



The Lived Experiences of Middle-Aged Couples Engaged in Infidelity: A Grounded Theory Study

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aimed to explore and conceptualize the lived experiences of middle-aged couples involved in marital infidelity using a grounded theory approach.

Methods and Materials: The research employed grounded theory methodology to systematically analyze the narratives of twelve men and women aged 40–65 years who sought counseling in family consultation centers in Shiraz and who had engaged in infidelity. Participants were selected through purposive sampling until theoretical saturation was achieved. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews served as the primary data collection method, supported by document reviews and field notes. Data analysis followed Strauss and Corbin's coding procedures—open, axial, and selective coding—with constant comparison and memo writing used to refine categories and develop a coherent theoretical model. Credibility was enhanced through member checking, peer debriefing, and triangulation of perspectives.

Findings: The analysis revealed a multi-layered model in which causal conditions such as unmet emotional needs, sexual dissatisfaction, negative spousal behaviors, monotony in marital life, reciprocal betrayal, and situational opportunities fostered extramarital involvement. Contextual factors such as traditional marriages, shifting cultural values, economic stress, low emotional literacy, and family interference further shaped the dynamics. Intervening conditions—including revenge motives, personality traits, spousal neglect, addiction, and social pressures—intensified vulnerability. Participants described a central phenomenon of inner void and dissatisfaction, leading to the search for substitute relationships. Their experiences reflected ambivalence, combining pleasure, novelty, and empowerment with guilt, stress, and anxiety. Strategies centered on secrecy management, deception, and regulation of relationships with third parties. Consequences included divorce, mistrust, emotional detachment, or continuation of hollow marriages, alongside psychological distress, identity disruption, and dependency on the third party.

Conclusion: The study highlights the paradoxical duality of infidelity as both a source of excitement and a trigger for guilt and long-term damage, underscoring the need for culturally sensitive interventions in therapy and social support systems.

Keywords: Infidelity; Middle-aged couples; Grounded theory; Marital dissatisfaction; Emotional needs; Secrecy; Consequences

1. Introduction

Infidelity has long been considered one of the most disruptive events in marital and intimate relationships, cutting across cultures, religions, and socioeconomic levels. It is defined as a breach of trust and commitment where one partner engages in emotional, sexual, or both types of relationships with someone outside the marital union. Although its forms and contexts vary, infidelity is often associated with profound consequences for couples, families, and even wider communities. The increasing prevalence of infidelity in different cultural settings has drawn significant scholarly attention to its antecedents, processes, and aftermaths (Beltrán-Morillas et al., 2023). Research in recent years has shown that infidelity is not only a moral or cultural issue but also a psychological and relational phenomenon that requires deeper theoretical and empirical exploration.

One important dimension of this phenomenon is its impact on psychological health and emotional well-being. Studies among adolescents and young adults demonstrate that early exposure to infidelity, either as perpetrators or victims, can trigger negative affect, hostility, and diminished psychological well-being (Beltrán-Morillas et al., 2023). Among female young adults in dating relationships, the experience of infidelity has been strongly linked with heightened psychological distress, underscoring the fact that the problem transcends marital contexts and is present even in premarital bonds (Budyningrum & Ariana, 2025). Similarly, empirical studies on children affected by parental infidelity emphasize the intergenerational consequences of such experiences, often resulting in adverse psychological development and long-term adjustment difficulties (Imtinan et al., 2023). These findings reveal that infidelity cannot be reduced to a matter of individual betrayal; rather, it is a social and familial disruption that reverberates across generations.

In middle-aged couples, infidelity tends to appear in the context of accumulated relational dissatisfaction, unmet needs, and developmental crises. Midlife has been described as a stage marked by identity re-evaluation and renewed desires for intimacy, which may predispose individuals to extramarital involvement (Taziki et al., 2024). For instance, the experience of midlife crisis, particularly in men, has been associated with increased tendencies toward infidelity, often mediated by declining marital intimacy (Taziki et al., 2024). Similarly, loneliness in its social-emotional dimension has been identified as a significant mediator in the relationship between marital dissatisfaction and online infidelity (Taheri

et al., 2024). These patterns point to the importance of understanding infidelity not only as a behavioral choice but as an outcome of complex psychological, relational, and social conditions that converge during midlife.

Personality and attachment characteristics also play a substantial role in shaping individuals' attitudes and behaviors toward infidelity. Research demonstrates that insecure attachment styles, combined with maladaptive personality traits, are predictive of permissive attitudes toward extramarital relationships, with coping strategies serving as mediating variables in this association (Khezrlou et al., 2024). Personality-driven factors such as sensation seeking, hostility, or narcissistic tendencies have further been linked to both online and offline forms of betrayal (Shrestha et al., 2023). These findings suggest that the inner psychological landscape of individuals cannot be separated from their likelihood of engaging in or tolerating infidelity.

