





Contextual Factors of Men's Online Extramarital Relationships: A Qualitative Study

Zeinab. Hajizadeh¹, Farah. Lotfi Kashani^{2*}, Shahram. Vaziri², Qasem. Ahi³

¹ PhD student in clinical psychology, Department of Psychology, Birjand Branch, Islamic Azad University, Birjand, Iran

² Associate Professor, Department of Psychology, Islamic Azad University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran

³ Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, Birjand Branch, Islamic Azad University, Birjand, Iran

* Corresponding author email address: lotfi.kashani@gmail.com

Article Info

Article type:

Original Research

How to cite this article:

Hajizadeh, Z., Lotfi Kashani, F., Vaziri, S., & Ahi, Q. (2024). Contextual Factors of Men's Online Extramarital Relationships: A Qualitative Study. *Journal of Assessment and Research in Applied Counseling*, 6(3), 56-69.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.61838/kman.jarac.6.3.7>



© 2024 the authors. Published by KMAN Publication Inc. (KMANPUB), Ontario, Canada. This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0) License.

ABSTRACT

Objective: Online extramarital relationships, like their real-world counterparts, may lead to marital disputes, separation, and even divorce. Accordingly, this research aims to qualitatively analyze men's online extramarital relationships.

Methods and Materials: This study was conducted qualitatively using content analysis methodology. Based on the criterion of theoretical saturation, twelve men participated in this study. Semi-structured interviews were used for data collection. MAXQDA software was utilized for coding and classifying the data.

Findings: The factors contributing to the formation of men's online extramarital relationships can be categorized into 14 main categories and 30 subcategories. The factors contributing to the formation of men's online extramarital relationships can be discussed in four domains: individual-personality, familial, cultural-social, and religious beliefs and convictions.

Conclusion: The extramarital relationship is a harmful phenomenon that occurs following a chain of individual-personality, familial, cultural-social factors, and religious beliefs and convictions. Given the nature of these factors, planning for prevention, focusing on, and providing necessary training to couples in this area can play a decisive role in reducing online extramarital relationships.

Keywords: Contextual Factors, Online Extramarital Relationships, Qualitative Research.

1. Introduction

The family is one of the earliest and most enduring social institutions where human identity and socialization of the individual are formed. Such that this institution can be the source of significant individual, social transformations, and the development of human values among its members. Without a doubt, there are no social harms that occur in isolation from the influence of the family

(Navabinejad et al., 2024; Saadati & Parsakia, 2023). Health and care for the family have always been primary concerns for humans, such that individuals constantly worry about the well-being of their family. Therefore, if marriage and family life create unfavorable conditions for satisfying needs and meeting expectations, not only is mental health not achieved, but it also results in negative and irreparable effects (Harris, 2018).

Information and communication technology, as an advanced technology, is considered one of the principal new investments. More than four decades have passed since the invention of the internet, and the world has witnessed its remarkable growth (Parsakia & Rostami, 2023). The internet has become a part of our daily lives, and the rapid growth of technology and the fast expansion of information technology in the field of the internet and virtual world have facilitated and promoted the establishment of internet relationships among people around the world. Although the internet has facilitated the establishment of virtual relationships among people worldwide, on the other hand, the increasing proliferation of these types of relationships has raised concerns in recent years. One of the problems that have attracted researchers' attention in this area is online extramarital relationships, which have involved many couples. Because extramarital relationships are taking new forms every day and are affecting relationships with new tools and methods (McKeever, 2020). The increasing issue of extramarital relationships as one of the damaging factors to the structure and stability of the family has drawn the attention of many experts and researchers (Coop Gordon & Mitchell, 2020).

Individuals enter extramarital relationships for various reasons, including inappropriate marriage, mistreatment, the absence of a spouse, seeking variety and self-justification, unrequited past love, the existence of extramarital relationship models, frigidity, chronic illness, emotional void, verbal abuse, physical violence, and economic issues (Habibi Askarabad & Hajiheydari, 2015). Moreover, the way individuals deal with ethical situations, such as extramarital relationships in virtual and real spaces, significantly differs. It can be said that due to some characteristics of the virtual space, individuals face ethical issues more leniently in virtual spaces and behave below their usual ethical standards (Taquadusi et al., 2017).

According to research, excessive use of social networks and online messaging apps (Facebook, Telegram, WhatsApp, etc.) and generally extensive internet usage leads to a reduction in family communications (Murray & Campbell, 2015). Internet relationships seriously damage the trust between couples and cause marital disputes, separation, and even divorce (Weiser & Weigel, 2015). Extramarital relationships can be devastating for both genders. According to most marriage and family counseling experts, the moment individuals become aware of their spouse's extramarital relationships, they are experiencing the bitterest event of their marital life, which any abnormal

reaction by the betrayed can be directed at the betrayer (Octaviana & Abraham, 2018). Extramarital relationships can damage relationships between families and even create job and social problems for them (Farabi et al., 2023), and various emotional reactions such as depression, anger, humiliation, and distress occur in many couples whose spouses have entered into such relationships (Sanchez et al., 2022). Furthermore, in our country, the divorce rate based on extramarital relationships has experienced an upward trend in recent years, according to family experts, in most cases, couples have cited infidelity as one of the divorce factors (Parsakia & Darbani, 2022).

