriage. Therefore, communication allows couples to engage in practical conversations, address issues and conflicts, and exchange valuable knowledge.

One of the other factors related to preventing marital infidelity among couples is financial and economic status. Although findings in this area have been contradictory. For example, some researchers concluded in their studies that financial issues and the gaps resulting from them, due to unmet economic needs, may encourage individuals to seek income through illegal means (Fooladian, Baradaran Kashani, and Diari, 2020). Meanwhile, some findings have indicated that economic status cannot be considered a factor related to marital infidelity, as infidelity occurs among both high-income and low-income groups for various reasons (Stagaki et al., 2022). It seems that this issue makes sense in relation to the economic and income status of the study sample. In line

with the interviews conducted, participants also confirmed this notion, stating that their partner's good financial status and comfort led them to this behavior, while some mentioned that being economically pressured, they chose a third person to fulfill their living expenses and engaged with them.

Ultimately, the third factor in the model for preventing infidelity in the virtual space was the social factor. Based on the participants' statements in the research, indicators like strict governance of laws, promoting a healthy lifestyle, and creating joyful and healthy programs were mentioned as effective factors in preventing marital infidelity in the virtual environment. Nowadays, in the modern age, in addition to the changes brought about in the forms of marriage, the widespread presence of women in society, the established roles of women and men, the transformations in marital roles, the interactions between men and women with the opposite sex, and having both work-related and non-work-related relationships with them, as well as the general possibility of relationships with the opposite sex and the employment of women—especially the vast opportunities available for social mobility for both men and women (particularly women)—can create conditions where spouses become emotionally and sexually indifferent towards each other. Consequently, the desire for love towards another person can emerge in them, and if they find themselves in a situation to establish an extramarital relationship, due to the lack of enforceable norms regarding relationships with the opposite sex in Iranian society, they tend to engage in relationships. To support these points, it should be noted that the existence of laws such as polygamy and temporary marriage for men (Hadadi, Ansari Nejad, Aghajani, & Khaleqi Isfahani, 2016; Sharaf-al-din & Salehi Zadeh, 2016) and the dissolution of the taboo regarding marriage proposals from men to married women (Fooladian et al., 2020) can also be facilitating social factors for extramarital relationships. On the other hand, it can be said that the social and cultural context is a key factor in understanding how communication processes between husband-and-wife relationship. Social norms also carry implicit messages about the responsibilities of women and men in relationships.

Conclusion

These contextual messages can make fulfilling needs and preventing them more challenging (Schmidt, Green & Prouty, 2015). At the same time, the existence of virtual and tangible joyful, healthy, and diverse programs in society aiming to fill couples' leisure time can act as a preventative measure; as couples fill their time through these healthy programs, they channel their energy in the right direction, which reduces the inclination towards hidden and unhealthy recreational programs. Based on the findings of this research, it seems essential to examine the factors that threaten family peace and stability as the foundation of society. Despite its findings, the present study faced some limitations. One of these is that the findings were based on statements and interviews with participants, making it impossible to establish a cause-and-effect relationship in this area. Additionally, the participants in this study were men and women with experiences of infidelity in the online space from the city of Urmia, which may limit the applicability of the results to other cultures. To address the findings and limitations of

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the study, it is suggested that the current research be repeated in different contexts, cultures, and sample groups. At the same time, the results of this study can be used to help develop preventive and therapeutic programs regarding marital infidelity.

Disclosure Statements

On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

ORCID

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1972-2199>

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