

# Factors Affecting Extramarital Relationships in Iran: A Meta-Synthesis Study

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### Article Info

#### Article type:

Original Article

#### How to cite this article:

Akbarzadeh, H., Goudarzi, M., & Keshavarz Afshar, H. (2026). Factors Affecting Extramarital Relationships in Iran: A Meta-Synthesis Study. *Applied Family Therapy Journal*, 7(6) 1-13.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.61838/kman.aftj.5629>



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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** The present study aimed to develop a comprehensive model of the factors influencing extramarital relationships in Iran through a meta-synthesis of Iranian research conducted between 2012 and 2022.

**Methods and Materials:** This study employed a qualitative meta-synthesis approach to integrate and analyze findings from previous Iranian studies on extramarital relationships. The statistical population consisted of all domestic research published between 2012 and 2022 that addressed factors associated with extramarital relationships among married couples. A purposive sampling strategy was used, and a systematic search was conducted across major scientific databases, including Google Scholar, Noormags, IranDoc, Magiran, the Scientific Information Database (SID), and the Comprehensive Portal of Humanities. Following screening and eligibility assessment, 37 relevant studies were selected for analysis. Data were extracted, coded, categorized, and synthesized using qualitative content analysis procedures. To ensure the trustworthiness and validity of the findings, expert evaluation was conducted, and the resulting model was assessed using Cohen's Kappa coefficient.

**Findings:** The meta-synthesis identified five major categories of factors affecting extramarital relationships in Iran, comprising 13 dimensions and 46 underlying concepts. The first category, personality factors, included the dimensions of spouses' personality traits and interpersonal differences. The second category, individual factors, encompassed sexual and physical issues, emotional difficulties, low self-esteem and negative self-concept, and marital commitment. The third category, family factors, consisted of family-related problems and marital life crises. The fourth category, moral-religious factors, included marriage-related issues, unconventional behaviors, and religious and ethical beliefs. Finally, cultural-social factors comprised inadequate boundary maintenance and the influence of media and virtual social spaces. The proposed conceptual model demonstrated acceptable validity, with an expert agreement coefficient (Kappa) of 0.71, confirming the reliability and coherence of the framework.

**Conclusion:** The findings indicate that extramarital relationships in Iran are influenced by a complex interaction of personality, individual, familial, moral-religious, and socio-cultural factors. The multidimensional nature of these relationships suggests that prevention and intervention efforts should address both intrapersonal and contextual determinants.

**Keywords:** Extramarital Relationships; Married Couples; Meta-Synthesis; Model Development; Marital Commitment; Family Counseling.

## 1. Introduction

Extramarital relationships constitute one of the most complex and destabilizing phenomena in marital and family psychology because they are not limited to a single behavioral act but involve a multidimensional process shaped by individual vulnerabilities, dyadic dissatisfaction, family interaction patterns, socio-cultural norms, moral beliefs, and changing media environments. In Iranian society, where marriage is traditionally understood not only as a private emotional bond but also as a social, religious, legal, and familial institution, extramarital involvement can produce extensive psychological, interpersonal, familial, and social consequences. The experience of infidelity may undermine the perceived security of the marital bond, intensify mistrust, activate cycles of anger and aggression, damage self-concept, and threaten the continuity of family functioning. Accordingly, the study of extramarital relationships requires an integrative framework capable of organizing scattered findings from psychological, sociological, cultural, and family studies into a coherent explanatory model (Ahmadi et al., 2024; Golbarian et al., 2025; Salehnia et al., 2025; Sharifi Saei & Azadarmaki, 2021).

A substantial body of Iranian research has shown that extramarital relationships emerge within a network of marital, emotional, sexual, relational, and contextual factors rather than from a single isolated cause. Early qualitative studies among couples referring to family courts emphasized dissatisfaction, unmet emotional needs, poor communication, conflict, and weakening of marital commitment as central themes in the formation of infidelity (Habibi Asgarabad & Haji Heydari, 2015). Sociological investigations have also demonstrated that the potential for marital infidelity is associated with broader social and relational factors, including changes in values, opportunity structures, and marital dissatisfaction (Ejtehadi & Vahedi, 2017). Phenomenological studies further indicate that participants often describe infidelity as a gradual process that develops through emotional distancing, perceived neglect, and erosion of intimacy rather than as a sudden and accidental behavior (Firouzjaeian & Ghadiri, 2017; Zhianpour & Baharlooei, 2020). Therefore, the phenomenon should be conceptualized as a dynamic process influenced by both personal agency and contextual conditions.