Given the increasing extent of internet use in families and the impact of the virtual space due to its specific characteristics on facilitating online extramarital relationships and considering that awareness-raising (definitions, causes, and consequences) can be considered a therapeutic and preventive element and help individuals involved in prohibited internet activities, non-involved spouses and families, therapists, and researchers, based on this, the present research with a qualitative method aims to examine how men perceive online extramarital relationships and what are the motivational factors for men in establishing online extramarital relationships.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

In this research, a qualitative approach was employed because this approach is suitable for deeply exploring individuals' experiences. Qualitative methods allow the researcher to reach a level of detail about people or situations and become deeply involved in the actual experience of the participants. One of the reasons for choosing a qualitative method is that exploring topics such as marriage and extramarital relationships necessitates examining this level of detail. Although the qualitative approach offers various strategies, the chosen strategy for this research is content analysis.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Semi-Structured Interview

Since the goal of this study is to gain a deep and detailed understanding of individuals' experiences with extramarital relationships; semi-structured interviews were conducted.

The participants in the study are men involved in online relationships who live in the city of Mashhad and have

volunteered to participate in the study in response to a call on virtual networks. The criteria for entering the study were: 1- Willingness to interview and cooperate in conducting the research, 2- Having at least a high school diploma education, 3- Having experience with online extramarital relationships. Also, the criteria for exiting the study were: 1- Unwillingness to continue cooperation in the research. The sampling method was purposive until the level of data saturation was reached, and data collection and analysis continued until the evolution of categories was accomplished. The process of identifying samples and preparing and interviewing 12 participants was achieved.

2.3. Data analysis

To achieve the main goal of the research and based on the data collected from the interviews according to the content analysis process, these data were analyzed using MAXQDA software.

For examining the validity and reliability, credibility, consistency, confirmability, and transferability were evaluated. 1) Credibility: In this research, the criterion for data credibility was considered through prolonged engagement and spending sufficient time for data collection by the researcher and reviewing the coded interview text by participants. Participant review was done by examining and confirming the interview text and extracted codes. Moreover, the researcher clarified cases that were ambiguous or where the participant's intent was not properly understood through feedback to the participant by phone. 2) Consistency: In this research, a precise examination of the data by an observer was used to increase the study's consistency. 3) Confirmability: In this research, to increase confirmability, the researcher attempted to fully describe all research stages, including data collection, analysis, and formation of main factors, so that the reader could audit the research results upon reading them. This process was also made available to several professors and research experts to confirm the correctness of the research process. 4)

Transferability: In this research, an effort was made to gather information from men with diverse experiences in life. Additionally, differences in age, education, occupation, and the number of children among participants also contributed to increasing the likelihood of transferability of research findings.

For measuring reliability in this research, the test-retest method was used, which refers to the consistency of data classification over time. This index can be calculated when a coder has coded a text at two different times. To calculate the test-retest reliability, three interviews were selected as samples, and each was coded twice by the researcher at a short and specific time interval. Then, the codes identified at two time intervals for each of the interviews were compared. The retesting method is used to evaluate the researcher's coding stability. In each of the interviews, codes that are similar at two time intervals are identified as agreement, and non-similar codes are identified as disagreement. The method for calculating the reliability between codings done by the researcher at two time intervals is as follows:

$$\text{Reliability Percentage} = 100\% * (\text{Number of Agreements}) / (\text{Total Number of Codes})$$

The total number of codes in two one-week intervals equals 63, the total number of agreements between codes at these two times equals 48, and the total number of disagreements at these two times equals 15. The test-retest reliability of the interviews in this research is 76%. Considering that the reliability rate is more than 60%, the reliability of the codings is confirmed.

3. Findings and Results

Based on the qualitative data analysis from the interviews with participants, and the coding and content analysis of the interview texts while matching them with theoretical foundations, the main and sub-categories of the formation of men's online extramarital relationships were presented as follows in [Table 1](#):

