

# Explaining the Causes of Women's Tendency Toward Extramarital Relationships in Yazd: A Grounded Theory Study

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** This study aimed to explain the causes of women's tendency toward extramarital relationships in Yazd using a qualitative grounded theory approach.

**Methods and Materials:** This qualitative study was conducted using a grounded theory design. The study population included women aged 25 to 45 years living in Yazd who had experienced extramarital relationships or showed a tendency toward such relationships, as well as experts in family studies and Islamic psychology and relevant Islamic sources. Participants were selected through purposive sampling. The final sample consisted of 25 women and 7 experts. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews designed to explore personal, relational, psychological, cultural, and religious dimensions associated with women's tendency toward extramarital relationships. Data analysis was conducted based on the Strauss and Corbin grounded theory strategy using MAXQDA 2020 software.

**Findings:** The analytical findings showed that, after open coding, 280 initial codes were extracted from the interviews and textual data. These codes were organized into 42 subcategories and 14 main categories. Through axial and selective coding, the central category was identified as "tendency toward extramarital relationships as a way of redefining identity and responding to unmet needs." This core category indicated that women's tendency toward extramarital relationships was not shaped by a single factor, but rather emerged from the interaction of unmet emotional, psychological, relational, identity-related, and contextual needs. The grounded theory model suggested that extramarital tendency may function as a compensatory response to perceived deprivation, lack of recognition, emotional neglect, weakened marital intimacy, and the search for self-worth and identity reconstruction.

**Conclusion:** The findings indicate that identifying the causes of women's tendency toward extramarital relationships can enhance awareness among women, family specialists, counselors, and intervention providers. Understanding these causes may support the development of more effective preventive and therapeutic interventions in the field of marital and family relationships.

**Keywords:** Extramarital relationships; women; grounded theory; qualitative research; Yazd

## 1. Introduction

Extramarital relationships constitute one of the most complex and consequential phenomena in marital and family studies because they involve the intersection of individual desire, relational dissatisfaction, moral conflict, cultural regulation, digital opportunity, and social stigma. Although infidelity has historically been studied as a violation of marital commitment, recent scholarship increasingly conceptualizes it as a multidimensional process that cannot be reduced to sexual behavior alone. It may include emotional, sexual, financial, online, communicative, and symbolic forms of boundary transgression, each of which can destabilize the marital bond and challenge the normative foundations of family life (Garbinsky et al., 2020; Rosaline & Kasaraneni, 2024; Warach & Josephs, 2021). In this regard, women's tendency toward extramarital relationships requires particular scholarly attention, not because it can be detached from broader marital dynamics, but because women's experiences of infidelity are often shaped by gendered expectations, emotional deprivation, restricted autonomy, marital dissatisfaction, social judgment, and culturally specific moral frameworks (Costa et al., 2019; Mayeli, 2024; Shaleha, 2021).

The family, as a primary site of emotional bonding, socialization, identity formation, and moral regulation, is highly vulnerable to relational disruptions. Marital infidelity may weaken trust, intensify conflict, produce attachment-related trauma, and threaten marital stability, while also influencing children's emotional development and family interaction patterns (Kalfin et al., 2024; Warach & Josephs, 2021; Yan, 2023). Studies have shown that extramarital sexual relations are associated with instability in marital relationships, reduced cohesion, and increased vulnerability to separation or divorce, especially when infidelity becomes embedded in ongoing emotional disengagement or unresolved conflict (Ibrahim, 2021; Okeno et al., 2025; Yuan & Weiser, 2019). Nevertheless, the meaning of infidelity differs across sociocultural contexts. In some settings, infidelity is interpreted primarily as a moral violation; in others, it is narrated as a response to unmet emotional needs, lack of intimacy, social pressure, or a desire for identity reconstruction (Garavand & Ahmadi, 2025; Rezaei, 2024; Tajbakhsh et al., 2020).

In the Iranian sociocultural context, marital infidelity is not merely a private relational issue but also a socially and morally charged phenomenon. Marriage is commonly embedded in expectations of family honor, gendered

responsibility, religious commitment, and preservation of marital appearance. Therefore, women's involvement in or tendency toward extramarital relationships often carries intense psychological, social, and spiritual consequences. Previous Iranian studies have identified a range of contextual and relational factors associated with marital infidelity, including emotional deprivation, marital dissatisfaction, lack of spousal intimacy, unresolved conflicts, weak communication, social restriction, early maladaptive schemas, and pressure from traditional family structures (Afshari Kashanian et al., 2019; Sharifi Saei & Azad Armaki, 2021; Zarei Mahmoudabadi, 2021). These findings suggest that extramarital relationships should be understood within the relational ecology of marriage rather than as isolated individual misconduct.

A growing body of qualitative research has attempted to explain how marital infidelity is formed. Grounded theory and phenomenological studies have shown that the process of infidelity often begins with emotional distance, dissatisfaction, perceived neglect, loneliness, or the feeling of being unseen within the marital relationship. Over time, these conditions may become connected to opportunities for alternative emotional or sexual validation, particularly in environments where communication with the spouse is weak and where the individual experiences limited psychological resources for coping with frustration (Tajbakhsh et al., 2020; Tamarchi et al., 2021; Zomorodian & Akbari, 2021). In women, this process may be intensified by experiences of emotional invisibility, role confinement, loss of personal identity, and the perception that the marital relationship has become primarily duty-based rather than emotionally reciprocal (Garavand & Ahmadi, 2025; Mayeli, 2024; Shaleha, 2021).

From a psychological perspective, intrapersonal variables also play an important role in the tendency toward infidelity. Personality traits, sensation seeking, self-control, attachment insecurity, emotional regulation problems, and early maladaptive schemas can shape how individuals respond to marital dissatisfaction and external opportunities for intimacy (Demarchli et al., 2023; Golkar et al., 2022; Grigoropoulos, 2024). For instance, lower self-control and higher sensation seeking may increase vulnerability to extramarital involvement, especially when virtual networks provide accessible, low-cost, and emotionally stimulating opportunities for communication (Demarchli et al., 2023). Similarly, early maladaptive schemas may make some individuals more sensitive to rejection, abandonment, emotional deprivation, or insufficient recognition, thereby

increasing the likelihood that they seek compensatory validation outside the marital relationship (Golkar et al., 2022). In this sense, women's tendency toward extramarital relationships may reflect not only current marital dissatisfaction but also deeper psychological patterns formed across the life course.

