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The Process of Formation and Continuation of Extramarital Emotional Relationships in Cyberspace: A Grounded Theory Study

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A B S T R A C T

Objective: This study aimed to explain the process through which extramarital emotional relationships are formed and maintained in cyberspace and to identify the principal factors influencing their development and continuation.

Methods and Materials: This qualitative study employed grounded theory based on the systematic approach of Strauss and Corbin. Participants comprised 16 specialists and counselors in family studies and educational sciences who were selected through purposive sampling according to relevant professional expertise and practical experience. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews and analyzed using open, axial, and selective coding. Data collection and analysis proceeded iteratively to identify concepts, categories, their interrelationships, and the central phenomenon underlying the process of online extramarital emotional involvement.

Findings: The resulting paradigmatic model explained the formation and continuation of extramarital emotional relationships in cyberspace through six interconnected dimensions. Causal conditions comprised individual, emotional, marital, communicational, psychological, and motivational factors. The core phenomenon emerged as a gradual process beginning with online interactions, progressing through emotional intimacy and emotional attachment, and culminating in the expansion and deepening of the relationship. Contextual conditions included characteristics of cyberspace, family and cultural environments, and broader social interactions and living circumstances. Intervening conditions encompassed individual and psychological characteristics, moral and social values and constraints, supportive resources, and coping skills. Strategies involved online emotional interactions, management and maintenance of the virtual relationship, and concealment or behavioral justification. Consequences were organized into individual-psychological, marital, and family domains.

Conclusion: Extramarital emotional relationships in cyberspace represent a multidimensional and progressive process shaped by the interaction of personal, relational, psychological, sociocultural, and technological conditions. The proposed grounded theory framework provides an integrated explanation of this phenomenon and may inform future

research as well as the development of preventive and counseling interventions tailored to couples experiencing vulnerabilities related to online emotional relationships.
Keywords: *Extramarital Emotional Relationships; Cyberspace; Marital Relationships; Grounded Theory; Social Networks*

1. Introduction

The rapid expansion of digital communication technologies has transformed the structure, meaning, and boundaries of intimate relationships. Social networking platforms, instant messaging applications, online communities, and other digitally mediated environments have created new opportunities for interaction that are no longer constrained by physical proximity, conventional social settings, or fixed temporal boundaries. Romantic partners can remain continuously connected, share experiences instantaneously, and maintain relational closeness across distance; at the same time, these technologies may introduce new relational ambiguities, privacy concerns, and opportunities for interactions that extend beyond mutually accepted marital boundaries. Consequently, cyberspace has become an increasingly important context for understanding contemporary couple relationships, because it can simultaneously strengthen intimacy, expand social networks, alter patterns of communication, and facilitate emotionally significant interactions with individuals outside the marital relationship (Eichenberg et al., 2017; Wen, 2024). Research on intimate relationships has therefore increasingly moved beyond face-to-face interaction to examine how technologically mediated communication affects emotional attachment, commitment, intimacy, conflict, and relationship stability (Amirnejad et al., 2024; Erber & Erber, 2024).

One of the most sensitive relational phenomena associated with these developments is online or cyber infidelity. Although definitions vary across studies, online infidelity generally refers to emotionally, romantically, or sexually significant interactions conducted through digital technologies that violate explicit or implicit expectations of exclusivity within a committed relationship. Early research emphasized that Internet-based interactions could constitute a form of infidelity even in the absence of physical contact, particularly when secrecy, emotional intimacy, sexual content, or relational exclusivity were involved (Hertlein & Piercy, 2006). The perceived meaning of such behavior may differ according to gender, relationship expectations, and the specific nature of the online interaction, making online infidelity a relationally negotiated rather than purely technologically defined phenomenon (Docan-Morgan & Docan, 2007). More recent conceptualizations have similarly emphasized that virtual interactions may cross relationship boundaries through emotional investment, secrecy, romantic communication, and the reallocation of attention from the primary partner toward a third person (Oliullah & Murtuza, 2025, 2026). Thus, the central issue is not simply whether communication occurs online, but how such communication develops, what meanings partners assign to it, and when it begins to function as an alternative emotional relationship.

The structure of cyberspace may facilitate this process in several ways. Digital environments provide immediate accessibility, continuous connectivity, private channels of communication, and relatively low-cost opportunities to initiate contact with acquaintances or strangers. They also permit selective self-presentation and varying degrees of anonymity, which may lower interpersonal barriers and accelerate self-disclosure. Social networking sites are particularly significant because they combine public interaction, private messaging, visual self-presentation, social comparison, and continuous access to broad interpersonal networks within a single communication environment (Adams, 2017). Studies have suggested that greater social media involvement can become associated with relationship conflict when online behaviors create jealousy, secrecy, monitoring, or contact with alternative partners (Clayton et al., 2013). Similarly, infidelity-related behaviors conducted through social media have been linked to lower marital satisfaction, particularly when individuals conceal interactions, maintain ambiguous contacts, or engage in behavior they would prefer their partner not to observe (McDaniel et al., 2017). These findings suggest that technological affordances do not cause infidelity in isolation, but may create a relational environment in which preexisting vulnerabilities, unmet needs, and opportunities for alternative intimacy interact.

Self-disclosure is particularly important in understanding how ordinary online contact can become emotionally significant. The development of close relationships generally depends on the progressive exchange of personal information, emotional experiences, needs, fears, and private concerns (Sprecher et al., 2018). Digital communication may intensify this process by enabling individuals to disclose personal material gradually and

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privately, sometimes with fewer social inhibitions than are present in face-to-face interaction. Research has shown that online disclosure by oneself and one's partner can influence perceived intimacy and relationship satisfaction, illustrating the broader relational power of digital self-disclosure (Lee et al., 2019). In the context of extramarital emotional relationships, similar processes may occur with a third person: initial communication may become increasingly personal, personal disclosure may generate a sense of being understood, and repeated emotional reinforcement may gradually foster attachment. Accordingly, online emotional infidelity may be better conceptualized as a process involving progression from contact to intimacy and from intimacy to relational investment rather than as a single, clearly bounded act.