From a psychological perspective, personality characteristics and intrapersonal vulnerabilities are frequently identified as important antecedents of

extramarital tendencies. Studies have linked readiness for infidelity with dark personality traits, moral disengagement, deficits in self-control, impaired executive functions, maladaptive schemas, and insecure attachment patterns (Basharpour & Miri, 2018; Khorramabadi et al., 2018; Malek Asgar et al., 2020). These findings suggest that individuals' cognitive, emotional, and personality structures may affect how they interpret marital dissatisfaction, regulate impulses, and respond to relational frustration. International evidence has similarly identified psychological predictors of extradyadic involvement, including motivational processes, self-esteem, and satisfaction with extradyadic relationships (Beltrán-Morillas et al., 2022; Hackathorn & Ashdown, 2021; Negash et al., 2016). Research on self-esteem and coping after infidelity also shows that individual self-evaluation can influence both vulnerability to relational injury and post-infidelity adjustment (Shrout & Weigel, 2020). Thus, personality and self-related variables should be considered central components in any model of extramarital relationships.

Emotional and relational dissatisfaction are among the most recurrent themes in Iranian studies of marital infidelity. Research on emotional divorce has shown that couples may remain legally married while experiencing profound emotional detachment, loneliness, and lack of intimacy, creating conditions in which extramarital emotional or sexual involvement becomes more probable (Sabbaghi et al., 2016). Studies of women harmed by their spouses' extramarital relationships have highlighted the destructive psychological effects of betrayal, including emotional pain, humiliation, anger, insecurity, and loss of trust (Amani et al., 2019). Qualitative research on men's and women's experiences similarly shows that the absence of empathy, emotional support, sexual satisfaction, and communicative responsiveness can facilitate the emergence of extramarital bonds (Afshari Kashanian et al., 2018; Choupani et al., 2019; Ghafourian Norouzi et al., 2018; Jamali et al., 2020). In this regard, marital infidelity can be interpreted not only as a violation of commitment but also as a symptom of unresolved relational needs and deteriorated marital quality.

Sexual factors are also repeatedly emphasized in the literature. Studies have reported that sexual dissatisfaction, sexual neglect, physical or sexual dysfunction, variety-seeking, and unmet sexual expectations can contribute to extramarital involvement among married individuals (Abuzari et al., 2018; Mohammadmirzaei et al., 2018; Samadi Kashan et al., 2019). Research on sexual self-concept has further shown that the way individuals perceive

their sexual identity, desirability, and competence may be associated with a tendency toward extramarital relationships, particularly when emotion regulation functions as a mediating process (Shalchian Pourkhaljan et al., 2022). These findings are consistent with international studies distinguishing emotional and physical forms of infidelity and showing that different characteristics of infidelity may predict different marital outcomes, including divorce (Harris, 2018; Yuan & Weiser, 2019). Therefore, sexual issues should be understood within the broader context of marital intimacy, self-concept, communication, and cultural norms surrounding sexuality.

Family-related factors constitute another important domain in the formation of extramarital relationships. Iranian studies have identified family-of-origin problems, domestic violence, financial strain, addiction, life crises, and occupational pressures as contextual factors that can weaken the marital bond and increase vulnerability to infidelity (Khaledian et al., 2023; Khodadadi Sangdeh & Farjad Tehrani, 2020; Nasiri et al., 2022). Research focusing on men's infidelity from women's perspectives indicates that contextual and family pressures may interact with personal dissatisfaction and opportunity structures (Jamali et al., 2020; Khodadadi Sangdeh & Farjad Tehrani, 2020). In couples affected by addiction, marital instability and emotional deprivation may become especially salient, as substance dependence can disrupt responsibility, intimacy, and trust within the family system (Khaledian et al., 2023). Studies on family emotional support and marital quality of life further suggest that supportive family climates may protect marital relationships by strengthening psychological security and relational satisfaction (Salehnia et al., 2025). Consequently, family context should be included as a distinct but interconnected domain in explanatory models of extramarital relationships.

Marital commitment and marital conflict are also central constructs in understanding infidelity. Structural studies have indicated that marital commitment is influenced by communication beliefs, early maladaptive schemas, couple communication patterns, sexual satisfaction, and conflict resolution styles (Mohammadi et al., 2020). Intervention-oriented research has shown that programs focused on successful marriage, choice theory-based couple therapy, and culturally grounded family models can reduce marital conflicts and strengthen relational functioning (Golbarian et al., 2025; Goodarzi & Ghozaadi, 2022; Salari Zare et al., 2022). Similarly, emotion regulation training has been shown to improve family functioning and marital

commitment among couples with low resilience (Gholamikia et al., 2023). These findings imply that extramarital relationships should be examined not only through risk factors but also through protective mechanisms such as commitment, emotion regulation, conflict resolution, and family resilience.

Moral, religious, and ethical dimensions are particularly significant in the Iranian context because marital relationships are embedded in cultural expectations concerning fidelity, modesty, commitment, gender roles, and family honor. Studies based on Islamic sources have identified moral beliefs, religious attitudes, and ethical boundaries as important factors in understanding extramarital relationships (Nargesi et al., 2019). Research on moral foundations and marital satisfaction suggests that moral structures may mediate the relationship between power dynamics and marital adjustment, thereby influencing the stability of marital relationships (Alibakhshi, 2024). The role of moral disengagement in infidelity readiness also demonstrates that individuals may cognitively justify violations of marital norms when ethical self-regulation is weakened (Basharpour & Miri, 2018). Therefore, ethical and religious beliefs should not be treated as peripheral variables; rather, they form part of the normative structure through which couples interpret loyalty, betrayal, obligation, and relational boundaries.