Cultural and contextual factors remain equally influential in shaping how infidelity is understood and managed. In certain contexts, infidelity is increasingly normalized as part of shifting cultural values, particularly with the advent of social media and opportunities for interaction beyond traditional boundaries (Ngwasheng & Mbedzi, 2024). At the same time, infidelity is a major reason for marital breakdown and divorce, especially in societies where family honor and cohesion are closely tied to spousal fidelity (Putri, 2023). In countries with strong religious or traditional frameworks, infidelity may also be approached through pastoral or spiritual counseling, highlighting the interplay between cultural norms and therapeutic approaches (Jojonikus, 2024; Riada et al., 2024). These cross-cultural perspectives illustrate that infidelity is simultaneously a universal and culturally bounded experience, requiring contextual sensitivity in both research and practice.

The psychological and relational consequences of infidelity are often devastating, manifesting in emotional trauma, breakdown of trust, and long-lasting interpersonal wounds. Survivors frequently report symptoms similar to posttraumatic stress, such as intrusive thoughts, hypervigilance, and emotional dysregulation (Tauy & Perez, 2023). In many cases, couples remain locked in cycles of mistrust, suspicion, and resentment, which severely undermines marital quality (Nasab et al., 2022). Some couples, however, navigate infidelity as a turning point in their relationship, using the crisis to rebuild intimacy, rediscover passion, or renew commitment (Wade et al., 2022). This paradox underscores the dual nature of

infidelity: while it is destructive in most cases, it may also act as a catalyst for transformation under certain conditions.

Healing from infidelity is a multifaceted process that requires careful therapeutic intervention. Grounded theory studies highlight that couple healing involves stages of acknowledgment, confrontation of emotions, renegotiation of relationship norms, and eventual reconstruction of trust (Fife et al., 2023). These findings emphasize that therapy must address not only the immediate betrayal but also the broader relational dynamics that allowed it to occur. The management of information disclosure, differentiation of self, and renegotiation of boundaries are particularly central in how couples adapt to life after infidelity (Dębska & Wałęcka-Matyja, 2024). Therapeutic modalities such as schema therapy, acceptance and commitment therapy, and reality-based approaches have been tested with encouraging results, showing improvements in emotion regulation, communication, and marital quality among couples affected by infidelity (Khaneghahi et al., 2024; Nasab et al., 2022; Pasha et al., 2024; Yousefpouri et al., 2024). These interventions highlight the role of structured therapeutic engagement in addressing both the psychological wounds and relational fractures caused by betrayal.

Nevertheless, the dynamics of infidelity cannot be fully understood without considering the broader family context, particularly in middle-aged couples who often carry significant parental responsibilities. Research in East Asian contexts, for example, illustrates that parental worries about children's well-being are closely tied to overall psychological adjustment in middle-aged couples, suggesting that infidelity may disrupt not only spousal bonds but also parental roles (Hong et al., 2024). Infidelity-related divorce further compounds these challenges, as women often bear the dual burden of psychological distress and managing children's education under constrained circumstances (Putri, 2023). Such findings indicate that the ripple effects of infidelity extend far beyond the marital dyad, affecting the family ecosystem as a whole.

At a societal level, scholars have called for stronger social work interventions and preventive strategies to mitigate the consequences of infidelity. This includes fostering emotional literacy, teaching effective communication, and providing support systems for couples at risk (Ngwasheng & Mbedzi, 2024). Moral and spiritual counseling frameworks also remain relevant in addressing the existential crises triggered by betrayal, particularly in communities where faith plays a central role in family life (Jojonikus, 2024; Riada et al., 2024). These perspectives affirm that while

therapeutic interventions are crucial, broader community-based strategies are equally important in tackling the pervasive challenge of marital infidelity.