Religious attitude and spiritual meaning are also central to understanding women's tendency toward extramarital relationships in societies where religion plays a significant role in moral identity and marital expectations. Religious commitment may function as a protective factor by reinforcing self-restraint, marital responsibility, and moral boundaries; however, when a woman experiences a conflict between emotional needs and religious norms, infidelity may be accompanied by guilt, shame, spiritual distress, and crisis of faith (Khosravi et al., 2019; Williams, 2018). In treatment and recovery contexts, spirituality may help couples reconstruct meaning and justice after an affair, but it may also intensify distress when individuals interpret their behavior as moral failure or spiritual collapse (Warach & Josephs, 2021; Williams, 2018). Therefore, religious and spiritual dimensions should not be treated as peripheral variables; rather, they are part of the interpretive structure through which many women understand marital commitment, betrayal, guilt, and repair.

Digital technologies have introduced new pathways for extramarital involvement. Online platforms, social networks, virtual communication, and remote work conditions have changed the boundaries of intimacy and increased opportunities for emotional and sexual contact beyond marriage (Roman, 2020; Rosaline & Kasaraneni, 2024). Internet-mediated infidelity can be justified by some individuals as less serious than physical infidelity, yet it may produce similar emotional consequences because it involves secrecy, emotional investment, fantasy, and the reallocation of attention away from the marital relationship (Roman, 2020). The growth of virtual networks also makes it easier for individuals to access validation, romantic attention, and sexualized interaction in contexts where direct social contact may be restricted or morally risky (Demarchli et al., 2023; Rosaline & Kasaraneni, 2024). For women who experience loneliness, emotional neglect, or limited autonomy, cyberspace may become a compensatory environment in which unmet needs are temporarily recognized.

International evidence further indicates that women's infidelity cannot be explained through one universal model. Evolutionary, sociological, psychological, and cultural perspectives each highlight different explanatory pathways.

A multinational study on female infidelity has tested evolutionary hypotheses and emphasized that women's infidelity may be connected to mate value, relationship dissatisfaction, sexual desire, and perceived alternative opportunities (Murphy et al., 2024). Research in Sub-Saharan Africa has shown that involuntary childlessness may be associated with marital infidelity among women, while women's education can moderate this relationship, suggesting that reproductive pressure and social expectations shape extramarital behavior in context-specific ways (Olamijuwon et al., 2021). Qualitative work in rural Cambodia has shown that perceptions of sexual infidelity are embedded in local gender norms and moral expectations (Thapa et al., 2019). These findings confirm that infidelity is culturally organized and that women's experiences must be examined through locally grounded frameworks.

The consequences of extramarital relationships are often profound and multidimensional. At the individual level, women may experience ambivalence, guilt, anxiety, depression, shame, fear of exposure, and spiritual conflict. At the relational level, infidelity can lead to emotional separation, distrust, retaliatory behavior, conflict escalation, and marital dissolution (Pichon et al., 2020; Warach & Josephs, 2021; Yuan & Weiser, 2019). At the family and social levels, it may affect parenting, children's emotional security, family reputation, and social support networks (Kalfin et al., 2024; Yan, 2023). A mixed-methods systematic review has also linked infidelity, romantic jealousy, and intimate partner violence against women, indicating that disclosure or suspicion of infidelity may expose women to serious safety risks in some relational contexts (Pichon et al., 2020). Therefore, studying women's tendency toward extramarital relationships has practical implications not only for couple therapy but also for family protection, social work, and preventive counseling.

Support services for individuals and families affected by extramarital affairs are increasingly emphasized in the literature. Survivors of affairs may need psychological counseling, marital therapy, legal guidance, social support, and child-focused interventions when family instability affects children's rights and well-being (Bah, 2025). Therapeutic approaches have included attachment-based interventions, mindfulness-based programs, schema therapy, culturally adapted counseling, and spiritually sensitive therapy, each targeting different dimensions of infidelity-related distress (Golkar et al., 2022; Shamsi et al., 2022; Williams, 2018). In particular, attachment-based mindfulness therapy has been examined for improving self-

compassion and positive emotion toward the spouse among women with a history of marital infidelity, suggesting that intervention should address both intrapersonal distress and relational repair (Shamsi et al., 2022). These therapeutic developments highlight the need to identify causal, contextual, and intervening conditions before designing effective interventions.

The methodological orientation of this field also requires careful consideration. Since women's tendency toward extramarital relationships involves private experiences, moral conflict, social secrecy, and layered meanings, qualitative approaches are especially useful for uncovering the subjective and contextual dimensions of the phenomenon. Phenomenology allows researchers to describe lived experience, while grounded theory enables the development of process-oriented theoretical models grounded in participants' accounts (Shaleha, 2021; Tajbakhsh et al., 2020; Wertz, 2024). Grounded theory is particularly suitable when the aim is not merely to list factors but to explain how conditions, strategies, interactions, and consequences form a coherent process. Previous grounded theory and meta-synthesis studies in Iran have provided important models of marital infidelity formation, but the phenomenon remains underexplored in relation to the specific experiences of women in Yazd and the integration of Islamic psychological perspectives with empirical qualitative data (Sharifi Saei & Azad Armaki, 2021; Tamarchi et al., 2021; Zarei Mahmoudabadi, 2021).