Existing studies indicate that the factors associated with online infidelity are multidimensional. Reviews of the literature have identified individual characteristics, relationship dissatisfaction, attachment-related vulnerabilities, opportunity, communication problems, personality factors, sexual and emotional needs, and characteristics of online environments as potentially relevant determinants (Kaya & Şakiroğlu, 2023). Recent conceptual work has likewise described online infidelity as a phenomenon shaped by the interaction of personal motivations, relational conditions, and the affordances of digital communication (Oliullah & Murtuza, 2025). Research conducted in the Iranian context has identified dissatisfaction with the marital relationship, unmet emotional needs, weakened commitment, communication difficulties, and attractions created by cyberspace as important factors underlying couples' tendency toward illicit or extramarital relationships (Alizadeh Same & Pouraman, 2023). Other Iranian studies have emphasized individual, interpersonal, and social factors in explaining cyber infidelity and in developing models intended to reduce its occurrence (Gheibi et al., 2025). These findings support the view that online extramarital emotional involvement cannot be adequately explained through a single psychological trait or a single marital problem.

The quality of the marital relationship itself is a particularly important part of this broader explanatory context. Emotional distance, unresolved conflict, inadequate communication, diminished intimacy, and perceptions of neglect may create conditions in which external sources of attention become more psychologically salient. Studies examining extramarital relationships more broadly have identified marital dissatisfaction, emotional deprivation, relational conflict, personal vulnerabilities, and social conditions among the factors that may contribute to involvement outside marriage (Tajbakhsh, 2021). A grounded theory investigation of individuals referred to counseling services similarly showed that extramarital relationships emerge within interconnected individual, relational, and contextual conditions and highlighted the importance of prevention strategies grounded in the complexity of these processes (Khamsan et al., 2021). In cyberspace, these vulnerabilities may take on additional significance because access to alternative sources of attention and validation is immediate and persistent. The individual who feels emotionally neglected within marriage may encounter online interactions that provide rapid reassurance, interest, empathy, or validation, potentially increasing the subjective attractiveness of continued communication.

At the same time, it would be overly deterministic to assume that marital dissatisfaction or high levels of online activity inevitably lead to extramarital emotional involvement. Numerous individuals experience relationship difficulties and actively use social media without crossing agreed relational boundaries. The development of online infidelity therefore appears to depend on mediating and moderating conditions such as values, self-regulation, commitment, social support, coping skills, and perceived consequences. Religious and spiritual orientations, for example, may shape how individuals evaluate relationship boundaries, interpret online intimacy, and regulate behavior involving third parties. Recent research examining extramarital relationships in social networks has highlighted the possible mediating role of spirituality and religious attitudes in understanding such behavior (Malekzadeh et al., 2025). Social support may also be relevant, because the availability or absence of meaningful interpersonal support can affect relationship adjustment and broader processes related to marital stability and dissolution (Potter, 2021). Accordingly, protective conditions may operate alongside risk factors and help explain why similar relational difficulties lead to different outcomes across individuals.

The cultural context in which online interactions occur must also be considered. Meanings attributed to loyalty, privacy, emotional intimacy, marital commitment, and acceptable communication with third parties are shaped by social and cultural norms. Studies of virtual social networks in Iran have shown that digital communication can transform patterns of interaction between couples and alter the ways intimacy, communication, and relational boundaries are

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negotiated (Heydari, 2020; Safa, 2024). Research on cyberspace use among couples has likewise indicated that virtual environments can influence emotional relationships by changing the quantity, quality, and focus of interpersonal communication (Shalchi et al., 2020). These transformations may be particularly important in sociocultural contexts where expectations regarding marital exclusivity are strong while digital communication simultaneously expands opportunities for private cross-gender or emotionally intimate interaction. The result may be increased ambiguity about where ordinary social communication ends and relational boundary violation begins.

Perceptions of online infidelity are also likely to be influenced by how partners interpret secrecy, emotional intensity, and exclusivity. Qualitative research on Internet affairs has demonstrated that partners may experience online infidelity as a significant betrayal even when no physical sexual relationship has occurred, particularly when emotional energy has been redirected outside the primary relationship (Vossler & Moller, 2020). The subjective experience of betrayal can therefore be linked not only to sexual behavior but also to concealment, emotional dependence, persistent communication, and the perception that a third person has gained access to forms of intimacy that were expected to remain exclusive to the couple. This helps explain why emotional relationships conducted online may have substantial psychological and marital consequences despite their virtual form. The distinction between "online" and "offline" behavior may become progressively less meaningful when digital communication produces genuine attachment, secrecy, conflict, and changes in marital interaction.

The consequences of such relationships may extend across multiple levels. At the individual level, involvement in a concealed emotional relationship may generate guilt, anxiety, cognitive preoccupation, divided loyalty, and emotional instability. At the marital level, discovery or suspicion of online infidelity may erode trust, increase monitoring and conflict, diminish emotional and sexual intimacy, and weaken commitment. At the family level, persistent conflict may contribute to emotional separation, household tension, and eventual marital dissolution. Earlier studies linking Facebook-related conflict with breakup and divorce illustrate how technology-related relational disputes can become incorporated into wider processes of relationship instability (Clayton et al., 2013). Research on infidelity and relationship dissolution also demonstrates that marital infidelity can have substantial implications for relationship continuation and that interpretations and responses may vary across cultural groups (Yuan & Weiser, 2019). Accordingly, online emotional infidelity should not be treated as a trivial or purely virtual phenomenon, because its relational consequences may be experienced as concrete and enduring.

Another important consideration is that contemporary digital environments are evolving rapidly. Increasingly sophisticated platforms, algorithmic recommendation systems, multimedia communication, artificial intelligence, and digitally manipulated content are changing how individuals evaluate identity, authenticity, and interpersonal information. Although research on emerging digital phenomena such as deepfakes has often been conducted outside the domain of intimate relationships, it demonstrates more broadly that digitally mediated content can affect cognitive processing, judgment, credibility assessment, and interpretation of information (Oliullah, 2025). Such developments underscore the need to conceptualize cyberspace not as a static communication channel but as a dynamic psychological and social environment. In relational settings, the continued evolution of digital technologies may further complicate issues of identity presentation, trust, privacy, emotional accessibility, and boundary management.

Despite increasing scholarly attention, much of the literature on online infidelity remains focused on identifying correlates, prevalence, attitudes, predictors, or consequences. Such studies are essential, but they do not necessarily explain how a relationship gradually develops from an apparently ordinary online exchange into an emotionally significant extramarital relationship or how such a relationship is subsequently maintained. The processual dimension is particularly important because causal variables alone cannot reveal the sequence through which initial interaction, self-disclosure, emotional validation, attachment, concealment, and relational prioritization become connected over time. Research describing online infidelity in romantic relationships has increasingly emphasized the need for clearer conceptual models that capture these complex relational pathways (Oliullah & Murtuza, 2026). Similarly, qualitative and grounded theory studies in related areas demonstrate the value of exploring participants' interpretations to uncover interactions among individual, relational, social, and contextual conditions that may be difficult to identify through predetermined quantitative variables (Gheibi et al., 2025; Khamsan et al., 2021).