Socio-cultural change has also transformed the contexts in which extramarital relationships occur. Studies on Tehran and other Iranian cities have emphasized the role of urbanization, changing gender relations, social networks, economic pressures, and shifting attitudes toward marriage and divorce in shaping the possibility of extramarital relationships (Kanaani & Alijani, 2021; Sarabi et al., 2022; Sharafoddin & Salehizadeh, 2016; Tajbakhsh, 2021). Research among married youth in Kermanshah indicates that extramarital relationships are associated with both personal dissatisfaction and broader socio-cultural conditions, including changing expectations of intimacy and marriage (Sarabi et al., 2022). Similarly, studies in Rasht and Izeh have shown that social factors, peer environments, and local cultural conditions may influence tendencies toward extramarital relationships (Kanaani & Alijani, 2021; Seydi Avandi, 2022). These findings highlight the need to examine extramarital relationships as both psychological and socio-cultural phenomena.

The expansion of digital media has introduced new pathways for emotional and sexual boundary violations. Iranian research has shown that emerging media, including

the internet, satellite media, mobile phones, and social networking platforms, can contribute to emotional infidelity by increasing access, anonymity, communication opportunities, and exposure to alternative relational scripts (Roustaei et al., 2016). International research on internet affairs similarly demonstrates that partners may perceive online infidelity as deeply injurious even when physical sexual contact has not occurred, because secrecy, emotional intimacy, and perceived betrayal violate relational trust (Vossler & Moller, 2020). In Iranian qualitative and futures-oriented analyses, virtual spaces are frequently discussed as contexts that facilitate boundary crossing and normalize unconventional relational behaviors (Afshari Kermani, 2020; Tamarchi et al., 2021). Therefore, contemporary models of extramarital relationships must include media and virtual spaces as independent contextual factors rather than treating them merely as communication tools.

Gendered experiences of infidelity have received considerable attention in Iranian research. Studies of women with extramarital relationship experiences show that unmet emotional needs, marital dissatisfaction, lack of attention, violence, and perceived neglect are recurrent explanatory themes (Ahmadi Ardakani et al., 2021; Bahmanesh & Rezaei, 2020; Masaali, 2022). Research on harmed men's perspectives regarding women's extramarital bonds has similarly shown that men interpret women's infidelity within contexts of marital disconnection, emotional deprivation, and changing gender roles (Avani & Zarei Mahmoudabadi, 2020). Studies of married men's extramarital relationships point to sexual dissatisfaction, emotional distance, opportunity, and social normalization as important factors (Hosseini et al., 2019; Nikbakhsh et al., 2021). These findings indicate that although the core dimensions of infidelity may be shared across genders, men's and women's pathways into extramarital relationships may differ in emphasis, meaning, and social interpretation.

The consequences of extramarital relationships are also profound and multidimensional. Research has shown that infidelity may result in psychological distress, aggression, family instability, divorce, distrust, and social harm (Ahmadi et al., 2024; Ghaem Mohammadi et al., 2023; Sadeghi et al., 2024). Studies on the cycle of aggression among Iranian couples suggest that unresolved marital conflict can escalate into patterns of emotional and behavioral harm that further deteriorate the relationship (Ahmadi et al., 2024). Research on post-divorce adjustment also demonstrates that the consequences of marital breakdown require structured psychological support and

culturally adapted intervention protocols (Sadeghi et al., 2024). Furthermore, studies on marital conflict and shame indicate that negative self-concept and shame may intensify relational conflict, suggesting that emotional self-evaluation is important both before and after relational betrayal (Gholami et al., 2024). Thus, understanding the antecedents of extramarital relationships can inform preventive counseling, marital enrichment, and post-crisis intervention.

Despite the richness of existing studies, the literature remains fragmented. Some studies emphasize individual and personality-based explanations, whereas others focus on sexual dissatisfaction, emotional deprivation, family crises, socio-cultural transformation, media influence, moral beliefs, or gendered experiences (Eslamzadeh, 2019; Khorramdel & Hajjar, 2019; Lashgari, 2018; Sharifi Saei & Azadarmaki, 2021). Delphi, review, meta-analysis, and meta-synthesis studies have attempted to organize these factors, yet the diversity of concepts and methodological approaches indicates the need for a comprehensive synthesis that can integrate findings across qualitative studies and generate a coherent model (Eslamzadeh, 2019; Khorramdel & Hajjar, 2019; Sharifi Saei & Azadarmaki, 2021). Additionally, cultural representations of marital infidelity in Iranian cinema show that infidelity is not only a private family problem but also a social issue reflected in public discourse, collective anxieties, and cultural narratives about marriage, gender, and modernity (Afrasiabi & Razavi, 2021). Such evidence supports the necessity of a meta-synthesis approach capable of capturing the psychological, relational, familial, ethical, and socio-cultural layers of the phenomenon.