The city of Yazd, with its distinctive cultural, religious, and family-oriented social structure, provides a meaningful context for examining women's tendency toward extramarital relationships. In such a context, women's narratives may involve not only marital dissatisfaction and emotional unmet needs but also concerns about reputation, religious guilt, gendered expectations, family interference, and the tension between traditional norms and modern forms of communication. Iranian studies have repeatedly shown that contextual conditions such as traditional marriage patterns, family pressure, lack of emotional intimacy, and social constraints can shape the formation of extramarital relationships (Afshari Kashanian et al., 2019; Khaledian et al., 2023; Khodaei Beyrami & Arvaneh, 2024). A meta-analysis of factors affecting the tendency toward extramarital relationships in Iran has further indicated that this phenomenon is influenced by a constellation of psychological, relational, cultural, and moral variables rather than by a single causal factor (Khodaei Beyrami & Arvaneh, 2024). Therefore, a context-sensitive model is needed to

explain the phenomenon in a way that reflects both women's lived experiences and the interpretive frameworks of family and Islamic psychology experts.

Despite the expansion of research on marital infidelity, several gaps remain. First, many studies have examined infidelity from either a psychological or sociological perspective, while fewer have integrated women's narratives, expert interpretations, and religious sources into a single grounded model. Second, much of the existing literature focuses on prevalence, attitudes, or consequences, whereas less attention has been given to the full process through which women move from unmet needs and contextual pressure toward extramarital tendency, strategies of concealment or justification, and long-term consequences (Garavand & Ahmadi, 2025; Mayeli, 2024; Rezaei, 2024). Third, the role of cyberspace, religious conflict, emotional deprivation, and identity reconstruction needs further qualitative explanation in culturally conservative settings where disclosure is difficult and stigma is intense (Khosravi et al., 2019; Roman, 2020; Rosaline & Kasaraneni, 2024). Fourth, while studies on men's infidelity have identified existential and identity-related processes, women's experiences require independent theorization because gendered social expectations shape the meaning and consequences of infidelity differently (Choupani et al., 2021; Costa et al., 2019; Khaledian et al., 2023).

Accordingly, the present study was designed to develop a grounded theoretical explanation of the causes of women's tendency toward extramarital relationships in Yazd by integrating the lived experiences of women, the perspectives of family and Islamic psychology experts, and Islamic religious sources, with the aim of identifying the central phenomenon, causal conditions, contextual and intervening conditions, strategies, and consequences of this process.

## 2. Methods and Materials

### 2.1. Study Design and Participants

The method of the present study was qualitative and grounded theory based on the systematic approach of Strauss and Corbin (1998). The statistical population of the study consisted of all married women aged 25 to 45 years residing in Yazd who had experienced extramarital relationships or had shown a tendency toward them, experts in the field of family studies with mastery of Islamic psychology, including psychologists, family counselors, and specialists in Islamic jurisprudence and ethics, as well as Islamic religious sources during 2024–2025. In this study, purposive

sampling was used, and participants were selected through purposive sampling with an emphasis on maximum variation in experiences and areas of expertise in order to achieve comprehensive saturation. Among women, theoretical saturation was reached after the twenty-third interview, and no new data were added; nevertheless, interviews continued up to the twenty-fifth participant to ensure adequacy. Among experts, theoretical saturation was reached after the seventh participant. The female participants were identified through referrals from family counseling centers, psychological clinics, and social networks related to family issues, while the experts were selected through university departments, research centers in Islamic psychology, and family counseling associations. The inclusion criteria for women included being between 25 and 45 years of age, having at least two years of marital experience, having experienced extramarital relationships or showing a tendency toward them based on self-report in the initial interview, the ability to communicate verbally and effectively, and written informed consent to participate in the study. The inclusion criteria for experts included holding a doctoral degree or an equivalent seminary qualification in related fields, including psychology, family counseling, or Islamic jurisprudence and ethics, having at least five years of professional experience in the field of family studies and Islamic psychology, deep familiarity with religious sources, including Qur'anic verses, hadiths, and authentic Shiite narrations, and willingness to participate in the study. In the section on Islamic sources, Qur'anic verses and Islamic narrations, including authentic Shiite hadiths and narrations from sources such as Nahj al-Balagha and Al-Sahifa al-Sajjadiyya, were used under the supervision of experts. The exclusion criteria for all participants included unwillingness to continue the interview at any stage, the emergence of severe symptoms of psychological distress requiring immediate intervention, or failure to adhere to the ethical principles of the research, such as dishonesty in responses.

## 2.2. Measures

In this study, data were collected from three main sources: in-depth semi-structured interviews with women and experts, field notes and researcher observations, such as recording participants' nonverbal behaviors during interviews, and Islamic religious sources, including Qur'anic verses, hadiths, and authentic narrations from Shiite sources such as Nahj al-Balagha and Al-Sahifa al-Sajjadiyya. The interviews were designed based on open-

ended and exploratory questions, which were first developed using the research literature and the experiences of initial experts and were then revised based on the opinions of supervisors and research advisors. The questions for women included items such as "What factors led you to become inclined toward extramarital relationships?", "What consequences have these relationships had for your family and spiritual life?", and "How did these relationships create conflict with your religious beliefs?" The questions for experts included items such as "What are the main factors contributing to women's tendency toward extramarital relationships from the perspective of Islamic psychology?" and "How can religious sources be effective in preventing or managing this phenomenon?" Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes, was audio-recorded with the participants' permission, and was transcribed immediately after completion. To observe ethical principles, written informed consent was obtained before the start of the interview. This consent form included an explanation of the study objectives, participants' rights, such as confidentiality of information, the right to withdraw at any time without consequences, and non-use of data in the event of withdrawal, as well as possible benefits and risks, such as the emergence of negative emotions. Participants were also assured that their identities would remain confidential, pseudonyms would be used, and the data would be used only for research purposes. In accordance with the ethical codes of the Iranian Psychological Association and ethical principles in research, the researcher provided referral to relevant specialists in cases of psychological distress, and no financial or nonfinancial compensation was offered to participants in order to prevent any influence on their responses.