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A grounded theory approach is especially suitable for examining such a process because it enables theoretical categories to emerge from systematically analyzed empirical data rather than imposing a fixed explanatory framework from the outset. The Strauss and Corbin tradition of grounded theory emphasizes the identification of conditions, actions and interactions, contextual influences, intervening factors, and consequences, allowing researchers to develop an integrated account of a social process (Corbin, 2021). This framework is particularly appropriate for online extramarital emotional relationships, where the phenomenon appears to be shaped by multiple interacting levels rather than by linear causation. It allows the researcher to examine not only why individuals may become vulnerable to such relationships but also how cyberspace provides a context for their development, which factors facilitate or inhibit progression, what strategies are used to maintain or conceal the relationship, and what consequences may subsequently emerge.

Furthermore, professional family counselors and specialists occupy a valuable position for examining this phenomenon because their clinical and professional experiences expose them to recurring patterns across different couples rather than to a single personal account. Their observations may illuminate how emotional needs, marital dissatisfaction, attachment vulnerabilities, communication deficits, digital opportunities, social norms, coping resources, and behavioral strategies intersect across cases. Existing work on couples' commitment and cyberspace suggests that digital environments have become increasingly integrated into the relational problems encountered by couples and professionals (Amirnejad et al., 2024). Likewise, recent studies emphasizing prevention of cyber infidelity indicate the importance of developing models that can be translated into counseling and preventive interventions (Gheibi et al., 2025). A theoretically integrated understanding of the formation and continuation of these relationships may therefore have direct implications for assessment, couple counseling, psychoeducation, prevention, and intervention.

Taken together, the literature demonstrates that online extramarital emotional relationships arise at the intersection of changing digital environments, personal vulnerabilities, unmet emotional needs, marital dynamics, cultural expectations, and opportunities for private interaction. Prior research has made important contributions by documenting the association of social media use with marital conflict, examining perceptions of online infidelity, identifying individual and relational predictors, and describing possible consequences (Hertlein & Piercy, 2006; Kaya & Şakiroğlu, 2023; McDaniel et al., 2017; Vossler & Moller, 2020). Iranian studies have further demonstrated the relevance of cultural context, marital communication, commitment, emotional needs, and social-network use in understanding changing couple relationships and extramarital involvement (Alizadeh Same & Pouraman, 2023; Heydari, 2020; Safa, 2024; Tajbakhsh, 2021). Nevertheless, a need remains for an integrated process-based explanation that clarifies how these different elements become connected in the formation, deepening, maintenance, concealment, and eventual consequences of extramarital emotional relationships in cyberspace.

Therefore, the present study aimed to explain the process of formation and continuation of extramarital emotional relationships in cyberspace and to develop a grounded theoretical model of the causal, contextual, intervening, strategic, and consequential factors involved in this process from the perspective of family specialists and counselors.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study employed a qualitative research design using grounded theory based on the systematic approach proposed by Strauss and Corbin. Grounded theory was considered appropriate because the study sought to develop an empirically grounded explanation of the process through which extramarital emotional relationships emerge, develop, and persist within cyberspace rather than merely describing isolated factors associated with such relationships. Consistent with the inductive logic of grounded theory, empirical data were systematically collected, compared, conceptualized, and integrated to identify the major categories and relationships underlying the phenomenon and ultimately to construct a conceptual model explaining its processual structure. The participants consisted of 16 specialists and family counselors who possessed relevant professional knowledge and experience regarding marital relationships, couple dynamics, family counseling, and problems associated with extramarital emotional involvement. Participants were initially recruited through purposive sampling to ensure that individuals selected for the study could provide rich, relevant, and experience-based information concerning the phenomenon under investigation. The principal inclusion criteria were possession of specialized knowledge relevant to family and

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marital issues, professional experience in family or couple counseling, familiarity through professional practice with issues involving extramarital emotional relationships, and willingness to participate voluntarily in the study. As data collection and analysis progressed, the selection and direction of subsequent interviews were guided by the concepts and categories emerging from the data in accordance with the logic of theoretical sampling. This iterative sampling strategy made it possible to elaborate developing categories, explore relationships among concepts, and examine dimensions of the phenomenon that required further clarification. The adequacy of the sample was determined according to the degree of conceptual development and theoretical saturation rather than a predetermined numerical criterion. Interviews continued until additional data no longer generated substantively new concepts, properties, dimensions, or relationships relevant to the principal categories. Throughout the study, ethical principles were observed because of the sensitive nature of the research topic. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained before data collection, confidentiality of all information was maintained, participants' identities were protected, and privacy was respected throughout the interview, transcription, analysis, and reporting processes.

2.2. Measures

Data were collected through individual, in-depth, semi-structured interviews, which served as the primary data collection instrument in this qualitative investigation. The semi-structured format provided sufficient consistency across interviews while retaining the flexibility required to explore participants' professional interpretations, observations, and experiences in depth. Interview questions were developed in accordance with the study objective and focused on participants' understanding of how extramarital emotional relationships may begin in cyberspace, the conditions contributing to their development, the processes through which online interactions become emotionally intimate, the circumstances supporting continuation or intensification of such relationships, and the potential individual, marital, family, social, and technological factors involved. Participants were also encouraged to discuss contextual conditions, intervening influences, behavioral and relational strategies, and possible consequences associated with the phenomenon. Open-ended questions were used to minimize the imposition of predetermined assumptions and to allow concepts to emerge from participants' accounts. Follow-up and probing questions were employed whenever clarification, elaboration, examples, or further explanation of a particular concept was required. The interview guide was therefore treated as flexible rather than fixed, and its emphasis evolved progressively in response to concepts identified during concurrent analysis. As categories became more clearly defined, later interviews were used to examine their properties and dimensions, clarify relationships among categories, identify variations in the process, and address conceptual gaps identified during earlier stages of analysis. Each interview was conducted individually in a setting that supported privacy and open communication. With appropriate consent, interview content was documented accurately and prepared for analysis. The resulting interview transcripts constituted the primary empirical material from which initial concepts, higher-order categories, and the eventual conceptual framework explaining the formation and continuation of extramarital emotional relationships in cyberspace were derived.