Figure 1

Final Model of the Study

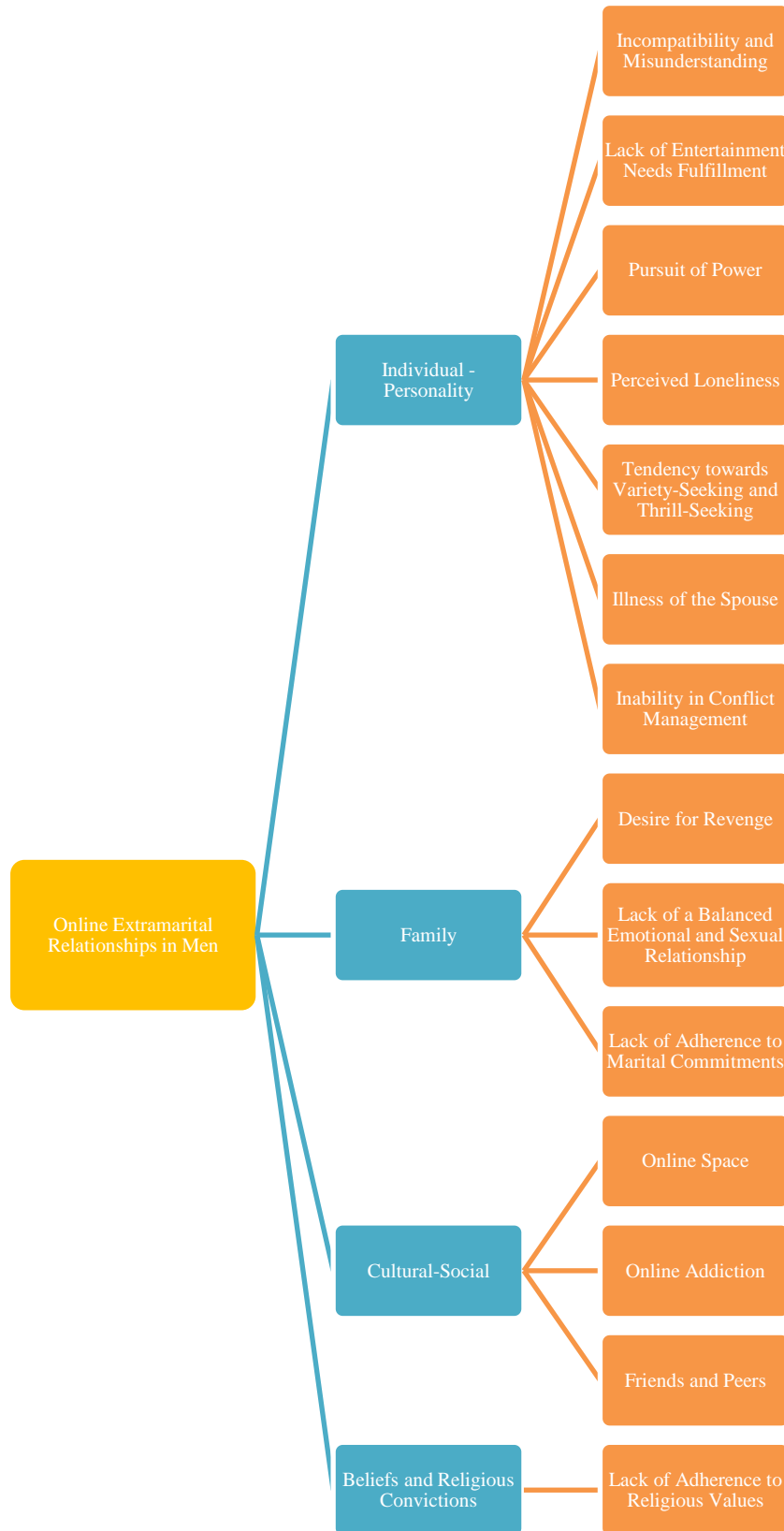


Table 1

Dimensions, Main Categories, and Subcategories in the Formation of Online Extramarital Relationships in Men

Dimension	Main Category	Subcategory
Individual - Personality	Incompatibility and Misunderstanding	Disagreement - Spouse's Indifference - Arguments and Quarrels - Dissatisfaction with Spouse's Physical Appearance
	Lack of Entertainment Needs Fulfillment	Lack of Joyful and Lively Times - Lack of Sufficient Time Together
	Pursuit of Power	Lack of Independence in Marital Life - Feeling of Power and Youth from Having Relationships with Others
	Perceived Loneliness	Marital Boredom - Lack of Happiness
	Tendency towards Variety-Seeking and Thrill-Seeking	Seeking Variety - High Thrill-Seeking
	Illness of the Spouse	Infertility - Mental and Personality Disorders (Pride, Depression, Irritability, etc.)
	Inability in Conflict Management and Life Skills	Inability in Negotiation and Conflict Resolution - Lack of Life Skills
Family	Desire for Revenge	Revenge - Tit-for-Tat Behavior
	Lack of a Balanced Emotional and Sexual Relationship with Spouse	Weak Emotional Bond with Spouse - Lack of Sexual Interest in Spouse
	Lack of Adherence to Marital Commitments	Lack of Commitment to Personal Duty - Lack of Commitment to Ethical Duty
Cultural - Social	Online Space	Ease of Relationships in Online Space - Accessibility and Ease of Relationships in Online Space - Anonymity
	Online Addiction	Addiction to Being in the Virtual Space (Social Networks) - Addiction to Unethical Chats and Pornography
	Friends and Peers	The Role of Friends in Forming These Relationships
Beliefs and Religious Convictions	Lack of Adherence to Religious Values	Relative Value Assigned to Religion - Misuse and Individual Interpretation of Religion

Based on the analyses conducted, the factors forming online extramarital relationships in men were obtained as shown in [Figure 1](#).

Main Category 1: Incompatibility and Misunderstanding

In the current study, most participants cited incompatibility and misunderstanding as one of the reasons for turning to online extramarital relationships. Incompatibility and misunderstanding are examined in four sub-categories: disagreement, spouse's indifference, arguments and disputes, and dissatisfaction with the spouse's physical appearance.

Sub-category 1- Disagreement: Misunderstanding and disagreement in marital life are the biggest problems that couples struggle with. One participant's opinion is as follows: "I no longer make any effort for my relationship with my spouse and have distanced myself from her. I'm also angry at her and I'm sure if she finds out, she will definitely react badly and our marriage will end (Third interview)." Another participant describes his disagreement with his spouse as follows: "But as we progressed, because our differences increased, I didn't get the feeling I wanted from married life (Sixth interview)."