Accordingly, the present study aimed to identify and synthesize the factors affecting extramarital relationships in Iran and to present a comprehensive meta-synthesis model based on previous Iranian research.

## 2. Methods and Materials

The present study was based on the meta-synthesis method, which involves integrating the characteristics and specific factors identified in the research literature. This approach, sometimes referred to as qualitative meta-analysis, seeks to analyze the studies it encompasses, resolve inconsistencies within the literature, integrate findings, and identify key themes for future research (Cooper & Hedges, 2009, p. 119). In this method, knowledge derived from various and sometimes fragmented studies that may be relevant to the practical needs of a specific field is collected.

Subsequently, this knowledge is synthesized, reorganized, evaluated, and interpreted in a manner that corresponds to contemporary needs. The objective is not merely to aggregate previous knowledge but rather to integrate diverse findings within a specific framework that generates new relationships among concepts (Short, 2008, p. 119). Accordingly, the scope of the present study encompassed all valid domestic scientific studies concerning factors affecting extramarital relationships among Iranian couples.

To achieve the study objective, the seven-step procedure proposed by Sandelowski and Barroso (2007) was employed, including: (1) defining the research question, (2) identifying and retrieving studies, (3) determining inclusion

and exclusion criteria, (4) extracting findings, (5) analyzing and synthesizing qualitative findings, (6) assessing the validity and reliability of results, and (7) presenting the findings.

### 3. Findings and Results

#### Step One: Defining the Research Question

The present study investigated the factors affecting extramarital relationships in Iran. This objective was operationalized through the following research question: What are the factors affecting extramarital relationships in Iran?

**Table 1**

*Research Questions*

| Question Formulation Indicator | Question Specification                                                                                                                                                                            |
|--------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| What? (Phenomenon under study) | What are the factors affecting extramarital relationships in Iran based on a meta-synthesis approach?                                                                                             |
| Who? (Population under study)  | Multiple databases and search engines were utilized, including Google Scholar, Noormags, IranDoc, Magiran, the Scientific Information Database (SID), and the Comprehensive Portal of Humanities. |
| When? (Time limitation)        | The articles and theses examined in this study were published between 2012 and 2022.                                                                                                              |
| How? (Study retrieval method)  | The study employed documentary analysis to analyze secondary data sources.                                                                                                                        |

#### Step Two: Identification and Retrieval of Studies

In this study, various databases, journals, and search engines covering the period from 2012 to 2022 were examined to identify and collect relevant studies. Studies were retrieved through a systematic search of Google Scholar, Noormags, IranDoc, Magiran, the Scientific Information Database (SID), and the Comprehensive Portal of Humanities using the keywords marriage, marital relationships, extramarital relationships, infidelity, sexual problems, economic problems, family, cultural problems, spouse/couples, interest, and empathy.

#### Step Three: Determining Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria (Source Selection and Sample Size)

After formulating the research question and search strategy, decisions were made regarding which studies should be included or excluded based on the objectives and scope of the study. Inclusion criteria consisted of studies containing keywords related to extramarital relationships, qualitative research conducted in Iran between 2012 and 2022, studies focusing on extramarital relationships, and studies conducted using scientific research methods. Exclusion criteria included inaccessible studies, studies

irrelevant in terms of content or time period, and publications lacking scientific validity. Accordingly, out of 1,343 identified studies, application of the inclusion and exclusion criteria resulted in a final sample of 37 studies relevant to the research topic.

#### Step Four: Extraction of Findings

Table 2 presents the components of factors affecting extramarital relationships among married Iranian individuals identified from previous theoretical and empirical studies. Based on the findings of prior qualitative research, 146 concepts were extracted and identified.

#### Step Five: Analysis and Synthesis of Qualitative Findings

Using the meta-synthesis approach, information from the selected studies was first extracted and then analyzed through conceptual analysis to identify key themes. The identified concepts were categorized into broader categories to determine relationships among them. Ultimately, 46 concepts grouped into 13 dimensions were identified as factors affecting extramarital relationships. These dimensions are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2**