2.3. Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted concurrently with data collection in accordance with the systematic grounded theory procedures of Strauss and Corbin. The analytical process involved open coding, axial coding, and selective coding and was guided throughout by the constant comparative method. During open coding, interview transcripts were examined carefully to identify meaningful units of data and assign conceptual labels to statements, experiences, observations, and processes relevant to the research question. Similar codes were continually compared, refined, differentiated, and grouped into broader conceptual categories based on their shared properties and dimensions. Analysis at this stage remained closely grounded in participants' accounts while progressively moving from descriptive codes toward more abstract conceptual interpretations. During axial coding, the relationships among categories and subcategories were examined systematically to determine how different elements of the phenomenon were connected. Categories were organized within a paradigmatic framework encompassing causal conditions, the central phenomenon, contextual conditions, intervening conditions, action and interaction strategies, and consequences. Particular attention was given to identifying the circumstances that facilitated the initiation of online emotional involvement, the process through which

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interactions evolved into emotional intimacy and attachment, the contextual and intervening factors affecting this progression, the strategies used to establish or maintain such relationships, and the individual, marital, and family consequences associated with them. In the selective coding stage, the central category was identified and systematically related to the other major categories to produce an integrated theoretical account of the phenomenon. The emerging categories and relationships were repeatedly compared with the original interview data and with one another to assess conceptual consistency, identify contradictory cases, refine category boundaries, and strengthen the explanatory coherence of the developing model. Constant comparison was employed across interviews, codes, concepts, and categories throughout the analytical process, and emerging findings informed subsequent data collection in accordance with theoretical sampling. Analysis continued until the principal categories were sufficiently developed in terms of their properties, dimensions, and interrelationships and additional interviews no longer contributed meaningful conceptual variation. The final stage involved integrating the categories into a coherent conceptual model that explained the process of formation and continuation of extramarital emotional relationships in cyberspace from the perspective of family specialists and counselors.

3. Findings and Results

The study included 16 specialists and family counselors with professional backgrounds in family counseling, psychology, clinical psychology, counseling, and educational sciences. Nine participants (56.3%) were women and seven (43.8%) were men. Participants ranged in age from 31 to 48 years, with a mean age of 39.25 years. Ten participants (62.5%) held a master's degree and six (37.5%) held a doctoral degree. Their professional roles included family counselor, psychologist and counselor, clinical psychologist, marriage counselor, couples counselor, faculty member, couples relationship specialist, psychologist, and family counseling instructor. Professional experience ranged from 5 to 20 years, with an average of 11.63 years, indicating that the participants generally had substantial professional exposure to marital, relational, and family issues. Following each interview, the transcript was carefully reviewed and meaningful segments were coded. Initial coding generated 224 preliminary codes. Through continuous comparison, removal of repetitive codes, and integration of conceptually similar items, these were reduced to 97 focused codes. The focused codes were subsequently organized into subcategories and higher-order categories through axial coding. Finally, selective coding was used to integrate the categories within the Strauss and Corbin paradigmatic framework, resulting in six major dimensions: causal conditions, central phenomenon, contextual conditions, intervening conditions, action and interaction strategies, and consequences.

Table 1

Qualitative Findings of the Grounded Theory Analysis of the Formation and Continuation of Extramarital Emotional Relationships in Cyberspace

Main Dimension	Components	Focused Codes
Causal Conditions	Individual Factors	Insecure attachment style; need for validation and attention from others; weak emotional self-awareness
Causal Conditions	Emotional Factors	Emotional loneliness; experience of emotional emptiness; unmet need for affection and intimacy
Causal Conditions	Marital Factors	Marital dissatisfaction; reduced emotional and sexual intimacy; feeling ignored by the spouse
Causal Conditions	Communication Factors	Poor communication skills; inability to express emotional needs; unresolved marital conflicts
Causal Conditions	Psychological Factors	Low self-esteem; difficulty in emotion regulation; vulnerability to emotional rejection
Causal Conditions	Motivational Factors	Desire for novel emotional experiences; seeking emotional validation outside marriage; desire to compensate for perceived deficiencies in the marital relationship
Central Phenomenon	Virtual Interactions	Initiation of online conversations; repetition and continuity of communication; exchange of personal messages; increased private communication
Central Phenomenon	Emotional Intimacy	Emotional self-disclosure; sharing personal problems and concerns; feeling understood by a third person; receiving emotional attention and support

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Central Phenomenon	Emotional Attachment	Development of emotional interest; increased emotional dependency; anticipation of messages; preoccupation with the third person
Central Phenomenon	Expansion and Deepening of the Relationship	Gradual increase in intensity of communication; transfer of part of emotional attention to the third person; prioritization of the virtual relationship; crossing boundaries agreed upon within the marital relationship
Contextual Conditions	Characteristics of Cyberspace	Easy access to the Internet and social networks; possibility of private communication; continuous accessibility of individuals; ease of communication with strangers; possibility of concealing identity or parts of personal information
Contextual Conditions	Family and Cultural Context	Cultural norms concerning emotional relationships; family attitudes toward marital commitment; communication patterns in the family of origin; patterns of expressing affection within the family; social attitudes toward the use of social networks
Contextual Conditions	Living Conditions and Social Interactions	Economic and occupational conditions; limited opportunities for face-to-face interaction; extent of social network use; breadth of online social networks; quality of interpersonal relationships and social support
Intervening Conditions	Individual and Psychological Characteristics	Self-control; ability to regulate emotions; personal responsibility; degree of commitment to marriage; ability to manage temptations and emotional attractions
Intervening Conditions	Moral and Social Values and Constraints	Moral and religious beliefs; attitudes toward marital fidelity; sensitivity to behavioral consequences; deterrent social norms; concern about harm to the family
Intervening Conditions	Support Resources and Coping Skills	Perceived social support; access to family counseling; conflict-resolution ability; constructive communication skills with the spouse; availability of emotional support within marriage
Strategies	Online Emotional Interactions	Emotional self-disclosure in cyberspace; exchange of intimate messages; sharing personal problems and concerns; expression of emotional interest and attention; gradual increase in duration and frequency of communication
Strategies	Management and Maintenance of the Virtual Relationship	Allocating more time to online communication; continuous monitoring of the third person's status; reinforcement of emotional dependency; prioritization of virtual interactions; comparison of the virtual relationship with the marital relationship
Strategies	Concealment and Behavioral Justification	Hiding messages and interactions; deleting communication records; justifying continuation of the relationship; normalizing intimacy outside marriage; minimizing the perceived consequences of the relationship
Consequences	Individual and Psychological Consequences	Increased anxiety; feelings of guilt; internal conflict; reduced psychological well-being; increased emotional dependency on the third person; cognitive preoccupation and emotional disturbance
Consequences	Marital Consequences	Reduced emotional and sexual intimacy; increased conflict between spouses; emotional distancing; weakened mutual trust; reduced marital satisfaction; weakened commitment to the relationship
Consequences	Family Consequences	Increased likelihood of emotional divorce; increased likelihood of separation or legal divorce; reduced family cohesion; disruption of family functioning; impaired psychological security of children; increased tension within the family environment