Taken together, the existing literature demonstrates that infidelity among middle-aged couples is shaped by a complex interplay of psychological, relational, cultural, and social factors. It emerges from unmet needs, personality vulnerabilities, contextual opportunities, and midlife challenges, while producing profound consequences for individuals, couples, children, and communities. Despite the destructive impact of infidelity, research also suggests that healing and transformation are possible through therapeutic engagement, emotional growth, and renewed commitment (Fife et al., 2023; Wade et al., 2022). Yet, much remains to be understood about the lived experiences of those directly involved in infidelity, particularly in middle-aged populations where developmental transitions and parental responsibilities intersect with marital challenges. To address this gap, the present study adopts a grounded theory approach to explore the lived experiences of middle-aged couples engaged in infidelity, with the aim of developing a deeper conceptual understanding of the phenomenon and its implications.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study was conducted using the grounded theory method, a qualitative research approach originally introduced by Glaser and Strauss in 1967. Grounded theory is particularly useful for exploring areas where little prior research exists and allows for the systematic development of concepts and theories directly from empirical data rather than relying on pre-existing frameworks. The target population consisted of men and women aged 40 to 65 years who had engaged in marital infidelity and were clients of family counseling centers in Shiraz. A purposive sampling strategy was applied to identify individuals who could provide rich and detailed insights into the phenomenon under investigation. Unlike probability-based sampling, purposive sampling is not intended to achieve representativeness but rather to select participants with direct, relevant experiences. A total of 12 individuals were interviewed, with the precise number determined by the principle of theoretical saturation, meaning that recruitment continued until no new concepts emerged and the data became repetitive.

Eligibility criteria for participation included being between 40 and 65 years old, having lived experiences of infidelity, attending family counseling centers in Shiraz, and being able and willing to articulate personal experiences in semi-structured interviews. Participants also needed to sign informed consent forms, accept confidentiality conditions, and agree to the protection of their privacy throughout the research process. Exclusion criteria included unwillingness to continue participation at any point, refusal to confirm interview transcripts during member checks, and inability to communicate experiences clearly due to severe psychological issues or communication disorders.

2.2. Measures

Primary data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews, supplemented by library research and focused group discussions where necessary. Semi-structured interviews, often used in phenomenological approaches, were chosen because they allow participants to narrate their lived experiences in detail while enabling the researcher to guide the discussion toward specific themes. The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions designed based on the research objectives and existing theoretical background. These questions were reviewed and refined through expert evaluation by three psychology professors, ensuring content and face validity.

The interview process began with one pilot participant to test the clarity and flow of the questions. Each subsequent interview was audio-recorded with the participant's consent and then transcribed verbatim. After two or three close readings of each transcript, the researcher engaged in preliminary coding and analysis to guide the next interview. This iterative process enhanced both the depth and focus of data collection. To strengthen trustworthiness, strategies such as prolonged engagement with participants, member checking, peer debriefing, and searching for negative cases were employed. Summaries of coded data and preliminary interpretations were shared with some participants to ensure alignment with their intended meanings. Moreover, the coding and categorization process was reviewed by qualitative research experts to minimize researcher bias.

To enhance transferability, the study provided rich descriptions of participants, context, and processes, allowing readers to judge the applicability of findings to similar contexts. Reliability was promoted through the creation of an audit trail, documenting all methodological decisions, interview procedures, coding steps, and analytical memos.

Confirmability was addressed by maintaining reflexive notes that recorded the researcher's assumptions, insights, and evolving interpretations, thereby ensuring that findings emerged from participants' accounts rather than the researcher's predispositions.

2.3. Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the grounded theory methodology proposed by Strauss and Corbin (1998). The process unfolded concurrently with data collection and proceeded through three systematic stages of coding: open, axial, and selective. During open coding, raw data from transcripts and field notes were broken down into smaller units of meaning, and initial conceptual labels were assigned. These codes were often derived directly from participants' language to preserve authenticity. Through constant comparison, codes with similar meanings were grouped into broader conceptual categories.

Axial coding involved identifying relationships between these categories and integrating them within Strauss and Corbin's coding paradigm, which includes causal conditions, the central phenomenon, contextual and intervening conditions, strategies, and consequences. This stage provided a more structured framework to explain how various categories were connected and how participants understood and managed their experiences of infidelity.

Finally, selective coding aimed to integrate all categories around a central or core category, representing the main theme that captured the essence of participants' lived experiences. At this stage, an analytic storyline was constructed, weaving together all identified categories and their interrelationships into a coherent emerging theory. Negative or contradictory cases were also incorporated to refine and strengthen the explanatory power of the findings.

Throughout the analytic process, constant comparative analysis and memo writing were applied. Analytical memos recorded the researcher's evolving thoughts, questions, and theoretical insights, serving as a bridge between raw data and conceptual theory. The process continued until a well-developed, data-driven theoretical model emerged, providing an integrated explanation of the lived experiences of middle-aged couples engaged in infidelity.

3. Findings and Results

In the open coding stage, the raw interview data were carefully broken down into smaller units of meaning,

allowing the extraction of initial concepts from the narratives of participants. Each meaningful sentence or expression was treated as a distinct semantic unit and assigned a conceptual code, either in participants' own words or with more analytical phrasing. The analysis revealed four broad themes emerging from participants' lived experiences of infidelity: causes and underlying conditions, types and experiences of extramarital relations, strategies of concealment and management, and personal and social perspectives on infidelity. Within these categories, recurrent issues were identified such as emotional and sexual dissatisfaction, neglect by one's spouse, personal tendencies toward novelty seeking and revenge, exposure to opportunities through work or social media, as well as feelings of guilt, excitement, and anxiety during the extramarital relationship. Participants also described diverse strategies for hiding their affairs, varied spousal reactions once infidelity was discovered, and conflicting decisions regarding continuation or termination of their marriages.