Sub-category 2- Spouse's Indifference: Unfortunately, some spouses use a reverse method to attract their spouse's attention, believing that the more they ignore their spouse, the more they attract them. However, indifference to the

spouse is the bane of the marital relationship. One participant's opinion is as follows: "One wants to be the focus of a complete person, right?! (First interview)" Another participant's experience is as follows: "I tried a lot, bought gifts for her, constantly strived for her progress, but I was never seen (Third interview)."

Sub-category 3- Dissatisfaction with Spouse's Physical Appearance: Decreasing sexual desire and dissatisfying sexual relations over time will significantly affect the quality of life of couples. For this reason, appearance can play an important role in the lives of some people. One of the participants states their experience as follows: "After we got married, my spouse changed a lot, she doesn't take care of herself at all, always untidy, neither cares for her body nor takes care of her face, it's like she's a 70-year-old woman (Fifth interview)."

Sub-category 4- Arguments and Disputes: Arguments between couples sometimes lead to an improvement in the relationship and lifestyle of the wife and husband, and sometimes it worsens the marital relationship. One of the participants states their experience as follows: "My spouse and I are not friends, I can't talk to her about my feelings because she definitely gets angry (Third interview)." Another interviewee's experience was: "Yeah, well, my emotional needs were never paid attention to, she always yelled at me, belittled me a lot (Seventh interview)."

Main Category 2: Lack of Fulfillment of Entertainment Needs

Participants in this study mentioned the absence of joyful and cheerful times and the lack of sufficient time to be together as triggers for the formation of online extramarital relationships.

Sub-category 1- Lack of Joyful and Cheerful Times: If two people feel that they do not spend happy hours together and their entertainments are entirely different and cannot occasionally enjoy together, they should know that they are likely nearing the end of their married life, and this issue is one of the reasons men turn to virtual relationships. One of the participants described his experience as follows: "Virtual relationships are merely entertainment for being busy and forgetting unpleasantness (First interview)."

Sub-category 2- Lack of Sufficient Time to Be Together: The issue of couples feeling that the other does not spend enough time to be together causes a cooling of the relationship and a deviation in marital relationships. In this context, one of the participants' experience was as follows: "My spouse did not have time for me, she spent more time with friends and her family, as if I did not exist (Sixth interview)." Another participant states, "My spouse continues to live her life as before, busy with work, studies, friends, and her family (Third interview)." The fact that couples do not dedicate sufficient time to be together leads to significant conflicts, as indicated by this participant: "She's either at work, playing with her phone, or sleeping (Eleventh interview)."

Main Category 3: Search for Power

Every couple faces challenges in their married life since each of them comes from different backgrounds and experiences. When both have strong and independent personalities, neither is willing to compromise their standards and align with the other's. This situation makes married life and peaceful coexistence more difficult. When neither party is willing to step back in case of conflicting interests, married life becomes challenging, and the stability of the marriage is jeopardized. Participants in this study identified the lack of independence in marital life and the feeling of power and youth from having relationships with others as factors for online extramarital relationships.

Sub-category 1- Lack of Independence in Marital Life: In married life, it is necessary for each person to maintain their independence and identity while paying attention to the desires and needs of the other. Psychologists believe that husband and wife should be together, but this does not mean they should neglect themselves. Sometimes, it is not bad for

a man and a woman to be alone, spending some time on their spiritual and intellectual desires. In this context, one of the participants' experience was as follows: "My spouse does not pay attention to my personal independence and always tries to impose her opinions on me, the choice of house, car, etc., has always been based on her opinion, and mine has been insignificant (Seventh interview)."

Sub-category 2- Feeling of Power and Youth from Having Relationships with Others: Some participants mention that having relationships with other women makes them feel powerful and young, which can be rooted in various issues. One of the participants describes his experience as follows: "But honestly, when I chat with her, I feel young. I think I need to take better care of myself. It's like I've gone back to the times when I was the center of attention (First interview)."

Main Category 4: Perceived Loneliness

Individuals who feel lonely in a relationship are likely not loved by their partner, or their partner does not listen to them. In fact, loneliness occurs when both of you are in the same environment but cannot establish a positive connection with each other. Feeling lonely in a relationship gradually destroys physical and emotional intimacy. In simpler terms, these couples lose their sense of belonging to each other. The interactions you will have are often hostile and end in arguments and fights.

Sub-category 1- Marital Boredom: In this context, emotional dependence, attention, and care in the relationship decrease, and indifference towards the spouse replaces it, making them feel unsupported emotionally. In this context, one of the participants' experience was as follows: "I feel she has become distant from me and lives an independent life, whether I exist or not does not matter to her (Second interview)." One of the participants' opinion is as follows: "I'm human too, I have feelings. She has never once told me she loves me. Well, I need affection too. A person needs someone who loves them from the bottom of their heart (Fifth interview)."

Sub-category 2- Lack of Feeling of Happiness: The lack of a feeling of happiness is a factor that, according to men, has led to marital relationships. One of the participants describes his experience as follows: "Now, there's no affection or love between us. There's no interest between us, not even the slightest. It wasn't like this from the start. We loved each other, but many things happened between us that now our relationship has cooled down, and I don't feel happy (Sixth interview)." Another participant expresses his experience as follows: "Her behavior has made me not feel

happy anymore, and I've become extremely cold towards her. What can I do? I'm very tired of this situation and don't feel joy (Twelfth interview)."