*Core Dimensions and Expert Opinions Regarding Concepts and Categories*

| Concepts                                                                                                                                                                                   | Dimensions                                        | Agree | Disagree | Relevance (%) | Approved/Not Approved |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|-------|----------|---------------|-----------------------|
| Sexual experience; marital dissatisfaction; physical/sexual dysfunction; sexual variety-seeking; sexual neglect                                                                            | Couples' Sexual Issues                            | 9     | 1        | 90%           | Approved              |
| Emotional deprivation; emotional divorce; need for attention from spouse; comparison with other couples; inadequate attention to spouse                                                    | Couples' Emotional Issues and Problems            | 9     | 1        | 90%           | Approved              |
| Unethical behavior toward spouse; family history of infidelity; favorable environmental conditions for unconventional behavior; revenge motives                                            | Unconventional Behaviors of Couples               | 10    | 0        | 100%          | Approved              |
| Differences in individual, cultural-social, and economic issues; marital incompatibility; mismatch of goals and expectations                                                               | Couples' Differences                              | 10    | 0        | 100%          | Approved              |
| Low differentiation of self; lack of skill and responsibility maturity; power-seeking tendencies                                                                                           | Failure to Respect Marital Boundaries             | 10    | 0        | 100%          | Approved              |
| Negative self-concept; low self-esteem; compensation for personal deficiencies; need for reinforcement and support from friends; influence of early maladaptive schemas; attachment styles | Lack of Self-Confidence and Negative Self-Concept | 8     | 2        | 80%           | Approved              |
| Life crises; addiction; excessive occupational engagement                                                                                                                                  | Marital Life Crises                               | 9     | 1        | 90%           | Approved              |
| Gullibility and unquestioning trust in spouse; personality disorders; rumination; perceptions of marriage                                                                                  | Couples' Personality Characteristics              | 8     | 2        | 80%           | Approved              |
| Type of marriage; marital continuity; divorce taboo                                                                                                                                        | Marriage-Related Issues                           | 9     | 1        | 90%           | Approved              |
| Family-of-origin problems; financial status; domestic violence                                                                                                                             | Family-Related Issues                             | 9     | 1        | 90%           | Approved              |
| Legitimation of male sexual freedom; incorrect and extreme prejudices                                                                                                                      | Religious-Ethical Beliefs of Couples              | 8     | 2        | 80%           | Approved              |
| Lack of honesty in marital relationships; lack of trust; failure to fulfill marital commitments                                                                                            | Couples' Commitments                              | 10    | 0        | 100%          | Approved              |
| Pornography; inappropriate use of social networking platforms                                                                                                                              | Impact of Media and Virtual Spaces on Couples     | 10    | 0        | 100%          | Approved              |

### Step Six: Assessing Validity and Reliability of Findings

At this stage, the researcher utilized nearly all six quality assessment methods discussed previously. To verify the extracted concepts, the researcher compared personal interpretations with the opinions of experts.

The categories developed in Table 3 were presented to ten specialists who were asked to indicate their agreement or

disagreement with each core dimension and coding scheme developed by the researcher based on previous studies. The experts agreed with all categories and concepts identified by the researcher. Furthermore, Cohen's Kappa coefficient was employed to assess the validity and quality of the developed meta-synthesis model. The results are presented in Table 3.

**Table 3**

*Consistency Between the Extracted Model (Categories) and Expert Opinions*

| Statistic | Kappa Value | Kappa Index | Standard Error | Significance Level |
|-----------|-------------|-------------|----------------|--------------------|
| Kappa     | 0.004       | 0.71        | 0.025          | 0.90               |

### Step Seven: Presentation of Findings

Finally, selective coding was employed to present the proposed theoretical framework in the form of a conceptual model.

**Research Question:** What are the factors affecting extramarital relationships in Iran?

Following the meta-synthesis of domestic studies, the findings illustrated in Model 1 demonstrate the dimensions

of factors affecting extramarital relationships in Iran. These dimensions were derived from the qualitative studies reviewed and validated through expert opinions. Based on the proposed model, the factors influencing extramarital relationships among couples were categorized into five major factors and 13 components derived from 46 concepts.

#### Personality Factors:

(1) Couples' personality characteristics;

(2) Couples' differences.

**Individual Factors:**

- (1) Couples' sexual/physical issues;
- (2) Couples' emotional issues and problems;
- (3) Lack of self-confidence/negative self-concept;
- (4) Couples' commitments.

**Family Factors:**

- (1) Family-related issues;

(2) Marital life crises.