In the axial coding stage, these open codes were systematically connected into broader conceptual categories to explain the structural and causal relationships underlying infidelity among middle-aged couples. Following Strauss and Corbin's paradigm model, the categories were grouped into causal conditions, contextual and intervening conditions, the central phenomenon, strategies, and consequences. The analysis identified four major axial codes: individual and internal factors, spouse-related factors, situational and environmental factors, and the experiences and consequences of infidelity. Each axial code is described in more detail below.

The first axial code, individual and internal factors, encompassed a wide range of unmet needs, personality traits, and personal histories that contributed to the emergence of infidelity. Many participants emphasized emotional and sexual deprivation within their marriages, reporting feelings of invisibility, lack of affection, and absence of romantic intimacy. These unfulfilled needs often created a sense of emptiness that drove them toward alternative sources of emotional and sexual satisfaction. Personality characteristics such as novelty seeking, power-seeking, and revenge orientation were also prevalent, as some participants pursued affairs either to break the monotony of routine life or as retaliation for a partner's betrayal. A smaller but significant subset described reconnecting with a former romantic partner, framing the renewed relationship as a continuation of unresolved love rather than a purely opportunistic affair.

The second axial code, spouse-related factors, highlighted the influence of a partner's behaviors and characteristics on the decision to engage in infidelity. Participants described negative partner behaviors including excessive jealousy, social irresponsibility, addiction, and general neglect of the marital relationship. A recurring complaint was that spouses failed to maintain their physical appearance, with some citing weight gain or poor self-care as a factor that diminished attraction. Another central theme was reciprocal infidelity, where participants justified their own extramarital involvement as a direct response to their spouse's betrayal. These accounts suggest that partner-related dynamics played a dual role in both undermining marital satisfaction and legitimizing infidelity as a form of retaliation or coping.

The third axial code, situational and environmental factors, captured the external contexts and opportunities that facilitated the initiation of affairs. Participants reported that many encounters with third parties occurred in specific social or professional settings such as workplaces, universities, or social gatherings, while virtual environments like social media platforms further expanded opportunities for extramarital connections. The absence of spousal supervision was frequently mentioned, with factors such as work-related absences or substance use by a partner creating conditions of reduced accountability. These situational openings provided both the time and the cover that allowed participants to pursue infidelity with less risk of immediate discovery.

The fourth axial code, experiences and consequences of infidelity, revealed the complex emotional and relational aftermath of extramarital involvement. Participants consistently reported contradictory emotions, simultaneously experiencing pleasure, excitement, and a sense of empowerment alongside guilt, anxiety, and fear of exposure. These mixed feelings often intensified over time as the affair deepened. The impact on the marital relationship was equally diverse, ranging from increased hostility and emotional distance to, in some cases, improved behaviors by the unfaithful spouse driven by guilt. Long-term consequences were particularly significant, with participants describing dependency on the third party, emotional detachment from their spouse, or eventual divorce. For others, life continued within the marriage, but with a notable absence of affection, intimacy, or sexual relations, leaving the relationship hollow yet formally intact.