## 2.3. Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using the systematic method of Strauss and Corbin, which included three stages of open, axial, and selective coding, and the coding process was performed using MAXQDA 2020 software. In the open coding stage, the data from interviews, field notes, and religious sources were analyzed line by line, leading to the extraction of more than 280 initial codes. These codes were organized into 14 main categories and 42 subcategories based on similarities and shared patterns. In axial coding, causal, contextual, and intervening relationships among the categories were identified and linked to the central phenomenon. Finally, in selective coding, an integrated

theoretical model was developed, showing the central phenomenon in interaction with causal conditions, contextual conditions, intervening conditions, strategies, and consequences. To enhance validity and reliability, triangulation was used, including data collection from three diverse sources, namely women, experts, and Islamic sources, to cross-validate the findings. In addition, member checking, involving returning findings to participants for confirmation and revision, and peer review, involving analysis review by two independent specialists in grounded

theory, were conducted. To ensure reliability, recoding was performed by the researcher after two weeks and by an independent coder. The kappa agreement coefficient was calculated to be higher than 0.85, indicating high reliability of the analysis.

### 3. Findings and Results

The demographic characteristics of the female participants are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Demographic Characteristics of the Female Participants*

| Variable   | Subgroup          | Frequency | Percentage |
|------------|-------------------|-----------|------------|
| Age group  | 25–30 years       | 8         | 32         |
|            | 31–35 years       | 7         | 28         |
|            | 36–40 years       | 6         | 24         |
|            | 41–45 years       | 4         | 16         |
| Education  | Below diploma     | 5         | 20         |
|            | Diploma           | 10        | 40         |
|            | Bachelor's degree | 10        | 40         |
| Occupation | Employed          | 12        | 48         |
|            | Homemaker         | 13        | 52         |

The statistical findings in Table 1 show that most female participants, 60%, were in the age range of 25 to 35 years. In terms of education, 40% of the women held a diploma and 40% held a bachelor's degree, indicating an average level of education in the sample. In addition, the almost equal

occupational distribution, 48% employed and 52% homemakers, indicates socioeconomic diversity within the group. The demographic characteristics of the experts are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2**

*Demographic Characteristics of the Experts*

| Variable      | Subgroup            | Frequency | Percentage |
|---------------|---------------------|-----------|------------|
| Age group     | 39–45 years         | 2         | 28.6       |
|               | 46–50 years         | 2         | 28.6       |
|               | 51–55 years         | 2         | 28.6       |
|               | 56–61 years         | 1         | 14.3       |
| Gender        | Female              | 3         | 42.9       |
|               | Male                | 4         | 57.1       |
| Academic rank | Assistant professor | 4         | 57.1       |
|               | Associate professor | 1         | 14.3       |
|               | University lecturer | 2         | 28.6       |

The statistical findings in Table 2 show that the experts were mainly in the age range of 39 to 55 years, accounting for 85.7% of the sample. In terms of gender, 57.1% were men. In addition, 42.9% of the experts were assistant professors. The research findings are presented below according to each question.

**Question One: What is the central phenomenon? What patterns, themes, or main categories can be**

**identified in the data regarding the tendency of women in Yazd toward extramarital relationships?**

In the open coding stage, the data collected from in-depth semi-structured interviews with 25 women aged 25 to 45 years who had experienced or tended toward extramarital relationships, 7 experts in the field of family studies and Islamic psychology, Islamic religious sources, including Qur'anic verses, hadiths, and authentic Shiite narrations, and

the researcher's field notes were analyzed line by line. This analysis led to the extraction of more than 280 initial codes, which were organized into 14 main categories and 42 subcategories based on similarities and shared patterns. The central phenomenon of the study was defined as "the tendency toward extramarital relationships as a way of redefining identity and responding to unmet needs." This phenomenon reflects a psychosocial process in which women seek to compensate for emotional, identity-related, sexual, social, cultural, and spiritual voids. Theoretical saturation was reached after the twenty-third interview with women, and no new data were added; nevertheless, interviews continued up to the twenty-fifth participant to ensure adequacy. The analysis of the three sources, namely women, experts, and Islamic sources, confirmed recurring patterns such as emotional void, religious conflict, and cultural pressure and showed convergence among the sources.

### Part One: Women with Experience of Extramarital Relationships

In the interviews with women, 7 core categories, 14 main categories, and 42 initial concepts were identified. The first core category was unmet emotional needs, which included the main category of lack of affection and attention from the husband, with initial concepts including lack of emotional affection and feeling that the relationship was duty-oriented, and emotional loneliness, with initial concepts including deep loneliness in marital life and lack of emotional understanding. The second core category was the search for individual identity, which included the main category of loss of individual identity, with initial concepts including being

lost in traditional roles and feeling that life was empty, and the desire for new experiences, with initial concepts including the search for an independent identity and filling the identity void. The third core category was sexual arousability, which included the main category of sexual dissatisfaction with the husband, with initial concepts including lack of sexual excitement and feeling that sex was a duty, and the need to feel attractive, with initial concepts including arousal through fantasy and desire for sexual desire. The fourth core category was social and cultural pressures, which included the main category of gender restrictions, with initial concepts including traditional cultural pressure and identity confinement, and the influence of social networks, with initial concepts including new expectations arising from modernity and the conflict between tradition and modernity. The fifth core category was religious and spiritual conflicts, which included the main category of religious conflict, with initial concepts including conflict between personal desires and teachings and feelings of guilt, and lack of spiritual meaning, with initial concepts including meaninglessness in marital life and crisis of faith. The sixth core category was the need for social connection, which included the main category of social isolation, with initial concepts including the need for relationships outside the family and the search for genuine friendship. The seventh core category was the need for autonomy, which included the main category of pressure from traditional roles, with initial concepts including the desire for independence and feelings of confinement. Table 3 shows examples of these categories with direct statements.