The first dimension, causal conditions, represented the factors that participants considered capable of creating vulnerability to the initiation of extramarital emotional involvement in cyberspace. Six interrelated components were identified: individual, emotional, marital, communication, psychological, and motivational factors. At the individual level, insecure attachment, a strong need for external validation, and limited emotional self-awareness appeared to increase susceptibility to emotionally significant online interactions. Emotional conditions were characterized by loneliness, emotional emptiness, and unmet needs for affection and intimacy. Marital factors reflected dissatisfaction within the couple relationship, reduced emotional or sexual closeness, and perceptions of being neglected by the spouse. Communication-related difficulties, particularly poor relational skills, inability to communicate emotional needs, and unresolved conflicts, further increased relational vulnerability. Psychological factors such as low self-esteem, difficulties with emotion regulation, and sensitivity to rejection were also identified. Finally, motivational factors included attraction to novelty, seeking affirmation outside marriage, and attempts to compensate for deficiencies perceived in the marital relationship. Collectively, these categories suggest that online extramarital emotional involvement is not attributable to a single antecedent but develops from the interaction of personal vulnerabilities, unmet relational needs, and motivational tendencies.

The second dimension, the central phenomenon, described the actual process through which extramarital emotional relationships developed and became sustained in cyberspace. The process was characterized by four sequentially connected components: virtual interactions, emotional intimacy, emotional attachment, and expansion and deepening of the relationship. Initial online exchanges were often described as relatively ordinary interactions that became progressively more frequent, personal, and private. As communication continued, emotional self-disclosure increased and participants described a transition toward sharing private concerns, personal difficulties, and emotionally significant experiences with the third person. The experience of receiving attention, empathy, and

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emotional support contributed to the development of intimacy and a perception of being understood. Over time, this intimacy could develop into emotional attachment, reflected in increasing dependency, anticipation of messages, emotional investment, and persistent preoccupation with the other person. The relationship could then become progressively more central to the individual's emotional life, with increasing communication intensity, reallocation of emotional attention away from the spouse, prioritization of the virtual relationship, and eventual crossing of boundaries previously accepted within the marital relationship. Thus, the central phenomenon emerged as a gradual relational trajectory rather than an abrupt transition from ordinary interaction to emotional infidelity.

The third dimension, contextual conditions, captured the environmental, familial, cultural, and social circumstances within which the central phenomenon emerged and developed. Three major contextual components were identified: characteristics of cyberspace, family and cultural context, and living conditions and social interactions. Participants emphasized that cyberspace facilitates interpersonal contact by providing immediate accessibility, privacy, continuous availability, and opportunities to establish contact with unfamiliar individuals. The possibility of concealing identity or selectively presenting personal information was also viewed as facilitating relational initiation and continuity. At the family and cultural level, norms surrounding emotional relationships, beliefs about marital commitment, communication patterns learned within the family of origin, and culturally shaped forms of expressing affection influenced how individuals interpreted both marital dissatisfaction and online intimacy. Social attitudes toward digital communication and social networking further contributed to the normalization or restriction of particular online behaviors. Living circumstances also shaped opportunities for virtual involvement; occupational pressures, economic conditions, limited face-to-face social interaction, high levels of social media use, broad online networks, and the quality of available social support influenced the degree to which individuals relied on online environments for emotional interaction. These findings demonstrate that cyberspace functions not merely as a technological medium but as an enabling social context that interacts with broader family and cultural structures.

The fourth dimension, intervening conditions, referred to factors that could intensify, restrain, redirect, or interrupt the influence of causal and contextual conditions on the central phenomenon. These conditions were grouped into individual and psychological characteristics, moral and social values and constraints, and supportive resources and coping skills. Self-control, emotional regulation capacity, personal responsibility, marital commitment, and the ability to manage emotional attraction appeared to operate as important regulatory mechanisms. Participants also highlighted the role of ethical and religious beliefs, attitudes toward fidelity, awareness of possible consequences, social norms discouraging extramarital involvement, and concern about damage to the spouse or family. These factors could create internal and external boundaries limiting the progression of online emotional involvement. In addition, perceived social support, access to professional family counseling, conflict-resolution skills, constructive communication with the spouse, and the availability of emotional support within the marriage were viewed as resources that could alter the trajectory of the process. Accordingly, similar causal vulnerabilities and contextual opportunities did not necessarily result in the same outcome for all individuals; instead, intervening resources and constraints influenced whether online intimacy was interrupted, controlled, rationalized, or allowed to deepen.

The fifth dimension, strategies, represented the behavioral and relational actions through which the emerging emotional relationship was initiated, maintained, intensified, concealed, or justified. Three categories of strategies were identified: online emotional interactions, management and maintenance of the virtual relationship, and concealment and behavioral justification. Online emotional interactions involved emotional self-disclosure, intimate messaging, discussion of personal difficulties, expressions of care and interest, and gradual increases in the duration and frequency of communication. Once the relationship became emotionally significant, participants described behaviors designed to maintain its continuity, such as allocating increasing amounts of time to online contact, monitoring the third person's online activity, reinforcing emotional dependency, prioritizing digital interaction, and comparing the virtual relationship favorably with the marital relationship. Concealment strategies included hiding messages, deleting communication histories, restricting the spouse's access to digital interactions, and minimizing visible traces of the relationship. At the cognitive level, behavioral justification was reflected in redefining the interaction as harmless, normalizing emotional intimacy outside marriage, rationalizing the continuation of communication, and minimizing its possible consequences.

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These strategies indicate that continuation of the relationship involved not only emotional processes but also active behavioral management and cognitive reinterpretation.