Main Category 5: Tendency towards Novelty-Seeking and Thrill-Seeking

The breadth of communications on the internet and social networks, compared to the past, has led to a sense of excitement and unhealthy patterns and sexual novelty-seeking in both genders, which in turn, justifies the increase in the statistics of extramarital relationships, prostitution, secret relationships, sexual problems, and rising unconventional sexual expectations and requests in marital relationships.

Sub-category 1- Novelty-Seeking: Sexual novelty-seeking typically manifests when love in marital relationships fades, and sexual satisfaction is incomplete. Many triggers such as pornography, unconventional films, sexually promoting websites, etc., can influence this relationship and cause the creation of false excitements in the individual. In this context, one of the participants' experience was as follows: "I like to have any relationship with any beautiful woman in any way, conversation, or chat (Fifth interview)." Another participant mentions the repetitiveness of the relationship with his spouse: "The relationship with my spouse has become repetitive for me, and I think it has become part of the daily routine of my life, so I always want to experience new and diverse relationships (Sixth interview)."

Sub-category 2- High Thrill-Seeking: One of the most challenging romantic relationships is one where the man is innately a pleasure-seeker. High thrill-seeking in men includes having relationships with multiple women, both emotionally and sexually, while having another significant relationship like marriage in their life. In this context, one of the participants' experience was as follows: "I experience excitements that I had completely forgotten. I listen to music. I take care of my appearance (First interview)."

Main Category 6: Illness of Spouses

The illness of one of the spouses causes abnormalities and a lack of emotional dependency between the spouses, which in the long term leads to seeking relationships with others. Physical illnesses such as infertility of one of the spouses, or mental and psychological illnesses such as bipolar disorder, depression, and pride pave the way for extramarital relationships of the spouses.

Sub-category 1- Infertility: Infertility, in addition to creating a lot of psychological pressure on infertile individuals, affects marital relationships and can be a ground

for extramarital relationships. One of the participants describes his experience as follows: "Maybe one of the reasons for my devaluation by my spouse is this issue, I couldn't make her experience motherhood. I actually wish she would go and start a life of her own and become a mother, that's my wish (Third interview)."

Sub-category 2- Mental and Personality Disorders: There are various mental illnesses and disorders that can be the cause of men's extramarital relationships. One of the participants describes his experience as follows: "I have tried to make her like before but she doesn't give in, of course, I have a certain pride and because she loves me so much, most of my efforts have been complaining and objecting in a way that my pride remains intact. My pride has never allowed me to ask her why she doesn't love me like before and doesn't pay attention to me (First interview)." Another interviewee mentions his spouse's mental and personality disorders as follows: "My spouse has a stubborn personality. Always. In all matters of life, big or small, of any kind. Only their opinion must be executed. They don't care about my wishes or opinions and are also very irritable (Twelfth interview)."

Main Category 7: Inability to Manage Conflict and Life Skills

Everyone should know that all couples encounter conflicts from time to time, and the occurrence of conflict does not mean that there is a problem in the relationship, but rather, they must have or acquire conflict management and life skills.

Sub-category 1- Inability to Negotiate and Resolve Conflict: Another pattern of ineffective interpersonal behavior is the inability to manage conflict resolution between couples. Based on the opinions of the interviewees, the inability to manage conflict resolution includes major issues such as: avoiding discussions and arguments, inability to solve problems, and inability to negotiate and resolve conflict. One of the participants' opinion is as follows: "I feel like they were not well-raised and have not learned how to solve problems. Everyone is looking for someone on their level of thought and ideal to understand each other's physical and spiritual needs (Eighth interview)." In fact, some couples do not know the art of negotiating over a problem and are always faced with the challenge of solving problems and conflicts. Another interviewee describes their experience as follows: "The reason for these issues is that our problems have never been solved. This skill does not exist between us, and in my opinion, especially not in her. She can't solve a problem (Seventh interview)."

Sub-category 2- Inability in Life Skills

Differences and separations due to the lack of essential life skills between men and women for solving problems and the inability to convey feelings to the other party manifest themselves. One of the participants' opinion is as follows: "Does not make any effort to change and has a limited view of marital issues (Eighth interview)." Another interviewee describes their experience as follows: "I don't get very far, but I think it's because I didn't know how to express affection at first, it's hard for me to change my approach in front of my spouse, whereas if I now, having experienced the joy of giving and receiving affection, were to meet my spouse, I would have had a romantic life (Second interview)."

Main Category 8: Feeling of Revenge

Sometimes, the infidelity of a man or a woman stems from their sense of revenge, when a man or a woman wants to show their real feelings to their partner by doing exactly what they experienced themselves, thus engaging in extramarital relationships to let their spouse understand how painful it is to be cheated on, or they intend to compensate for their spouse's indifference and neglect through feelings of revenge.

Sub-category 1- Revenge: Individuals who enter romantic relationships may suffer various psychological and emotional damages, awakening a sense of revenge in some of them. One of the participants describes their experience as follows: "I'm not upset about being neglected anymore; I don't care, and I make up for it by chatting and establishing relationships with others (First interview)." When one of the spouses engages in emotional and sexual extramarital relationships, the other spouse might also turn to extramarital relationships motivated by creating feelings of jealousy and revenge against their unfaithful spouse. Another interviewee's opinion was as follows: "When I was sure my spouse was communicating with someone through social networks, I kept silent for a while and didn't tell my spouse about it, promising myself that my spouse would soon stop this mistake. When I observed that my spouse continued to err, I decided to retaliate with extramarital relationships (Ninth interview)."