**Moral–Religious Factors:**

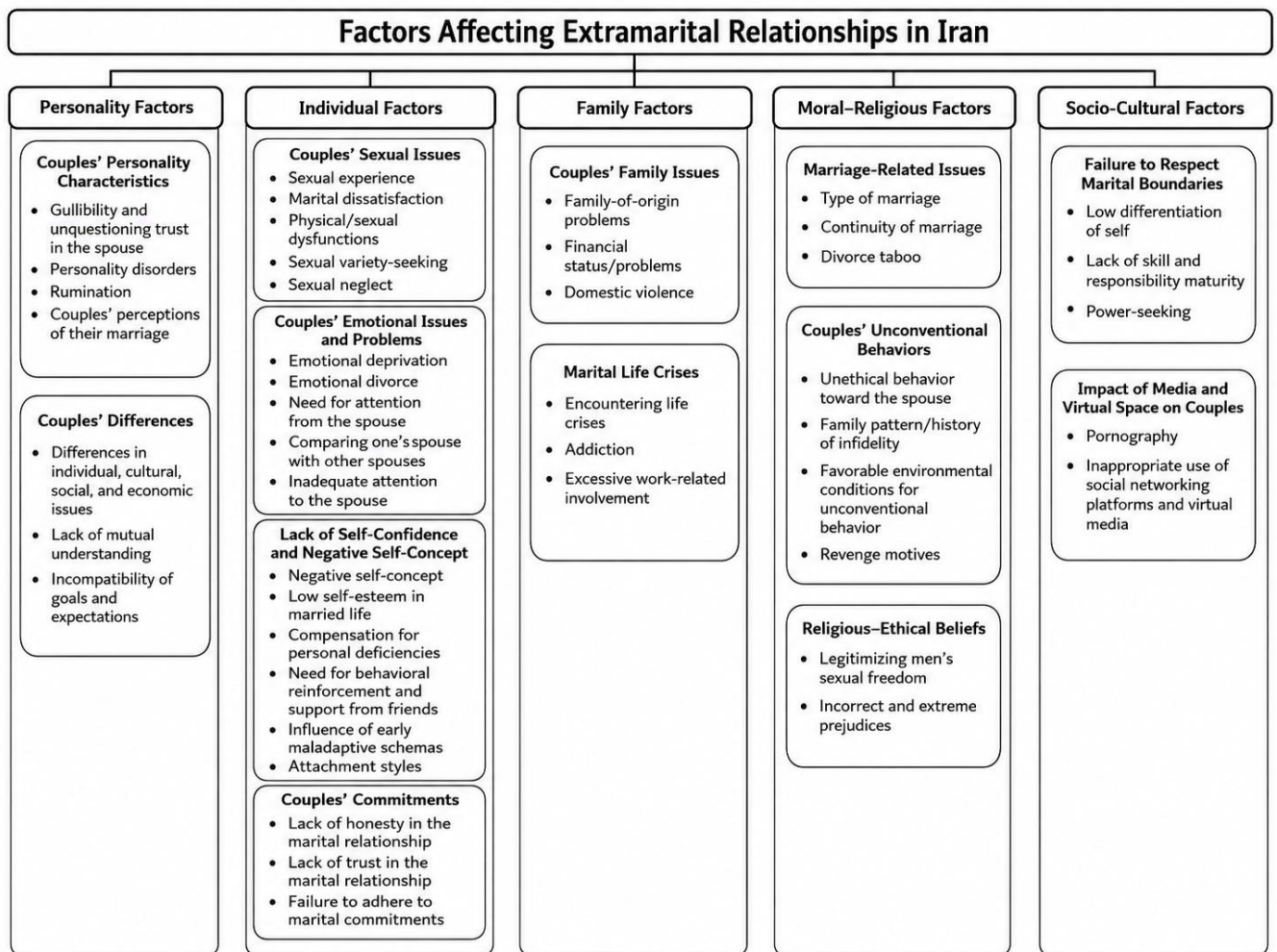
- (1) Marriage-related issues;
- (2) Unconventional behaviors of couples;
- (3) Religious–ethical beliefs.

**Socio-Cultural Factors:**

- (1) Failure to respect marital boundaries;
- (2) Impact of media and virtual social spaces on couples.

**Figure 1**

*Conceptual model for identifying factors affecting extramarital relationships among married Iranian individuals using the meta-synthesis approach*



#### 4. Discussion

The present meta-synthesis study aimed to identify and integrate the factors affecting extramarital relationships in Iran based on qualitative studies conducted between 2012 and 2022. The findings resulted in a comprehensive model consisting of five major categories of factors, including personality factors, individual factors, family factors, moral–

religious factors, and socio-cultural factors, encompassing 13 dimensions and 46 concepts. The validity of the proposed model was confirmed through expert evaluation and Cohen's Kappa coefficient, indicating substantial agreement among experts. Overall, the findings suggest that extramarital relationships in Iran cannot be explained by a single determinant; rather, they emerge from the interaction

of multiple psychological, relational, familial, cultural, and moral influences.

One of the major findings of the study was the identification of personality factors, including couples' personality characteristics and interpersonal differences, as important contributors to extramarital relationships. This finding is consistent with studies emphasizing the role of personality traits, maladaptive schemas, executive dysfunctions, self-control deficits, and dark personality characteristics in the development of infidelity tendencies (Basharpour & Miri, 2018; Khorramabadi et al., 2018; Malek Asgar et al., 2020). Individuals with poor impulse regulation, ineffective emotional processing, distorted cognitions, or maladaptive interpersonal beliefs may be more vulnerable to seeking emotional or sexual fulfillment outside marriage. Research has also demonstrated that perceptions of marriage, personality disorders, rumination, and cognitive distortions contribute to dissatisfaction and relational instability (Heydari Mamadi et al., 2019; Hosseini et al., 2019). International studies similarly suggest that motivations for infidelity are associated with personality processes, self-esteem regulation, and the search for emotional validation (Beltrán-Morillas et al., 2022; Hackathorn & Ashdown, 2021). Furthermore, recent evidence linking self-concept and shame to marital conflict supports the argument that negative self-perceptions and emotional vulnerabilities may create conditions conducive to relational dissatisfaction and extramarital involvement (Gholami et al., 2024). Therefore, personality characteristics appear to function as underlying predispositions that shape individuals' responses to marital stressors and relational dissatisfaction.