**Table 3**

*Examples of Main Categories and Subcategories of the Central Phenomenon with Statements from Female Participants*

| Main category                     | Subcategory                             | Initial concept                                                        | Statement                                                                                 |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Unmet emotional needs             | Emotional loneliness                    | Feeling emotionally lonely in the presence of others                   | "I felt alone at home, even when everyone was around me." (Participant 12)                |
| Search for individual identity    | Loss of individual identity             | Feeling a loss of individual identity within traditional roles         | "I felt that I was no longer myself." (Participant 10)                                    |
| Sexual arousability               | Sexual dissatisfaction with the husband | Lack of sexual excitement and satisfaction in the marital relationship | "Sex with my husband no longer has any excitement; it feels like a duty." (Participant 9) |
| Social and cultural pressures     | Gender restrictions                     | Gender restrictions and traditional cultural pressures                 | "Our society restricts women, as if they should always stay at home." (Participant 2)     |
| Religious and spiritual conflicts | Religious conflict                      | Conflict between personal desires and religious teachings              | "I feel guilty, but I cannot stop it." (Participant 24)                                   |
| Need for social connection        | Need for social relationships           | Need for social relationships outside the family                       | "I need real friendship, someone who listens to what I say." (Participant 25)             |
| Need for autonomy                 | Need for autonomy                       | Desire for autonomy and individual independence                        | "I want to be independent and make my own decisions." (Participant 6)                     |

## Part Two: Experts in the Field of Family Studies and Islamic Psychology

In the interviews with experts, 3 core categories, 6 main categories, and 18 initial concepts were identified. The first core category was weakness of piety and faith, which included the main category of imaginative piety, with initial concepts including lack of control over imagination and weak self-restraint, and crisis of faith, with initial concepts including distance from religion and spiritual emptiness. The second core category was Satanic temptation, which included the main category of temptation through gaze and

imagination, with initial concepts including Satanic facilitators and economic pressure as temptation, and religious justification, with initial concepts including justifying sin through religious arguments and misuse of teachings. The third core category was the cycle of gradual destruction, which included the main category of internal family collapse, with initial concepts including emotional separation and harm to children, and mental prison, with initial concepts including irreversible regret and hidden social stigma. Table 4 shows examples of these categories with direct statements.

**Table 4**

*Examples of Main Categories and Subcategories of the Central Phenomenon with Statements from Experts*

| Main category                | Subcategory                             | Initial concept                                          | Statement                                                                                                                 |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Weakness of piety and faith  | Imaginative piety                       | Lack of control over imagination and weak self-restraint | "The tendency often arises from weakness of piety and lack of control over imagination, which Satan exploits." (Expert 3) |
| Satanic temptation           | Temptation through gaze and imagination | Satanic facilitators through imagination                 | "When piety is weak, Satanic temptation enters through gaze and imagination." (Expert 2)                                  |
| Cycle of gradual destruction | Internal family collapse                | Emotional separation and harm to children                | "These relationships create a cycle of gradual destruction; the family collapses from within." (Expert 5)                 |

## Part Three: Islamic Religious Sources

In the analysis of Islamic sources, 2 core categories, 4 main categories, and 12 initial concepts were identified. The first core category was the prohibition of illicit relationships, which included the main category of preserving chastity and piety, with initial concepts including imaginative chastity and fear of God, and spiritual poverty, with initial concepts including deprivation of divine mercy and crisis of faith. The

second core category was Satanic temptation and its consequences, which included the main category of temptation toward indecency, with initial concepts including Satan's promise of poverty and command toward indecency, and punishment in the Hereafter, with initial concepts including the entry of poverty into the home and distance from Paradise. Table 5 shows examples of these categories with direct statements.

**Table 5**

*Examples of Main Categories and Subcategories of the Central Phenomenon with Statements from Islamic Sources*

| Main category                           | Subcategory                   | Initial concept                                                  |
|-----------------------------------------|-------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Satanic temptation and its consequences | Temptation toward indecency   | Satan's promise of poverty and command toward indecency          |
| Prohibition of illicit relationships    | Spiritual poverty             | The entry of spiritual poverty into the home due to adultery     |
| Prohibition of illicit relationships    | Preserving chastity and piety | Chastity as the foundation of religion and preservation of piety |

## Question Two: What conditions influence women's tendency toward extramarital relationships?

### Causal Conditions

The causal conditions included chronic emotional void and deficiency in sexual intimacy, as reflected in Participant 9's statement, "Sex is a duty," Expert 4's statement, "Lack of intimacy is the root," and verse 30 of Surah Al-Rum, emphasizing tranquility in marriage; weakness of faith and imaginative piety, as reflected in Expert 2's statement,

"Weak piety allows temptation," and the hadith of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), "Chastity is the foundation of religion"; and childhood emotional deprivation schemas, as reflected in Participant 10's statement, "I did not receive affection since childhood," and Expert 5's statement, "Childhood schemas are repeated." These factors directly create the phenomenon and were confirmed by all three sources.

### Contextual and Intervening Conditions

The contextual conditions included early and exchange-based marriage, as reflected in Participant 2's statement, "It was a forced marriage," Expert 1's statement, "The traditional structure imposes pressure," and a narration from Imam Ali (AS) on preserving reputation in the family; interference by the husband's parents, as reflected in Participant 25's statement, "My mother-in-law always interferes"; pressure to maintain appearances, as reflected in Expert 6's statement, "Reputation is more important than truth"; restrictive gender roles, as reflected in Participant 6's statement, "A woman should always stay at home," and Expert 7's statement, "Identity confinement"; and the conflict between tradition and modernity, as reflected in Expert 3's statement, "Modernity destabilizes beliefs." These structures make the emotional void chronic. The facilitating intervening conditions included cyberspace, as reflected in Participant 20's statement, "Cyberspace has made it easy," Qur'an 2:268 on Satanic temptation, and Expert 2's statement, "Temptation occurs through imagination." The inhibiting intervening conditions included strong piety, as reflected in Expert 3's statement, "Fear of God is a deterrent," and the hadith of Imam Sadiq (AS) on imaginative chastity. These conditions moderate the pathway of the phenomenon.

