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

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1. Round 1

1.1. Reviewer 1

Reviewer:

In the final paragraphs of the Introduction, the research gap should be articulated more sharply. The manuscript currently argues that previous studies have examined predictors, correlates, perceptions, and consequences but have insufficiently explained “how a relationship gradually develops from an apparently ordinary online exchange into an emotionally significant extramarital relationship.” This is a promising rationale, but it needs to be distinguished more explicitly from previous grounded theory and qualitative studies cited in the manuscript, particularly studies that have already developed models of extramarital relationships or cyber infidelity. The authors should specify exactly what remains theoretically unresolved in prior models and explain how the current study advances knowledge beyond merely reorganizing known determinants into the Strauss–Corbin paradigm.

In the Methods paragraph under "Study Design and Participants," the sentence stating that "the study employed a qualitative research design using grounded theory based on the systematic approach proposed by Strauss and Corbin" needs greater methodological justification. The manuscript should explain why systematic grounded theory was selected instead of phenomenology, thematic analysis, constructivist grounded theory, or another qualitative approach. Because the participants were professionals rather than individuals directly experiencing the phenomenon, the authors should justify why the data are sufficiently processual to support theory generation rather than expert thematic categorization. This distinction is important because grounded theory requires the generation of an explanatory theory grounded in data, not simply the organization of expert opinions within a predetermined paradigm.

In the participant-description portion of the Methods, the manuscript reports that 16 "specialists and family counselors" participated, but the criteria defining expertise remain insufficiently operationalized. The paragraph should specify minimum years of professional experience, relevant academic qualifications, clinical or counseling exposure to cases involving online extramarital emotional relationships, and whether direct case experience was required. It should also clarify how participants were identified and approached. Because the resulting model is based entirely on professional perspectives, the credibility of the findings depends heavily on demonstrating that the participants had substantial and directly relevant expertise rather than general experience with family counseling.

Table 1 is comprehensive, but the relationship between the 97 focused codes and the codes displayed in the table is unclear. The authors should indicate whether every focused code is represented in Table 1 or whether the table contains only illustrative or representative codes. At present, the number of listed codes appears smaller than 97, which may create uncertainty regarding whether codes were omitted, merged, or summarized. A statement immediately before or after Table 1 should specify the total number of subcategories and focused codes ultimately retained and explain the selection principle used for presentation in the manuscript.

In the Findings paragraph discussing causal conditions, the manuscript states that insecure attachment, emotional loneliness, marital dissatisfaction, low self-esteem, and novelty seeking "increase susceptibility" to online extramarital involvement. This language is stronger than can be supported by the qualitative design and expert-perspective data. The authors should consistently distinguish participants' interpretations from empirically established causal effects. Terms such as "were perceived by participants as contributing conditions," "were described as vulnerabilities," or "were identified as potentially facilitating factors" would be more methodologically appropriate than language suggesting demonstrated directional causality.

Response: Revised and uploaded the manuscript.

1.2. Reviewer 2

Reviewer:

In the Methods paragraph describing purposive and theoretical sampling, the sequence between these two strategies requires clearer reporting. The manuscript states that participants were "initially recruited through purposive sampling" and that later interviews were guided by theoretical sampling, but it does not explain how theoretical sampling actually changed recruitment decisions. The authors should provide at least two or three concrete examples showing which emerging category required additional data and what type of participant was subsequently sought to elaborate that category. Without such evidence, the claim of theoretical sampling risks appearing procedural rather than demonstrating the iterative sampling logic expected in grounded theory.

In the sentence stating that "the adequacy of the sample was determined according to the degree of conceptual development and theoretical saturation," the authors should provide explicit evidence for how saturation was assessed. It would strengthen methodological transparency to report approximately after which interview the major categories stabilized, whether additional interviews were conducted to confirm saturation, and what criteria were used to determine that no new properties, dimensions, or relationships were emerging. Since theoretical saturation is central to the defensibility of a grounded theory sample, it should not be reported solely as a general methodological statement.

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In the "Data Collection Tools" paragraph, the manuscript should provide the core interview questions or at least representative examples of the semi-structured interview guide. The current description identifies broad domains such as initiation, development, contextual conditions, and consequences, but does not reveal how questions were phrased or sequenced. Because the final coding structure closely corresponds to the Strauss–Corbin paradigm, readers need assurance that participants were not directly prompted to produce categories corresponding to causal conditions, context, intervening conditions, strategies, and consequences. The authors should clarify whether these dimensions emerged analytically or were explicitly embedded in the interview questions.

In the same data-collection section, essential procedural information about the interviews is missing. The authors should report the approximate duration and range of the interviews, whether they were conducted face-to-face or online, where they took place, whether interviews were audio-recorded, who conducted them, whether the interviewer had prior professional relationships with any participants, and how transcripts were produced and checked for accuracy. These details are necessary for assessing data quality, interviewer influence, and reproducibility of the qualitative research process.

In the "Data Analysis" section, the description of open, axial, and selective coding is technically appropriate but remains generic. The authors should provide a more explicit audit trail illustrating how raw interview material was transformed into initial codes, focused codes, subcategories, and the six major dimensions. For example, one short quotation could be linked to an initial code such as "waiting for messages," then to the focused concept of "anticipation of communication," and subsequently to the category "emotional attachment." Such an example would substantially improve analytical transparency and demonstrate that the final categories were genuinely grounded in the interview data.

In the Findings paragraph reporting that "224 preliminary codes" were reduced to "97 focused codes," the terminology should be aligned more rigorously with the grounded theory approach adopted. The manuscript should explain what is meant by preliminary codes and focused codes and how these categories relate to Strauss and Corbin's open, axial, and selective coding terminology. "Focused coding" is more commonly associated with constructivist grounded theory and may create methodological ambiguity unless the authors explicitly define how the term is being used. It would be preferable either to use terminology consistently with the selected grounded theory tradition or to justify the hybrid coding vocabulary.

Response: Revised and uploaded the manuscript.

2. Revised

Editor's decision after revisions: Accepted.
Editor in Chief's decision: Accepted.

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