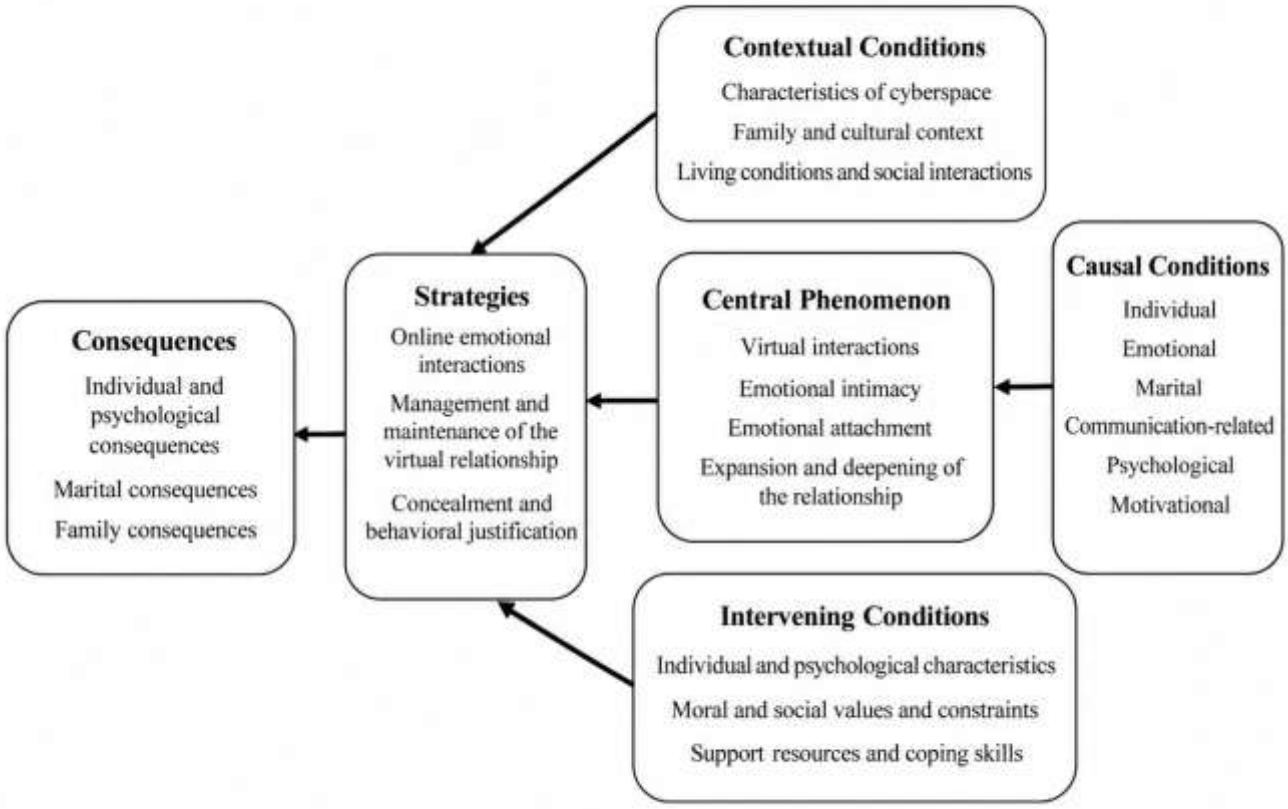
The sixth dimension, consequences, encompassed the potential outcomes associated with the formation and continuation of extramarital emotional relationships in cyberspace. These outcomes were organized into individual and psychological, marital, and family consequences. At the individual level, participants identified anxiety, guilt, internal conflict, decreased psychological well-being, increased emotional dependency, cognitive preoccupation, and emotional instability. Marital consequences included reduced emotional and sexual intimacy, escalating conflict, emotional distancing, erosion of mutual trust, decreased marital satisfaction, and weakening of commitment to the marital relationship. At the broader family level, sustained emotional involvement outside marriage was associated with an increased possibility of emotional divorce, separation, or legal divorce, as well as diminished family cohesion and impaired family functioning. Participants also emphasized potential effects on children, particularly reduced psychological security and increased exposure to tension within the household. Overall, the consequences suggested a cascading pattern in which an initially private online emotional relationship could progressively affect individual psychological functioning, the quality and stability of the marital relationship, and ultimately the functioning and emotional climate of the family system.

Following axial coding, selective coding was undertaken to integrate the identified categories and construct the final conceptual framework according to the Strauss and Corbin paradigmatic model. Within this framework, causal conditions represented the factors contributing to the emergence of the phenomenon; contextual and intervening conditions represented the circumstances shaping its development and regulation; strategies represented the actions and interactions through which the relationship was maintained, intensified, concealed, or managed; and consequences represented the potential individual, marital, and family outcomes. These six dimensions were conceptually integrated around the central phenomenon of the gradual formation and continuation of extramarital emotional relationships in cyberspace, thereby providing a process-oriented explanation of how individual and relational vulnerabilities interact with the affordances of digital environments, regulatory conditions, behavioral strategies, and subsequent outcomes.

Figure 1

Paradigmatic Model of the Formation and Continuation of Extramarital Emotional Relationships in Cyberspace

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4. Discussion

The present study sought to explain the process through which extramarital emotional relationships are formed and sustained in cyberspace from the perspective of family specialists and counselors. The grounded theory analysis resulted in an integrated paradigmatic model consisting of six major dimensions: causal conditions, the central phenomenon, contextual conditions, intervening conditions, strategies, and consequences. Taken together, the findings suggest that online extramarital emotional involvement is not an isolated behavior or a sudden relational event, but rather a gradual and multidimensional process that emerges from the interaction of individual vulnerabilities, unmet emotional needs, marital dissatisfaction, communication difficulties, psychological characteristics, motivational tendencies, digital affordances, cultural conditions, and regulatory resources. This process may begin with apparently ordinary virtual interactions, progress through increasing self-disclosure and emotional intimacy, develop into emotional attachment, and eventually lead to the prioritization and deepening of the online relationship. This overall interpretation is consistent with previous work conceptualizing online infidelity as a relational process shaped by personal, dyadic, and technological factors rather than as a single discrete act (Hertlein & Piercy, 2006; Kaya & Şakiroğlu, 2023; Oliullah & Murtuza, 2025, 2026).

The first major finding concerned the causal conditions underlying the emergence of online extramarital emotional relationships. These conditions included individual, emotional, marital, communication-related, psychological, and motivational factors. Participants particularly emphasized insecure attachment, need for validation, weak emotional self-awareness, emotional loneliness, unmet needs for affection, marital dissatisfaction, declining intimacy, unresolved conflict, low self-esteem, emotional dysregulation, and the desire for novelty or external emotional confirmation. These findings are consistent with studies that have identified marital dissatisfaction, emotional deprivation, interpersonal conflict, and unmet relational needs as important antecedents of extramarital involvement (Khamsan et al., 2021; Tajbakhsh, 2021). Likewise, research on online infidelity has shown that personal characteristics, dissatisfaction within the primary relationship, opportunity, attachment-related processes, and unmet emotional or sexual

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needs can jointly increase vulnerability to alternative relationships (Kaya & Şakiroğlu, 2023). The current findings therefore reinforce the argument that digital infidelity is rarely attributable to cyberspace alone. Rather, cyberspace appears to interact with preexisting emotional and relational vulnerabilities that increase the psychological attractiveness of attention and intimacy offered by another person.