### **Question Three: What strategies or actions are related to the phenomenon?**

#### **Strategies and Consequences**

The strategies included seeking emotional validation in cyberspace, as reflected in Participant 20's statement, "Cyberspace has made it easy," and Expert 4's statement, "Initial search for validation"; fantasizing, as reflected in Participant 13's statement, "Thinking about it arouses me," Expert 2's statement, "Imagination is the root of temptation," and Qur'an 2:268; forming a parallel relationship, as reflected in Participant 9's statement, "I started a new relationship," and Expert 5's statement, "Emotional parallelization"; concealment, as reflected in Expert 4's statement, "Maintaining appearances is the main strategy," and Participant 25's statement, "Professional concealment"; religious justification, as reflected in

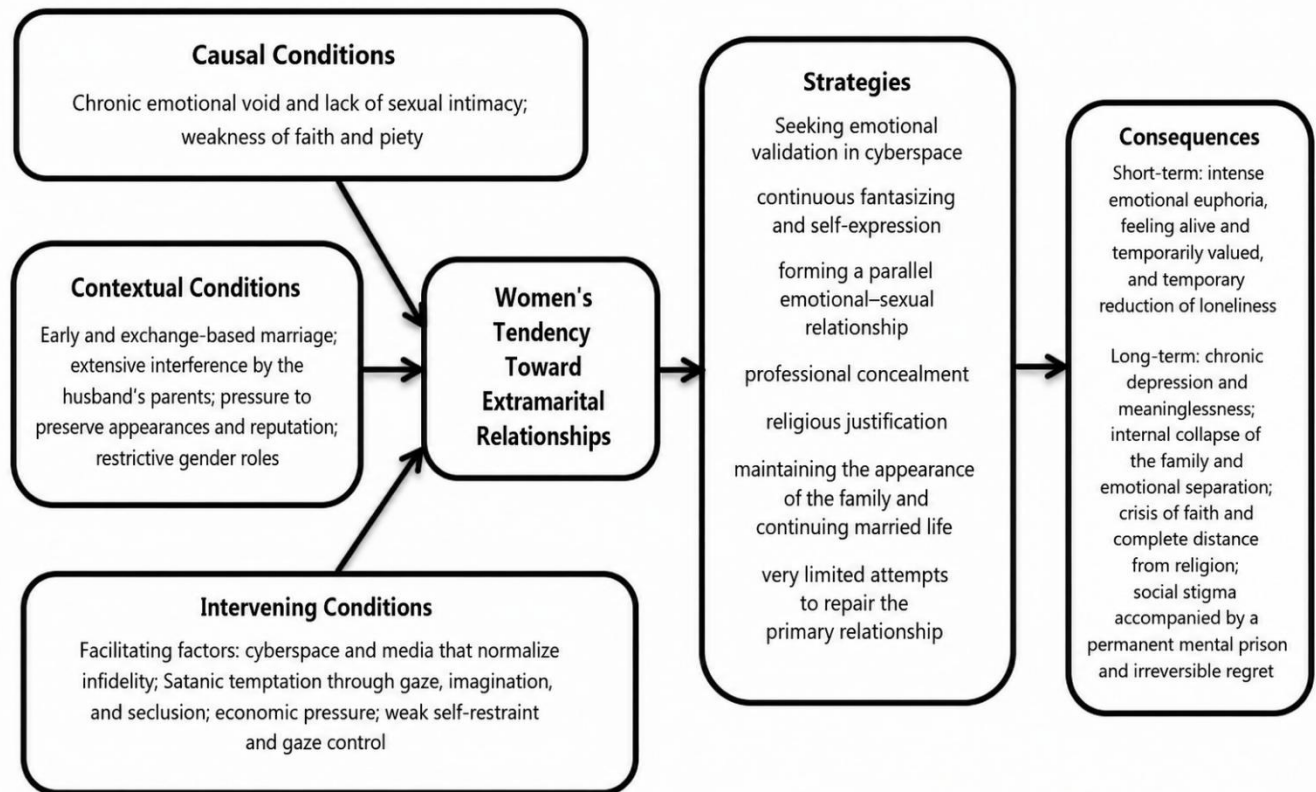
Participant 24's statement, "God sees my heart," Expert 6's statement, "Justifying sin," and the narration from Imam Ali (AS) on justifying sin; and maintaining the appearance of the family, as reflected in Participant 25's statement, "I continue because of the children," and Expert 7's statement, "Maintaining appearances." These strategies are effective in the short term but destructive in the long term. The short-term consequences included emotional euphoria, as reflected in Participant 4's statement, "I felt alive," and Expert 1's statement, "Temporary euphoria," and reduced loneliness, as reflected in Participant 12's statement, "My loneliness decreased." The long-term consequences included chronic depression, as reflected in Participant 1's statement, "Deep emptiness," Expert 5's statement, "Internal collapse," and the hadith of Imam Sadiq (AS) on spiritual poverty; crisis of faith, as reflected in Expert 6's statement, "Distance from religion," Qur'an 24:30 on the prohibition of adultery, and Participant 24's statement, "I cannot pray"; social stigma, as reflected in Participant 2's statement, "Rejection by society," and Expert 7's statement, "Mental prison"; and regret, as reflected in Expert 7's statement, "Cycle of destruction," and Participant 10's statement, "I wish I had not done it." These consequences are cyclical and are described in Islamic sources as gradual destruction.

### **Question Five: Integrated Theoretical Model**

The paradigmatic model (Figure 4-1) shows the relationships among the central phenomenon, causal conditions, including emotional void, weakness of faith, and childhood schemas, contextual conditions, including early marriage and cultural pressure, intervening conditions, including cyberspace and Satanic temptation, strategies, including seeking validation and concealment, and consequences, including short-term euphoria and long-term emptiness. The analysis in selective coding indicates a cycle of gradual destruction that describes the tendency as a response to an intolerable situation, with an emphasis on prevention through strengthening faith and emotional support, which was confirmed by experts and Islamic sources.