Table 1

Results of Qualitative Coding

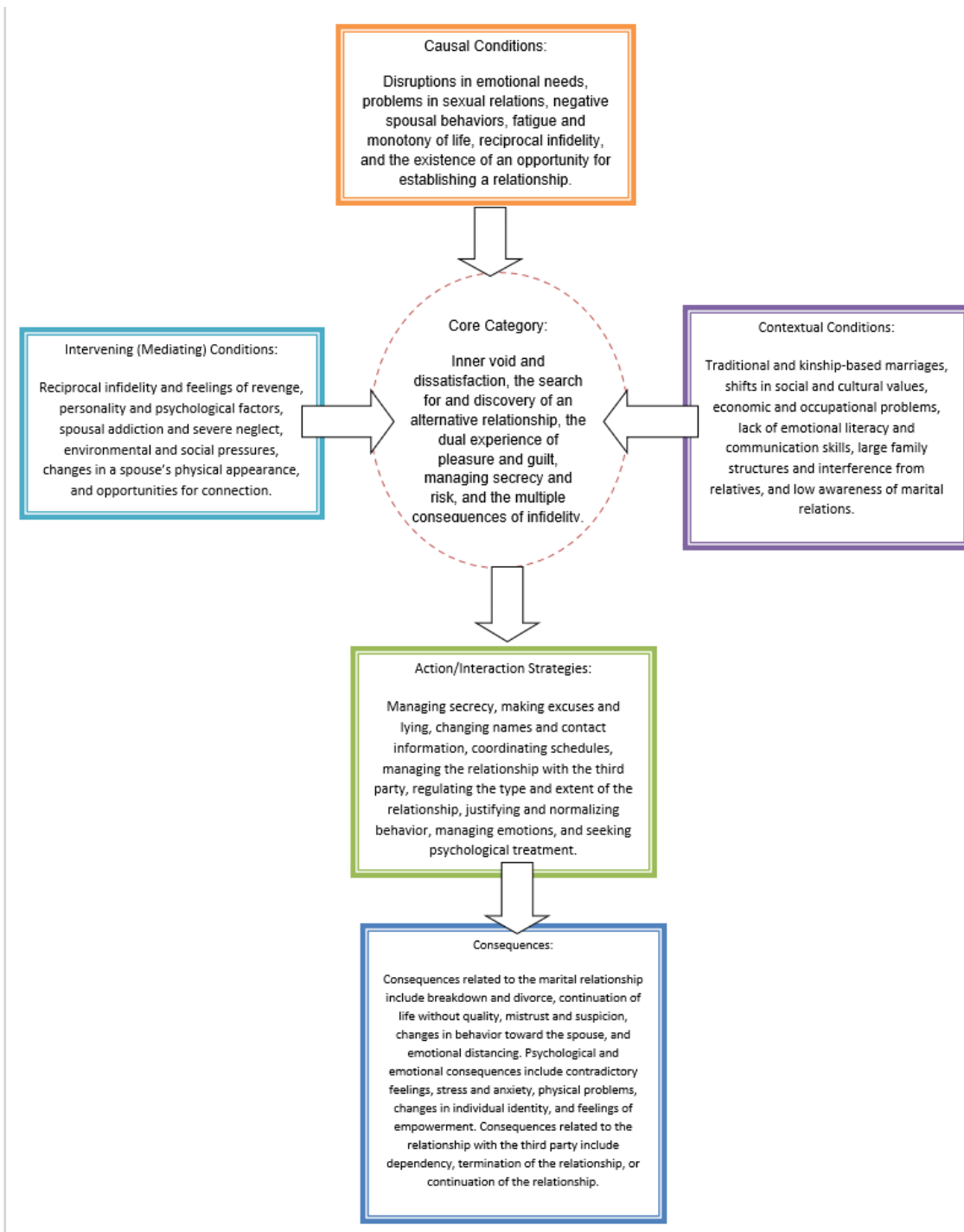
Code	Category	Theme
Unmet emotional, sexual, and psychological needs, including lack of affection, invisibility, absence of romance, and sexual dissatisfaction	Individual and internal factors	Internal and external driving forces
Traits such as novelty seeking and excitement seeking, power orientation, revenge motivation, and fatigue from monotony; rekindled past love	Personality and behavioral traits	
Negative spousal behaviors including addiction, excessive jealousy, social irresponsibility, and neglect; lack of self-care and weight gain; reciprocal infidelity as a response to partner’s betrayal	Spouse-related factors	
Situational opportunities for meeting others (workplace, university, social media, gatherings); absence of spousal supervision due to work or addiction	Situational and environmental factors	
Emotional and sexual coldness, neglect, frequent quarrels, monotony, and dissatisfaction in marital life	Deficiencies in marital relationships	
Infidelity perceived as widespread in society; social contributors such as economic problems, lack of affection, low emotional literacy, and cultural pressures	Views on infidelity	Contextual conditions, strategies, and consequences
Concealment strategies such as phone passwords, silencing notifications, using absences as opportunities; spouse’s reactions after disclosure (anger, insults, complaints, crying, indifference, forgiveness); decision-making regarding future of marriage (continuation or separation)	Management and coping with infidelity	
Mixed emotions including confusion, guilt, initial regret, pleasure, excitement, dependency on the third party, empowerment, and anxiety from secrecy	Psychological feelings and consequences	
Emotional distancing from spouse, aggression, and in some cases improved behavior due to guilt	Impact on relationships	
Dependency on the third party, divorce from spouse, or continuation of marriage without emotional or sexual intimacy	Long-term consequences	

Table 1 presents the integrated results of qualitative coding, showing how initial open codes were condensed into broader categories and themes. The findings reveal that infidelity among middle-aged couples arises from a complex interplay of individual, relational, and contextual factors. Individual-level dynamics included unmet emotional and sexual needs as well as personality traits such as novelty seeking, revenge motivation, or the revival of past romances. Partner-related issues such as addiction, neglect, and reciprocal betrayal also played a central role. At the situational level, opportunities created by social environments, virtual networks, and lack of spousal

oversight provided the context for extramarital encounters. Participants described diverse coping strategies ranging from concealment to confrontation, while also sharing their perspectives on infidelity as a socially widespread phenomenon driven by structural and cultural pressures. The emotional and relational consequences were deeply ambivalent, combining pleasure, empowerment, and attachment with guilt, anxiety, and marital coldness. Ultimately, the long-term outcomes diverged between dependency on the third party, divorce, or hollow continuation of the marital bond, underscoring the multifaceted nature of infidelity experiences.