The marital and communication-related causal conditions identified in the present study are also consistent with Iranian studies examining cyberspace and couple relationships. Research has suggested that dissatisfaction with the marital relationship, inadequate communication, emotional neglect, and weakening of marital commitment may contribute to greater openness to extramarital interactions in virtual environments (Alizadeh Same & Pouraman, 2023; Amirnejad et al., 2024). Similarly, virtual social networks have been associated with transformations in communication patterns among couples, including changes in the quality and allocation of attention within the marital relationship (Heydari, 2020; Safa, 2024). The current findings extend this literature by showing how these factors may operate together as part of a process: when relational needs remain unmet and spouses are unable to communicate those needs effectively, the attention received from a third person may acquire heightened emotional significance. Thus, the attraction of an online relationship may reflect not only the qualities of the third person but also the contrast between the perceived emotional responsiveness of the virtual relationship and deficiencies experienced within the marriage.

The central phenomenon identified in the study was a progressive sequence involving virtual interaction, emotional intimacy, emotional attachment, and expansion and deepening of the relationship. This process is particularly important because it demonstrates that online extramarital emotional relationships may develop incrementally rather than through an immediate decision to violate marital boundaries. Initial communication may be perceived as casual or harmless, but repeated interaction can increase personal disclosure and emotional investment. This interpretation is strongly aligned with relational research emphasizing the role of self-disclosure in the development of intimacy and closeness (Sprecher et al., 2018). Online disclosure may also influence the experience of relational intimacy because sharing personal thoughts, concerns, and emotions can strengthen feelings of understanding and connection (Lee et al., 2019). Within an extramarital context, therefore, the repeated exchange of private concerns may gradually transform a routine digital interaction into an emotionally meaningful relationship.

The findings also indicated that emotional attachment was marked by increasing dependency, anticipation of messages, preoccupation with the third person, and redistribution of emotional attention away from the spouse. These characteristics correspond with conceptualizations of online infidelity that emphasize emotional investment, secrecy, and the transfer of relational resources outside the primary relationship (Oliullah & Murtuza, 2025, 2026). Previous qualitative research has similarly shown that partners may interpret online affairs as genuine forms of betrayal when emotional intimacy and attachment become directed toward someone outside the relationship, even without physical contact (Vossler & Moller, 2020). This helps explain why the distinction between “online” and “offline” infidelity may be less important than the underlying relational processes. A relationship conducted exclusively through digital communication may still involve emotional exclusivity, dependency, concealment, and significant changes in the primary marital bond.

The third major dimension concerned contextual conditions, including characteristics of cyberspace, the family and cultural context, and living conditions and social interactions. Participants viewed the accessibility, privacy, continuity, and relative anonymity of online communication as important environmental conditions supporting the emergence and maintenance of extramarital emotional relationships. These findings correspond with previous research showing that social networking sites can expand access to alternative partners and create opportunities for private or ambiguous interactions that may generate jealousy, conflict, or relational boundary violations (Adams, 2017; Clayton et al., 2013). The availability of private messaging, constant connectivity, and selective self-presentation may reduce the practical barriers that once limited opportunities for sustained interaction outside marriage. These features do not inevitably create infidelity, but they may increase exposure to potential relational alternatives and make the continuation of emotionally significant communication easier.

The family and cultural aspects of contextual conditions were also notable. Participants referred to cultural norms concerning emotional relationships, family attitudes toward commitment, patterns of affection learned in the family of origin, and broader social attitudes toward social networking. This is compatible with evidence that digital

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technologies do not affect relationships independently of cultural expectations but are interpreted through existing beliefs about fidelity, privacy, gender interaction, and acceptable relational boundaries (Docan-Morgan & Docan, 2007; Yuan & Weiser, 2019). Iranian research has likewise demonstrated that virtual networks are reshaping communication patterns within couples and influencing the ways individuals understand intimacy and relational boundaries (Safa, 2024; Shalchi et al., 2020). The current findings therefore suggest that cyberspace functions as a culturally embedded relational environment. Whether a particular interaction is perceived as harmless, inappropriate, or unfaithful may depend on the norms and expectations that organize the marital relationship and the larger social context.

The fourth major dimension involved intervening conditions that could either constrain or facilitate the progression of online extramarital involvement. These included self-control, emotion regulation, responsibility, commitment, ethical and religious values, concern about consequences, social norms, access to counseling, social support, conflict-resolution abilities, and constructive communication with the spouse. This finding is significant because it indicates that vulnerability factors do not automatically lead to online infidelity. Individuals may experience loneliness, dissatisfaction, or attraction to a third person while still maintaining relational boundaries through internal regulation and external support. The role of spirituality and religious attitudes identified in previous research is compatible with this interpretation, as such orientations may influence moral evaluation, commitment, and behavioral restraint in situations involving online relational alternatives (Malekzadeh et al., 2025). Likewise, social support and relational resources may reduce the likelihood that individuals rely excessively on alternative online relationships for emotional validation (Potter, 2021). The findings therefore support a dynamic model in which risk factors interact with protective and regulatory conditions.

The fifth dimension, strategies, described the actions used to establish, maintain, intensify, conceal, and rationalize the online relationship. Participants identified emotional self-disclosure, intimate messaging, increased communication frequency, allocation of more time to the third person, monitoring of the other person's online activity, comparison of the online relationship with the marital relationship, hiding messages, deleting communication histories, normalizing the interaction, and minimizing its consequences. These findings are consistent with research indicating that secrecy is a central feature of behaviors perceived as infidelity-related on social media (McDaniel et al., 2017). The act of hiding digital interactions is especially important because it reflects awareness that the behavior may violate relational expectations, even when the individual does not explicitly label the relationship as infidelity. Previous work has also demonstrated that social networking behaviors can become associated with conflict when partners perceive concealed communication or contact with potential alternative partners (Clayton et al., 2013). Thus, concealment and justification may serve both behavioral and cognitive functions by allowing the relationship to continue while reducing the individual's immediate discomfort about violating marital norms.