Sub-category 2- Tit-for-Tat Behavior in Marital Life: Every couple may have some disputes. Indeed, at different times, spouses may be upset with each other for various reasons, causing turmoil and tension between them. In this situation, one of them may act oppositely or unethically. For example, they may resort to yelling or being stubborn. Some spouses forget being in a romantic relationship with their partner in such situations. As a result, they try their best to defeat their spouse by engaging in tit-for-tat behavior. One

of the participants describes their experience as follows: "I no longer pursue her to be like before with me. If she goes into a room and ignores me, I also stay in another room and chat and keep busy, so I don't get angry. There's no more tension, everyone does their own thing (First interview)."

Main Category 9: Lack of a Balanced Emotional and Sexual Relationship with the Spouse

Sub-category 1- Weak Emotional Bond with Spouse: Men's and women's need for love is equal and the same. However, men and women have different emotional needs, which is the cause of conflicts and marital problems. If a woman does not trust her husband, does not appreciate him, does not accept his thoughts, she will feel depressed and hurt. Men show their personality through their actions, and if they are not trusted by their spouses, they feel weak and incapable, doubting their worthiness. Conversely, if a man does not pay attention to his wife, does not treat her with respect, the woman will feel aggrieved and doubt her worth. One of the participants describes their experience as follows: "Suddenly, my life fell apart. My spouse was no longer the same person, either at work or if at home, always busy in a room with books and his laptop. I no longer felt any affection from him (First interview)." Another participant's opinion is as follows: "I don't get very far, but I think it's because I didn't know how to express affection at first, it's hard for me to change my approach in front of my spouse (Second interview)."

Sub-category 2- Lack of Desire for Sexual Relations with Spouse: One of the problems some couples face in their marital life is the lack of sexual desire, leading to the cooling of the marital life. One of the participants describes their experience as follows: "Even in sexual needs, we had problems. I mean, whenever I approached her, she pushed me away. I would go to her and say I have sexual needs now, and she would say she's not in the mood (Fourth interview)." Another interviewee describes their experience as follows: "We also had problems in sexual relations, meaning that we had sexual relations very rarely, always and only to satisfy a sexual need (Seventh interview)."

Main Category 10: Lack of Commitment to Marital Obligations

Commitment is a key pillar in marital life that is of great importance. When two people marry, they become life partners, expressing their unconditional love for each other, and it is this love that creates a sense of security, a security that spans all dimensions of life. Performing duties such as loving the spouse, respecting them, being loyal, etc., ensure that only death can separate the couple. Lack of commitment

to marital obligations leads to significant disputes between the spouses.

Sub-category 1- Lack of Personal Commitment: The personal aspect of commitment is influenced by three components: the attractiveness of the spouse, the attractiveness of the marital relationship, and marital identity. One of the participants describes their experience as follows: "I am now with my wife, and the marital relationship between us has little attraction, and I don't reject anyone else who responds to me. I believe that one should not forcibly show a happy face in marital life (Eighth interview)." In fact, if a person does not have a negative view of engaging in online extramarital relationships, despite being married, they consider extramarital relationships permissible and engage in them.

Sub-category 2- Lack of Ethical Commitment: The ethical dimension of marital commitment means staying in the relationship based on a sense of duty or promise, a personal contract to the spouse, and a desire for personal stability based on ethical loyalty to the marriage and relationship. One of the participants describes their experience as follows: "What does commitment mean? I think anyone who loves anyone else can have any kind of relationship they want, avoiding what you love and who you love? No, I don't accept that (Eighth interview)."

Main Category 11: Online Space

Online extramarital relationships, known as cybersex, are a form of emotional relationship where individuals engage in intimate sexual relationships without any real-world contact. In fact, individuals might not even see each other's faces or hear each other's voices and have no actual physical contact. However, an online extramarital relationship is very similar to a real-life extramarital relationship. It can even cause serious damage to a relationship or even a family. According to the opinions of the study participants, the ease of relationships in the online space, accessibility and simplicity of online relationships, and anonymity are among the most important reasons for men's online extramarital relationships.

Sub-category 1- Ease of Relationships in the Online Space: Now, with the use of the internet and virtual space, it is easy to connect with someone other than your spouse or life partner. Although this might seem harmless to some due to the lack of physical interaction, it should be known that this is still considered an extramarital relationship. One of the participants describes their experience as follows: "I myself find it easier, after all, when it's just virtual, things don't escalate, both emotionally and sexually (Second

interview)." Another interviewee mentions the convenience of quickly establishing a relationship: "Because it involves less trouble and is more readily available; on the other hand, you can be with several people at a limited time (Fifth interview)."

Sub-category 2- Accessibility and Ease of Relationships in the Online Space: Now, with easy access to the internet and virtual space, it is possible for someone to be online with someone other than their life partner. Such communications can easily set the stage for forming an emotional and sexual relationship outside the family and secretive extramarital relationships without their spouse's knowledge. One of the participants describes their experience as follows: "I didn't choose this relationship, I mean I didn't pursue it. This relationship was the most accessible and easiest path that was available to me (First interview)." Another participant describes their experience as follows: "Easy access to Telegram and WhatsApp are the reasons for this action (Fourth interview)."