Figure 1

Final Model



The grounded theory results of this study demonstrate that the lived experiences of middle-aged couples engaged in infidelity form a complex and multi-layered phenomenon shaped by causal, contextual, and intervening conditions, as well as by participants' strategies and the diverse consequences that follow. At the causal level, the most

frequently cited triggers of infidelity included disruptions in emotional needs, sexual dissatisfaction, negative spousal behaviors such as addiction or neglect, fatigue and monotony in marital life, reciprocal betrayal, and the availability of social or virtual opportunities for connection. These conditions gave rise to a central set of core

phenomena, particularly an inner void and dissatisfaction that motivated individuals to seek compensatory relationships outside the marriage, the discovery and pursuit of alternative bonds, the simultaneous experience of pleasure and guilt, and the conscious management of secrecy and relational risks. Contextual conditions further shaped these experiences, with participants pointing to traditional and kinship-based marriages, changing social and cultural values, economic and occupational stress, low emotional literacy and communication skills, large family structures and interference from relatives, and insufficient awareness of marital needs as structural backdrops that facilitated infidelity. Intervening conditions such as retaliatory motives, personality traits like novelty-seeking and power orientation, spousal addiction and severe neglect, social pressures, and changes in a partner's appearance intensified the dynamics of betrayal and often accelerated the turn toward extramarital involvement. In response, participants described a range of strategies, from elaborate concealment tactics—such as digital secrecy, lying, excuses, and coordination of schedules—to careful management of relationships with third parties, including limiting contact, normalizing the affair, or seeking psychological coping methods. These strategies, however, inevitably led to diverse consequences: in the marital sphere, outcomes included divorce, continuation of life without intimacy, mistrust, aggression, and emotional distance, with occasional cases of improved behavior out of guilt. Psychologically, participants reported contradictory emotions of excitement and power alongside guilt, anxiety, stress-related physical problems, identity disruption, and at times a heightened sense of attractiveness. Finally, in relation to third parties, outcomes ranged from deep dependency to eventual separation or, in a few cases, continuation of the relationship, sometimes formalized in temporary arrangements. Taken together, the grounded theory model highlights infidelity not as a singular act but as a dynamic process in which unmet needs, structural contexts, personal traits, and relational strategies interact to produce a spectrum of outcomes that profoundly reshape both individual identity and marital life.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study explored the lived experiences of middle-aged couples engaged in infidelity, applying a grounded theory approach to uncover the complex interplay of individual, relational, and social conditions that lead to and sustain extramarital involvement. The findings

demonstrated that infidelity is not a single event but a multifaceted process that evolves through causal, contextual, and intervening conditions, managed by specific strategies of secrecy and relationship regulation, and resulting in diverse psychological, relational, and social consequences. Central to these experiences was the recurring theme of unmet emotional and sexual needs within marriage, coupled with contextual pressures and opportunities that facilitated betrayal. Participants described infidelity as simultaneously a source of pleasure, empowerment, and novelty, and as a generator of guilt, anxiety, and long-term relational damage.

One of the most significant findings of this study was the centrality of unmet emotional needs and relational dissatisfaction as causal conditions for infidelity. Participants repeatedly emphasized neglect, emotional coldness, and lack of intimacy as primary motivators for seeking external relationships. This is consistent with prior studies that highlight the role of emotional deprivation in fostering infidelity. For example, adolescents exposed to emotionally unsatisfying relationships often report higher susceptibility to betrayal behaviors and negative affect (Beltrán-Morillas et al., 2023). Similarly, midlife couples experiencing loneliness and relational emptiness are more vulnerable to seeking alternative sources of intimacy (Taheri et al., 2024). The alignment between our findings and these prior works underscores that the roots of infidelity are frequently found in relational deficiencies, making preventive interventions that target emotional connection crucial.