The findings also revealed the importance of individual factors, including sexual and physical issues, emotional problems, negative self-concept, lack of self-confidence, and marital commitment. Among these dimensions, sexual dissatisfaction and unmet sexual needs were repeatedly identified across studies as central explanatory factors. This result aligns with numerous qualitative investigations that highlighted sexual neglect, physical or sexual dysfunction, lack of intimacy, and variety-seeking behaviors as significant contributors to infidelity (Abuzari et al., 2018; Mohammadmirzaei et al., 2018; Samadi Kashan et al., 2019). Sexual self-concept has also been associated with tendencies toward extramarital relationships, particularly when individuals experience difficulty regulating emotional reactions to dissatisfaction within marriage (Shalchian Pourkhaljan et al., 2022). These findings support the notion

that sexual satisfaction serves not merely as a biological need but also as a relational mechanism through which intimacy, validation, and emotional connection are maintained.

The emotional dimension identified in the present model further emphasizes the role of emotional deprivation, emotional divorce, lack of attention, and unmet affectional needs. This finding is strongly supported by studies demonstrating that emotional disconnection often precedes extramarital involvement (Firouzjaeian & Ghadiri, 2017; Sabbaghi et al., 2016). Women and men involved in extramarital relationships frequently describe experiences of loneliness, neglect, rejection, and a lack of emotional responsiveness from their spouses (Ahmadi Ardakani et al., 2021; Amani et al., 2019; Bahmanesh & Rezaei, 2020). Emotional dissatisfaction appears to weaken marital attachment and increase openness to alternative sources of intimacy. Similar findings have been reported internationally, where emotional motivations often emerge as stronger predictors of extradyadic involvement than purely sexual motivations (Hackathorn & Ashdown, 2021; Vossler & Moller, 2020). Consequently, strengthening emotional intimacy may represent one of the most important protective factors against marital infidelity.

Another important dimension identified in this study was lack of self-confidence and negative self-concept. The extracted concepts included low self-esteem, negative self-image, attachment insecurities, need for external validation, and the influence of early maladaptive schemas. These findings are consistent with studies indicating that individuals with insecure attachment patterns and fragile self-esteem may seek affirmation and emotional support through relationships outside marriage (Beltrán-Morillas et al., 2022; Malek Asgar et al., 2020). Research has shown that self-esteem moderates responses to relational stress and betrayal, affecting both vulnerability to infidelity and coping with its consequences (Shrout & Weigel, 2020). Moreover, contemporary studies have demonstrated that negative self-concept is associated with marital conflict and relational instability, which may indirectly increase susceptibility to extramarital involvement (Gholami et al., 2024). These findings suggest that interventions targeting self-worth, attachment security, and emotional regulation may play a preventive role.

The dimension of marital commitment emerged as another critical factor in the present model. Couples who fail to maintain honesty, trust, and commitment appear to be at greater risk for relational boundary violations. This finding

corresponds with studies demonstrating that marital commitment is closely linked to communication patterns, conflict resolution styles, sexual satisfaction, and relational beliefs (Mohammadi et al., 2020). Research examining family functioning and resilience has similarly shown that effective emotion regulation and adaptive communication strengthen commitment and reduce marital instability (Gholamikia et al., 2023). Intervention studies have further demonstrated that educational and therapeutic programs aimed at improving marital skills can significantly reduce conflict and enhance commitment among couples (Golbarian et al., 2025; Goodarzi & Ghobaadi, 2022; Salari Zare et al., 2022). Thus, commitment appears to function as both a protective factor and a mediator between marital dissatisfaction and extramarital involvement.

The present study additionally identified family factors, including family-related issues and marital life crises, as influential components. Financial difficulties, family-of-origin problems, domestic violence, addiction, occupational stress, and major life crises were among the concepts repeatedly identified across qualitative studies. These findings support previous research indicating that family stressors undermine marital satisfaction and increase vulnerability to infidelity (Jamali et al., 2020; Khodadadi Sangdeh & Farjad Tehrani, 2020; Nasiri et al., 2022). Substance dependence and chronic relational conflict can create emotional distance and weaken mutual support between spouses, thereby increasing the likelihood of seeking alternative sources of fulfillment (Khaledian et al., 2023). The role of emotional support within family systems has also been highlighted in recent research demonstrating that supportive relational environments promote marital quality and resilience (Salehnia et al., 2025). Therefore, family factors represent both contextual risks and potential sources of protection.