**Figure 1**

*Structure of the Research Paradigmatic Model*



#### 4. Discussion

The present study aimed to explain the causes of women's tendency toward extramarital relationships in Yazd using a grounded theory approach. The findings showed that the central phenomenon was "women's tendency toward extramarital relationships as a way of redefining identity and responding to unmet needs." This central category indicates that women's tendency toward extramarital relationships is not formed through a single psychological, sexual, or social factor, but through the interaction of unmet emotional needs, sexual dissatisfaction, identity-related deprivation, social and cultural pressures, religious and spiritual conflicts, and facilitating contextual conditions. The paradigmatic model derived from the data showed that chronic emotional void, lack of sexual intimacy, weakness of faith and piety, and childhood emotional deprivation schemas functioned as causal conditions; early and exchange-based marriage, interference by the husband's family, pressure to preserve appearances, restrictive gender roles, and the conflict between tradition and modernity functioned as contextual conditions; cyberspace, media normalization of infidelity, economic pressure, and weak self-restraint functioned as

facilitating intervening conditions; and stronger piety, self-control, and gaze control functioned as inhibiting conditions. These findings are consistent with previous Iranian studies that have conceptualized marital infidelity as a process emerging from accumulated relational dissatisfaction, contextual pressure, unmet emotional needs, and weakened marital intimacy (Afshari Kashanian et al., 2019; Tajbakhsh et al., 2020; Tamarchi et al., 2021; Zarei Mahmoudabadi, 2021).

One of the most important findings of this study was the role of unmet emotional needs in women's tendency toward extramarital relationships. The narratives of the female participants showed that emotional loneliness, lack of affection from the spouse, lack of emotional understanding, and the feeling of being unseen within the marital relationship gradually created vulnerability to extramarital emotional attachment. This finding supports the results of qualitative studies indicating that emotional deprivation and lack of intimacy are among the most important contextual and relational factors in the formation of marital infidelity (Garavand & Ahmadi, 2025; Mayeli, 2024; Rezaei, 2024). In the present study, many participants did not describe extramarital relationships merely as sexual behavior, but as

a search for recognition, emotional validation, and psychological aliveness. This result is aligned with phenomenological findings showing that women who engage in infidelity often experience the relationship as an attempt to compensate for emotional neglect, marital dissatisfaction, and the absence of meaningful communication with the spouse (Costa et al., 2019; Shaleha, 2021).

Another central finding was the role of identity reconstruction. The women's narratives indicated that traditional roles, repeated domestic responsibilities, lack of autonomy, and the experience of being reduced to the roles of wife, mother, or daughter-in-law contributed to the loss of individual identity. In this context, extramarital relationships appeared as a maladaptive pathway for recovering a sense of individuality, attractiveness, agency, and personal worth. This interpretation is consistent with studies that have emphasized the existential and identity-related dimensions of marital infidelity. Although some research has focused on men's existential experiences in infidelity, the present study shows that women may also experience extramarital relationships as a response to identity confinement, emotional emptiness, and the search for meaning (Choupani et al., 2021; Shaleha, 2021). The finding also corresponds to meta-synthesis research in Iran, which has shown that infidelity formation is shaped by psychological, relational, and sociocultural mechanisms rather than by sexual dissatisfaction alone (Sharifi Saei & Azad Armaki, 2021; Zarei Mahmoudabadi, 2021).

Sexual dissatisfaction and deficiency in sexual intimacy were also identified as important causal conditions. Participants described marital sexual relationships as lacking excitement, emotional connection, and mutual satisfaction, and in some cases as a duty rather than a shared intimate experience. This finding aligns with studies indicating that sexual dissatisfaction, unmet intimacy needs, and low relational quality can increase vulnerability to extramarital involvement (Murphy et al., 2024; Okeno et al., 2025). However, the present findings suggest that sexual dissatisfaction should be interpreted within a broader emotional and cultural field. In other words, sexual dissatisfaction was rarely isolated from emotional neglect, lack of affection, and identity deprivation. This integrated interpretation is consistent with research showing that women's infidelity may involve both sexual and emotional motivations and that these motivations are often intertwined with marital dissatisfaction and perceived lack of recognition (Costa et al., 2019; Grigoropoulos, 2024).

The findings also showed that religious and spiritual conflicts played a major role in the participants' experiences. Women who reported a tendency toward or experience of extramarital relationships often described guilt, shame, crisis of faith, difficulty in religious practice, and internal conflict between personal desires and religious teachings. From the experts' perspective, weakness of piety, weak self-restraint, lack of control over imagination and gaze, and religious justification were important mechanisms in the formation and continuation of extramarital relationships. This finding is consistent with studies emphasizing the protective role of religious attitude against positive attitudes toward marital infidelity (Khosravi et al., 2019). It also supports the view that spirituality and religion can function both as protective resources and as interpretive frameworks through which individuals understand betrayal, guilt, responsibility, and repair (Williams, 2018). In the context of Yazd, where religious and cultural values strongly shape marital expectations, the spiritual dimension of infidelity appears to be particularly important.

The results further indicated that early and exchange-based marriage, family interference, pressure to preserve appearances, restrictive gender roles, and the conflict between tradition and modernity served as contextual conditions that intensified vulnerability to extramarital relationships. These conditions did not directly produce infidelity in all cases, but they created an environment in which emotional deprivation, lack of autonomy, and marital dissatisfaction became chronic. This finding is aligned with Iranian studies identifying traditional marriage patterns, family pressures, and sociocultural restrictions as important factors in the formation of marital infidelity (Afshari Kashanian et al., 2019; Khaledian et al., 2023; Khodaei Beyrami & Arvaneh, 2024). The findings also correspond to broader family research showing that family cohesion, communication patterns, and family interaction processes influence emotional development, relational stability, and vulnerability to family breakdown (Ibrahim, 2021; Kalfin et al., 2024; Yan, 2023).

Cyberspace and social networks were identified as important facilitating intervening conditions. Participants described virtual environments as spaces where emotional validation, fantasy, secrecy, and communication with alternative partners became more accessible. This finding is consistent with research on internet infidelity, which indicates that online communication may blur the boundaries of marital commitment and provide opportunities for emotional or sexual involvement outside

marriage (Roman, 2020). It is also aligned with studies indicating that work-from-home conditions and increased digital contact may contribute to the growth of extramarital affairs by expanding opportunities for private communication and emotional involvement (Rosaline & Kasaraneni, 2024). Moreover, the role of addiction to virtual networks, sensation seeking, and self-control in predicting attitudes toward marital infidelity has been documented in women with extramarital relationships, which supports the present finding regarding cyberspace as a facilitator rather than an independent cause (Demarchli et al., 2023).