Sexual dissatisfaction also emerged as a prominent cause of infidelity in the accounts of participants. Reports of sexual coldness, lack of marital intimacy, and frustration with routine sexual life were strong motivators for seeking extramarital partners. This is consistent with previous research demonstrating that men facing midlife crises are particularly prone to infidelity when marital intimacy declines, often seeking novelty as compensation (Taziki et al., 2024). Psychological studies have also indicated that sexual deprivation creates pathways toward hostility, negative affect, and destabilization of well-being, which can in turn facilitate infidelity (Beltrán-Morillas et al., 2023). The findings therefore highlight the interdependence between emotional and sexual satisfaction in preventing betrayal, aligning with theories that consider intimacy a multidimensional construct integrating both emotional closeness and sexual fulfillment.

Another critical dimension revealed by the study was the role of spousal behaviors and relational dynamics in driving

betrayal. Negative spousal behaviors, including addiction, excessive jealousy, neglect of appearance, and frequent conflicts, were cited as major contributing factors. These findings are in agreement with research showing that infidelity is often perceived as a reaction to partner dysfunctions, such as neglect or betrayal (Khaneghahi et al., 2024). Moreover, reciprocal infidelity—where participants engaged in extramarital involvement in response to their spouse's betrayal—was a recurring theme. This aligns with findings from therapeutic studies that show couples often frame infidelity as a retaliatory mechanism when trust has already been breached (Nasab et al., 2022). Such reciprocal cycles suggest that infidelity cannot be treated as an isolated act but must be understood as embedded in broader relational patterns of dissatisfaction, conflict, and mistrust.

Situational and environmental opportunities were equally important in shaping infidelity experiences. Many participants described how work environments, social gatherings, or virtual spaces like social media facilitated encounters with third parties. The proliferation of digital technology has been shown to increase opportunities for extramarital connections, especially through online platforms that blur traditional boundaries of intimacy (Taheri et al., 2024). Cross-cultural studies have confirmed similar patterns, demonstrating that infidelity often occurs not only due to internal relational factors but also because of external conditions that lower the barriers to engagement (Ngwasheng & Mbedzi, 2024). In societies experiencing rapid cultural change, the normalization of online and offline extramarital interactions makes such opportunities even more accessible, thereby magnifying the risks for vulnerable couples.

The dual emotional experience of infidelity—pleasure mixed with guilt—was one of the most striking themes in participants' narratives. They described feeling both excitement and empowerment while simultaneously battling anxiety, guilt, and shame. This finding resonates with research that conceptualizes infidelity as a paradoxical phenomenon, where betrayal generates both positive reinforcement through novelty and negative reinforcement through fear of discovery (Shrestha et al., 2023). Similarly, grounded theory studies of couples healing from betrayal highlight that ambivalence is central to how individuals navigate infidelity, often oscillating between attachment to the extramarital partner and guilt toward the spouse (Fife et al., 2023). The findings confirm that infidelity must be understood as an emotional contradiction rather than a straightforward pursuit of pleasure.

The strategies participants employed to conceal their infidelity highlight the intentional and effortful management of secrecy. Accounts included hiding messages, creating digital passwords, coordinating time with the third party, and justifying absences with fabricated stories. These findings align with research on information management after infidelity, which emphasizes that decisions about disclosure and secrecy are crucial in shaping how couples adapt after betrayal (Dębska & Wałęcka-Matyja, 2024). In some cases, participants noted that secrecy was normalized over time, with guilt diminishing and betrayal becoming part of routine life. Such normalization has been documented in cultural studies where infidelity is embedded within broader patterns of shifting moral values (Jojonikus, 2024; Riada et al., 2024). Taken together, these findings reveal the centrality of concealment strategies both in sustaining affairs and in shaping their psychological consequences.

The consequences of infidelity reported by participants were profound and multifaceted. At the marital level, many couples experienced divorce, mistrust, or continuation of relationships without intimacy. Others reported temporary improvements in behavior driven by guilt, though these were not sustainable in the long term. Such findings mirror prior studies that highlight both destructive outcomes, such as divorce and long-term mistrust (Nasab et al., 2022), and paradoxical outcomes, such as renewed love or temporary reconnection after betrayal (Wade et al., 2022). Psychologically, participants described contradictory emotions, heightened anxiety, stress-related physical problems, and changes in identity, reflecting earlier research that equates betrayal with post-traumatic symptomology (Tayy & Perez, 2023). These findings confirm that infidelity is not merely a relational rupture but also a psychological crisis with long-lasting consequences.

The intergenerational effects of infidelity were another crucial dimension. While not the direct focus of this study, participants indirectly highlighted how infidelity strained parental roles and family functioning. Prior research supports this concern, showing that parental betrayal can severely impact children's psychological development and well-being (Imtinan et al., 2023). In addition, studies on middle-aged couples emphasize that infidelity and parental worries often intersect, with betrayal adding to the burden of caring for children during a demanding life stage (Hong et al., 2024). Divorce related to betrayal further amplifies these challenges, leaving women particularly vulnerable to psychological and socioeconomic hardships that extend to children's education and development (Putri, 2023). These

findings underline that infidelity has ripple effects that extend beyond the couple, disrupting entire family systems.