The moral–religious category identified in the model included marriage-related issues, unconventional behaviors, and religious–ethical beliefs. This finding reflects the unique cultural context of Iranian society, where marriage is strongly embedded within moral and religious value systems. Studies grounded in Islamic perspectives have emphasized that religious beliefs and ethical principles influence attitudes toward fidelity, marital obligations, and sexual boundaries (Nargesi et al., 2019). Research on moral disengagement has similarly demonstrated that cognitive justifications for unethical behavior may facilitate readiness for infidelity (Basharpour & Miri, 2018). Furthermore, studies examining moral foundations suggest that ethical

values influence marital satisfaction and relational functioning through their effects on power dynamics and interpersonal interactions (Alibakhshi, 2024). These findings indicate that moral and religious beliefs may operate both as protective resources and as frameworks through which individuals interpret marital behavior.

Socio-cultural factors emerged as the fifth major category in the model and included inadequate marital boundaries and the influence of media and virtual environments. This finding reflects growing evidence that broader social transformations have altered opportunities, expectations, and norms related to intimate relationships. Sociological studies have emphasized the effects of modernization, changing gender roles, urbanization, and shifting attitudes toward marriage on infidelity tendencies (Ejtehad & Vahedi, 2017; Kanaani & Alijani, 2021; Sharafoddin & Salehizadeh, 2016). Research among married youth has similarly highlighted the role of social pressures and changing cultural expectations in shaping attitudes toward extramarital relationships (Sarabi et al., 2022; Seydi Avandi, 2022). The emergence of digital technologies has further transformed relational boundaries by increasing accessibility, anonymity, and opportunities for emotional and sexual interactions outside marriage (Afshari Kermani, 2020; Roustaei et al., 2016). Studies on internet infidelity indicate that online relationships can produce emotional consequences comparable to those associated with physical affairs (Vossler & Moller, 2020). Consequently, socio-cultural and technological factors must be considered integral components of contemporary explanations of marital infidelity.

## 5. Conclusion

The comprehensive nature of the present model is consistent with previous synthesis studies that have emphasized the multifactorial nature of marital infidelity (Eslamzadeh, 2019; Sharifi Saei & Azadarmaki, 2021). However, the current study extends previous knowledge by integrating a large body of qualitative evidence into a coherent framework consisting of five major factors, thirteen dimensions, and forty-six concepts. The findings support ecological and systemic perspectives suggesting that infidelity results from the interaction of intrapersonal vulnerabilities, relationship dynamics, family contexts, cultural norms, and environmental opportunities rather than from isolated individual deficits. This interpretation is further supported by studies examining contextual factors of

infidelity among women, men, and couples across different regions of Iran (Afshari Kashanian et al., 2018; Choupani et al., 2019; Ghafourian Norouzi et al., 2018; Kanaani & Alijani, 2021; Tajbakhsh, 2021; Tamarchi et al., 2021). The convergence of findings across diverse methodologies and populations strengthens confidence in the explanatory value of the proposed model.

## 6. Limitations & Suggestions

The findings of this study should be interpreted in light of several limitations. First, the meta-synthesis relied exclusively on published Iranian studies, which may have excluded relevant unpublished research and gray literature. Second, the study was limited to qualitative investigations conducted during a specific time period, potentially restricting the inclusion of emerging trends and newer forms of relational behavior influenced by technological developments. Third, differences in methodological quality, sampling strategies, and reporting practices across the included studies may have affected the consistency of extracted concepts. Finally, because the findings were synthesized from secondary data rather than direct participant experiences, caution should be exercised when generalizing the model to all Iranian couples.

Future studies are encouraged to test the proposed model quantitatively using large and diverse samples from different regions of the country. Longitudinal research examining the developmental pathways leading to extramarital involvement would provide valuable insight into causal mechanisms. Comparative studies investigating gender differences, generational variations, and cultural subgroups may further clarify the relative importance of specific factors. Researchers may also explore the impact of emerging technologies, social media platforms, and virtual relationships on marital commitment and fidelity. Additionally, intervention studies designed around the dimensions identified in the present model could help determine which factors are most responsive to prevention and treatment efforts.

Counselors, psychologists, and family therapists should consider the multidimensional nature of extramarital relationships when designing assessment and intervention programs. Premarital education should emphasize communication skills, emotional intimacy, sexual satisfaction, conflict management, commitment, and healthy boundary setting. Family-centered interventions should address relational stressors, family-of-origin issues, and life

crises that may increase vulnerability to infidelity. Educational programs aimed at strengthening moral responsibility, emotional regulation, self-esteem, and digital literacy may also contribute to the prevention of extramarital involvement. Policymakers and family-support organizations may utilize the findings of this study to develop culturally appropriate prevention programs that strengthen marital stability and promote healthy family functioning.

## Acknowledgments

We would like to express our appreciation and gratitude to all those who cooperated in carrying out this study.

## Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

## Ethical Considerations

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

## Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

## Funding

This research was carried out independently with personal funding and without the financial support of any governmental or private institution or organization.

## Authors' Contributions

All authors have equally contributed 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.

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