Sub-category 3- Anonymity: Often, individuals who enter these relationships do so because of the anonymity of the other party or by hiding their own identity. In this context, one of the interviewees says: "Virtual relationships are safer, especially if you're smart and don't give real information, you can just delete your account whenever you want (Second interview)."

Main Category 12: Online Addiction

Sexual addiction to the virtual space, which is common among some individuals, causes a person to become addicted to viewing pornographic or vulgar images and videos, which in many cases leads to sexual obsession, and this is a disorder. This addiction manifests as addiction to social networks and addiction to unethical chats.

Sub-category 1- Addiction to Presence in Virtual Space: People addicted to social networks usually suffer from the syndrome of online loneliness, experiencing constant online presence without physical contact with the family, and these individuals prefer cyber relationships over interpersonal relationships, resulting in family and work problems. The constant and addictive presence in virtual networks paves the way for forming extramarital relationships. One of the participants describes their experience as follows: "Usually, in the groups I'm a member of - mostly on Telegram - these connections form (Second interview)." Another participant shows the level of dependency on the virtual space, especially on social networks, as follows: "I always get pulled to go to my phone, the phone doesn't leave me, if Telegram was disconnected for a moment, it's like I went

crazy. Or for example, if my phone had a problem, I felt as if something was ripped out of me (Twelfth interview)."

Sub-category 2- Addiction to Unethical Chats and Pornography: When men and women engage in romantic relationships with the opposite sex in chat rooms or social networks, this issue can lead to the destabilization and destruction of their family life. One of the participants describes their experience as follows: "Well, I got used to them, I get bored. I don't know, maybe it's a kind of addiction (Second interview)." The impact of satellite networks and pornographic films; with advancements in technology, social networking sites, and the internet, and easy access to them, are one of the significant factors in the social harm of online extramarital relationships. One of the men's opinion is as follows: "What does it matter to her if I watch porn or talk to someone on Facebook and Telegram, am I neglecting her in any way (Twelfth interview)?"

Main Category 13: Friends and Peers

Sub-category 1- The Role of Friends in Forming Their Relationships: Among some of the participants, cases were found that reflect the role of friends in forming their relationships with someone other than their spouse: "All our friends had girlfriends; it became normal, and none of them has had any problems in their life because of it (Sixth interview)." Another participant emphasizes the role of friends in this issue: "They have a wife, children, they are living their married life but also have someone else. Now, they might see that person once every two weeks, once a month, or even sometimes go on trips with them, but they've managed to keep their married life (Seventh interview)."

Main Category 14: Lack of Adherence to Religious Values

Lack of adherence to religious values leads to the emergence of behavioral and moral abnormalities in the family and society. Given that in the interviews, most participants had weak beliefs in both practical and attitudinal aspects, this can also be considered as one of the factors that can lead spouses towards extramarital relationships.

Sub-category 1- Relativizing the Value of Religion: When a spouse is committed to their religious beliefs, they try to keep their family and spouse satisfied because they believe that God watches over their actions and behaviors, and the slightest discrimination and disrespect in this regard is unforgivable. Lack of practical adherence to religious values among participants is presented in concepts such as lack of heartfelt faith in religious obligations, performing religious obligations out of compulsion, lack of belief in obligations, and weakening in performing religious

obligations: "I've never prayed before, I mean, I don't believe in praying and fasting... it doesn't mean anything special to me (Twelfth interview)."

Sub-category 2- Misuse and Individual Interpretation of Religion: Some participants, stating that their religion has left them free to have multiple spouses and with their personal interpretation of religious matters, deem such relationships permissible: "I always try to read the Sigheh [temporary marriage] if I enter a relationship so I don't commit a sin, for men, God in the Quran has given freedom and said we can have several wives (Eighth interview)."

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The current study was conducted with the goal of qualitatively analyzing men's online extramarital relationships. Based on the qualitative data analysis, the results show that the factors forming men's online extramarital relationships can be categorized into 14 main categories and 30 sub-categories. In examining the factors forming online extramarital relationships in men, four realms and categories can be identified: individual-personality, familial, cultural-social, and beliefs and religious convictions.

In the individual-personality factors category, factors such as incompatibility and misunderstanding (differences of opinion - spouse's indifference - arguments and disputes - dissatisfaction with spouse's physical appearance), unfulfilled need for entertainment (lack of enjoyable and cheerful times - lack of sufficient time to be together), and the search for power (lack of independence in marital life and feeling of power and youth from having a relationship with others), perceived loneliness (marital boredom - lack of feeling of happiness), inclination towards variety seeking and thrill-seeking (variety seeking - high thrill-seeking), illnesses of spouses (infertility - mental and personality disorders (pride, depression, irritability, etc.)), inability in conflict management and life skills (inability in negotiation and conflict resolution - inability in life skills) significantly influence the formation of online extramarital relationships in men. Given that individual differences and personality traits are one of the evident phenomena in psychology, personality appears to be a significant predictor of the effects of individual differences on sexual behavior and marital relationships. Individual differences in personality traits can impact the quality of marital relationships and the formation of extramarital relationships. In this context, Qahramani and Ghodrati (2016) concluded that the main category in