Therapeutic perspectives were also reflected in participants' narratives, particularly concerning efforts to repair relationships or cope with betrayal. Some couples sought counseling, while others expressed awareness of therapeutic approaches. The effectiveness of structured interventions such as schema therapy (Pasha et al., 2024), acceptance and commitment therapy (Khaneghahi et al., 2024; Yousefpouri et al., 2024), and other integrative methods (Nasab et al., 2022) has been well documented. Such interventions target emotion regulation, communication patterns, and attitudes toward betrayal, providing tools for couples to navigate the aftermath of infidelity. Grounded theory research has also emphasized the need for tailored therapeutic frameworks that address both the immediate wounds and the broader relational contexts (Fife et al., 2023). This aligns with participants' recognition that betrayal cannot be addressed superficially but requires comprehensive engagement with both psychological and relational dimensions.

The findings also emphasize the cultural and moral dimensions of infidelity, which were evident in participants' views about its prevalence and normalization. Many considered betrayal widespread, reflecting broader social changes in values and lifestyles. This is consistent with research noting that infidelity is increasingly perceived as common, particularly in societies experiencing modernization and exposure to global cultural influences (Ngwasheng & Mbedzi, 2024). Pastoral and moral counseling frameworks are increasingly relevant in such contexts, providing not only therapeutic but also ethical and spiritual guidance for couples navigating betrayal (Jojonikus, 2024; Riada et al., 2024). These perspectives underscore that interventions must be culturally grounded, sensitive to moral frameworks, and capable of addressing both individual pain and collective values.

Taken together, the findings of this study contribute to a deeper understanding of infidelity among middle-aged couples by situating betrayal within a dynamic interplay of unmet needs, relational dysfunctions, situational opportunities, concealment strategies, and long-term consequences. By aligning these results with prior research, it becomes clear that infidelity is a universal yet context-dependent phenomenon. It is shaped by psychological vulnerabilities, marital dynamics, and cultural transformations, while producing devastating but sometimes transformative consequences for couples and families. The

study adds to the growing body of grounded theory research by highlighting the lived complexities of betrayal and providing insights that may inform therapeutic, social, and moral interventions aimed at prevention and healing.

5. Suggestions and Limitations

Although the study provides rich qualitative insights, several limitations must be acknowledged. The sample size was relatively small, focusing on twelve participants from counseling centers in Shiraz. While this allowed for in-depth exploration of experiences, it limits the generalizability of findings to other populations and cultural contexts. The use of self-report interviews also raises concerns about bias, as participants may have underreported or distorted sensitive information due to shame, fear, or memory lapses. Moreover, the study focused exclusively on middle-aged individuals, excluding younger or older populations whose experiences of infidelity may differ significantly. The cross-sectional design further restricted the ability to capture long-term trajectories of betrayal and recovery. Finally, cultural specificity must be considered: while the findings resonate with global literature, they are shaped by the social, cultural, and religious context of Iran, limiting direct transferability to other societies.

Future studies could expand on these findings by including larger and more diverse samples across different cultural and demographic contexts. Longitudinal research would be particularly valuable to trace the evolving consequences of infidelity over time, including the processes of reconciliation, divorce, or continued secrecy. Comparative studies between middle-aged, younger, and older populations could provide insights into developmental differences in how betrayal is experienced and managed. Additionally, quantitative approaches could complement qualitative findings by measuring the prevalence of identified patterns, such as secrecy strategies, emotional ambivalence, and intergenerational effects. Research that integrates children's and spouses' perspectives would also enrich the understanding of how betrayal reverberates within families. Finally, intervention-based research evaluating the effectiveness of therapeutic models tailored to cultural contexts would help bridge the gap between descriptive understanding and practical application.

For practice, the findings highlight the urgent need for preventive and therapeutic interventions targeting emotional and sexual intimacy in marriages. Counselors and therapists should prioritize helping couples build emotional literacy,

improve communication skills, and address unmet needs before they escalate into betrayal. Given the role of secrecy and digital opportunities, practitioners should also incorporate discussions on boundaries and responsible technology use into couple therapy. Community-based programs, including social work initiatives, can play a vital role in raising awareness and reducing stigma around seeking help for relational problems. In cultural contexts where moral and spiritual frameworks are central, collaboration with religious and pastoral counselors may enhance the relevance and acceptance of interventions. Overall, practice should adopt a holistic, culturally sensitive, and systemic approach, recognizing that infidelity affects not only couples but entire families and communities.

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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