The strategies identified in this study included seeking emotional validation in cyberspace, continuous fantasizing, self-expression, forming a parallel emotional-sexual relationship, concealment, religious justification, maintaining the appearance of the family, and very limited attempts to repair the primary relationship. These strategies show that women's movement toward extramarital relationships may involve gradual psychological and behavioral transitions rather than a sudden event. This is consistent with grounded theory studies showing that marital infidelity often develops through progressive stages, including emotional distance, external validation, secrecy, justification, and relational parallelization (Tajbakhsh et al., 2020; Tamarchi et al., 2021; Zomorodian & Akbari, 2021). The finding regarding concealment also aligns with research on financial infidelity, which shows that secrecy and boundary violation are central features of betrayal even when the behavior is not directly sexual (Garbinsky et al., 2020). Therefore, secrecy can be considered a cross-domain mechanism in relational betrayal.

The consequences identified in the present study were twofold. In the short term, women reported emotional euphoria, feeling alive, temporary valuation, and reduced loneliness. However, in the long term, the consequences included chronic depression, meaninglessness, internal family collapse, emotional separation, crisis of faith, social stigma, mental imprisonment, and irreversible regret. This dual pattern is important because it shows that extramarital relationships may initially function as emotional compensation but later produce deeper psychological, relational, and spiritual damage. This finding is consistent with studies showing that infidelity can produce attachment trauma, distrust, relational instability, and long-term emotional aftershocks (Warach & Josephs, 2021). It is also aligned with research showing that infidelity is associated with marital dissolution and may affect marital stability differently across cultural groups (Yuan & Weiser, 2019). In

addition, the link between infidelity, romantic jealousy, and intimate partner violence against women indicates that the consequences of infidelity can extend beyond emotional distress to safety risks and social vulnerability (Pichon et al., 2020).

The findings of this study also highlight the importance of social and therapeutic support. Since extramarital relationships can generate distress not only for spouses but also for children and family systems, support services should address individual, marital, family, and social consequences. This is consistent with the view that survivors and families affected by extramarital affairs require counseling, social work support, child-sensitive interventions, and culturally responsive services (Bah, 2025). The role of therapeutic interventions is also supported by studies showing the effectiveness of attachment-based mindfulness therapy on self-compassion and positive emotion toward the spouse in women with a history of marital infidelity (Shamsi et al., 2022). Similarly, schema therapy approaches may be useful when maladaptive schemas and attitudes toward infidelity are central to marital conflict (Golkar et al., 2022). Therefore, the present findings suggest that interventions should not focus only on stopping extramarital behavior, but should also address emotional deprivation, identity reconstruction, marital intimacy, spiritual conflict, and digital boundaries.

## 5. Conclusion

Overall, the findings of the present study support a multidimensional, process-oriented explanation of women's tendency toward extramarital relationships. The resulting model shows that this tendency emerges from the interaction of emotional, sexual, psychological, cultural, digital, and spiritual conditions. This conclusion is consistent with Iranian meta-analytic and meta-synthetic studies showing that extramarital relationships are shaped by multiple factors, including marital dissatisfaction, psychological vulnerability, social context, family structure, and moral-religious variables (Khodaei Beyrami & Arvaneh, 2024; Sharifi Saei & Azad Armaki, 2021). It is also consistent with international studies showing that infidelity is culturally embedded and shaped by gender norms, reproductive pressures, personal traits, relationship quality, and social opportunity structures (Murphy et al., 2024; Olamijuwon et al., 2021; Thapa et al., 2019). The contribution of this study lies in its integration of women's lived experiences, expert

perspectives, and Islamic sources within a grounded theory model specific to the cultural context of Yazd.

## 6. Limitations & Suggestions

This study had several limitations. First, because the research used a qualitative grounded theory design, the findings are not statistically generalizable to all women in Yazd or other cultural contexts. Second, the sensitivity of the topic may have influenced participants' willingness to disclose all aspects of their experiences, especially because extramarital relationships are associated with stigma, moral judgment, and possible family consequences. Third, the study relied on self-reported narratives, and although triangulation was used, some experiences may have been reconstructed, selectively narrated, or influenced by guilt and social desirability. Fourth, the sample included women aged 25 to 45 years and experts in family and Islamic psychology; therefore, the perspectives of husbands, children, extended family members, and legal or social service professionals were not directly included. Fifth, the interpretation of Islamic sources was conducted under expert supervision, but other theological or jurisprudential perspectives may produce different emphases.

Future studies should examine the model developed in this research through mixed-methods or quantitative designs in order to test the relationships among emotional deprivation, sexual dissatisfaction, religious conflict, cyberspace use, self-control, and extramarital tendency. Comparative studies across different cities and cultural contexts in Iran can clarify whether the model is specific to Yazd or reflects broader sociocultural patterns. Future research should also include the perspectives of husbands and couples to better understand dyadic processes, mutual dissatisfaction, conflict patterns, and the possibility of relationship repair. Longitudinal studies are recommended to explore how emotional distance develops into extramarital tendency over time and how short-term emotional relief becomes transformed into long-term psychological and relational consequences. In addition, future research can examine the role of digital platforms, online secrecy, fantasy, and emotional validation in greater depth.

Family counselors, psychologists, and marital therapists should assess extramarital tendency as a multidimensional process rather than as a single behavioral event. Interventions should address unmet emotional needs, sexual dissatisfaction, identity deprivation, maladaptive schemas,

religious guilt, and digital boundary management. Premarital and marital education programs should emphasize emotional intimacy, communication skills, realistic expectations of marriage, conflict resolution, and mutual recognition of personal identity within marital life. Counselors working with women should create a nonjudgmental and confidential therapeutic space in which clients can discuss loneliness, desire, guilt, and relational dissatisfaction before these issues develop into extramarital involvement. Family-based interventions should also consider the role of in-law interference, pressure to preserve appearances, restrictive gender expectations, and the need for culturally sensitive strategies that support both marital stability and women's psychological well-being.

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## 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.

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## 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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