The strategies identified in this study also suggest a reinforcing cycle. As emotional self-disclosure increases, the third person may become a more important source of validation and support; as emotional reliance increases, more time and attention may be devoted to the virtual relationship; and as the relationship becomes more important, concealment may become increasingly necessary. This cycle can strengthen attachment while simultaneously weakening openness within the marriage. Such an interpretation is consistent with the broader literature on close relationship development, in which reciprocal self-disclosure and responsiveness contribute to increasing closeness (Sprecher et al., 2018). In the context of online infidelity, however, this otherwise normative mechanism of relationship formation may occur outside the marital relationship and may therefore contribute to emotional displacement from the spouse toward the third person.

The sixth dimension consisted of individual, marital, and family consequences. At the individual level, participants identified anxiety, guilt, internal conflict, reduced well-being, emotional dependency, preoccupation, and emotional disturbance. At the marital level, the consequences included reduced emotional and sexual intimacy, increased conflict, weakened trust, lower marital satisfaction, emotional distance, and reduced commitment. At the family level, participants referred to emotional divorce, separation, legal divorce, reduced cohesion, impaired family functioning, insecurity among children, and heightened household tension. These findings are consistent with previous studies indicating that online infidelity can be experienced as a significant relational betrayal and can negatively affect trust, satisfaction, and relationship stability (Vossler & Moller, 2020). Research on social media-related conflict has

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likewise linked problematic online relational behavior with breakup and divorce outcomes (Clayton et al., 2013). More broadly, evidence concerning infidelity and relationship dissolution supports the conclusion that violations of exclusivity can have substantial consequences for marital continuation and family functioning (Yuan & Weiser, 2019).

The consequences identified in the present study should also be interpreted in light of the fact that digital behavior is increasingly integrated into everyday intimate life. Online interactions are no longer separate from the "real" relationship environment; instead, they are embedded in the same emotional, cognitive, and relational systems that shape face-to-face intimacy. Contemporary digital communication can influence how partners allocate attention, disclose personal experiences, establish boundaries, interpret privacy, and monitor one another (Eichenberg et al., 2017; Wen, 2024). Therefore, the psychological and marital consequences of online emotional infidelity may be substantial even when there has been no physical encounter. The emotional meanings assigned to secrecy, attachment, and exclusivity may be more consequential than the technological medium through which the relationship occurs.

The findings of the present study further contribute to the literature by integrating previously dispersed variables into a coherent process model. Existing studies have examined individual predictors, social media behaviors, marital dissatisfaction, emotional needs, cultural attitudes, spirituality, and consequences, but these factors are often studied separately. The grounded theory model developed here indicates that causal vulnerabilities interact with contextual affordances, while intervening factors influence whether those vulnerabilities develop into sustained emotional involvement. Strategies then maintain or conceal the relationship, and the cumulative process can generate psychological, marital, and family consequences. This integrative structure is consistent with the logic of the Strauss and Corbin grounded theory approach, in which conditions, actions and interactions, and consequences are analyzed relationally rather than independently (Corbin, 2021). The resulting framework therefore provides a process-oriented account that may help explain why similar levels of marital dissatisfaction or social media exposure can lead to different relational outcomes across individuals.

5. Conclusion

The model highlights the importance of treating online extramarital emotional involvement as a dynamic process that may contain multiple intervention points. Because the process often begins with relatively ordinary interaction and only gradually progresses toward emotional attachment, preventive efforts do not need to wait until a fully developed affair has occurred. Early recognition of emotional loneliness, relational dissatisfaction, excessive private self-disclosure, dependence on external validation, and secrecy surrounding online interactions may create opportunities for timely intervention. This interpretation is compatible with previous attempts to develop preventive models of cyber infidelity based on individual, interpersonal, and social factors (Gheibi et al., 2025). It also supports the broader conclusion that interventions should not focus exclusively on restricting technology use; rather, they should address communication quality, intimacy, emotional regulation, marital expectations, and digital boundary management simultaneously.

6. Limitations & Suggestions

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the study relied exclusively on the perspectives of specialists and family counselors rather than individuals who had personally experienced an extramarital emotional relationship in cyberspace or their spouses. Although professional participants were able to draw on repeated clinical and counseling experiences, their interpretations may differ from the subjective meanings assigned by individuals directly involved in such relationships. Second, the sample consisted of 16 participants selected purposively, which is appropriate for grounded theory but limits the transferability of the findings to all cultural, geographic, occupational, and marital contexts. Third, the sensitivity of the topic may have influenced the degree to which professionals discussed particular cases or details, even though confidentiality was maintained. Fourth, the rapidly changing nature of digital platforms means that some specific manifestations of online interaction may evolve over time as new technologies and communication practices emerge. Finally, the qualitative design was intended to generate a conceptual explanation rather than to estimate prevalence, causal effect sizes, or the statistical strength of relationships among the identified categories.

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Future studies could examine the proposed model using the perspectives of individuals who have personally experienced online extramarital emotional involvement, spouses who have discovered such relationships, and couples undergoing therapeutic intervention. Comparative qualitative studies could investigate whether the process differs according to gender, age, duration of marriage, presence of children, type of online platform, or cultural context. Quantitative research could operationalize the categories identified in the present model and test their direct, indirect, mediating, and moderating relationships using structural equation modeling or longitudinal designs. Longitudinal research would be particularly useful for determining how ordinary online interactions progress over time and identifying the stages at which emotional boundaries become increasingly difficult to restore. Future studies could also compare exclusively emotional online relationships with relationships involving sexual content or offline contact, as well as examine the role of emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence-based companions, anonymous communication platforms, and immersive virtual environments in changing definitions and experiences of relational exclusivity.

In practice, couple and family counselors should assess online relational behavior as part of routine evaluations of intimacy, trust, communication, and marital satisfaction. Interventions may benefit from helping couples explicitly define acceptable and unacceptable digital boundaries rather than assuming that both partners share identical expectations regarding private messaging, emotional disclosure, contact with former partners, or secrecy. Preventive counseling should also address emotional loneliness, unmet needs, communication deficits, conflict resolution, emotion regulation, and the tendency to seek validation outside the marital relationship. When online emotional involvement has already developed, treatment should address not only the digital behavior itself but also the underlying relational vulnerabilities, the function served by the third-person relationship, the restoration of transparency and trust, and the rebuilding of emotional intimacy between spouses. Psychoeducational programs for couples may further emphasize early warning signs such as escalating private communication, emotional dependence on a third person, concealment of interactions, and comparison of the spouse with an online relationship partner, thereby supporting earlier recognition and intervention before the relationship becomes more deeply established.

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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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