extramarital relationships is the husband's neglect of the wife, conceptualized as the lack of financial, emotional, and sexual fulfillment. In another study, results by Habibi Askarabad and Hajheydari (2015) indicated that individual factors (such as variety seeking and self-righteousness, unrequited past love, the presence of extramarital relationship patterns), interpersonal factors (such as sexual incompatibility, frigidity, chronic illness, emotional void, lack of understanding and empathy, significant age difference, class difference, verbal abuse, physical violence, spouse's absence) are among the primary causes of extramarital relationships from the perspective of both men and women (Habibi Askarabad & Hajiheydari, 2015). Moreover, Jahan et al. (2018) in their study titled "Investigation of the Consequences of Extramarital Relationships," found that extramarital relationships have numerous consequences, such as comparing the spouse with the lover, cooling off the marital life, closing the ways to improve marital life, losing trust between the couple, scandal, loss of mental peace for the adulterer, mental illnesses and in more severe cases, sexually transmitted diseases, which can destroy the foundation of marital life (Jahan et al., 2017). Confirming the findings of the study, it should be stated that a number of researchers considering extramarital relationships as an internal issue, focus on internal individual characteristics such as sexual and emotional variety seeking, especially in the emotional and sexual dimensions, and on the other hand, other researchers report dysfunction in interpersonal relationships such as emotional dissatisfaction, sexual dissatisfaction, insecure attachment style, increased negative interactions relative to positive ones as causes of extramarital relationships, believing that extramarital relationships are the result of a defect in the marital relationship and only occur in boring and troubled relationships.

In examining familial factors, categories include: seeking revenge (revenge - tit-for-tat behavior), the absence of a balanced emotional and sexual relationship with the spouse (weak emotional bond with the spouse - lack of desire for sexual relations with the spouse), and not adhering to marital commitments (lack of commitment to personal - lack of commitment to moral obligation), significantly influence the formation of online extramarital relationships in men. In this context, Rodríguez, López, and Pereira (2016), aiming to investigate the perception of extramarital relationships in the web space, concluded that individuals heavily involved in virtual extramarital relationships have very low commitment to their real partner and a low understanding of extramarital

relationships, engaging more in these virtual relationships (Rodrigues et al., 2017). In another study, Vallincourt et al. (2016) found that one of the factors challenging family health, discussed as extramarital relationships, is the most significant threatening factor to the function, stability, and continuation of the marital relationship. When spouses have many unmet emotional needs and remain apart for various reasons over time, the possibility of someone else fulfilling these needs increases (Vaillancourt-Morel et al., 2016). Also, Wiebe & Johnson (2017) in their study concluded that awareness about sexual matters can be the source of many psychological-behavioral disorders. Sexual activity disorders, regardless of the cause, have many negative consequences. Given that one of the fundamental and influential factors in the stability of marital relationships is the proper and satisfactory sexual relationship, the outcomes of a correct or incorrect relationship not only concern the couple but also affect future generations and consequently society, because a healthy society consists of healthy families (Wiebe & Johnson, 2017). In explaining familial factors, it must be stated that if family life creates unfavorable conditions for satisfying needs and meeting expectations, not only does it not achieve mental health, but it also leaves negative and sometimes irreparable effects.

In the category of cultural-social factors, the online space (ease of relationships in the online space - access and ease of relationships in the online space - anonymity), online addiction (addiction to presence in the virtual space (social networks) - addiction to unethical chats and pornography), and friends and peers (the role of friends in forming their relationships) significantly influence the formation of online extramarital relationships in men. In this context, Rezaei and Dehghan (2018) found that the family, as the most fundamental social institution, possesses specific functions and roles that lead directly or indirectly to the vitality and flourishing of society. A pathological examination of Iranian families shows that currently, two factors, cultural and economic poverty, are the source of many family problems, and emotional divorce inflicts irreparable damage on family members, making them susceptible to various mental and psychological problems, with lack of acquaintance between couples, unfavorable economic conditions, increasing unemployment rate, increasing divorce rates, etc., being among the causes of emotional divorces (Parsakia & Rostami, 2023). Additionally, presence on social networks decreases the couple's ability to resolve marital conflicts, use leisure time, etc. Also, Cravens and Whiting (2014), in a study aimed at the clinical consequences of online

extramarital relationships, reached the conclusions that the internet increases relationships or the development of illegal relationships (sexual addiction and pornography) (Cravens & Whiting, 2014). Finally, Norton and Babbitt (2014) showed that excessive use of social networks is associated with reduced marital boundaries (Norton & Baptist, 2014). In explaining cultural-social factors, it should be stated that when the cultural function of the family is harmed and fails to create necessary models and motives for the preservation and survival of the family, men and women do not recognize motives for the survival and solidity of the family system, and are ready to break this bond at the slightest disagreement. Moreover, the impact of virtual networks (WhatsApp, Instagram, etc.) and satellite channels and pornographic films; currently, with technological advancements, social virtual networks and the internet, and easy access to them are one of the effective factors in the social harm of marital infidelity.

In the category of beliefs and religious convictions, lack of adherence to religious values (relative value placed on religion - misuse and individual interpretation of religion) significantly influences the formation of men's online extramarital relationships. In this regard, Ghafourian et al. (2018) concluded that religious belief factors significantly impact the occurrence of extramarital relationships among women (Ghaffourian et al., 2018). According to Atkins, Baucom, and Jacobson (2001), in happy marriages, religious values can strengthen the primary relationship. In other words, religion has the ability to protect spouses from extramarital relationships during life crises, thereby reducing the occurrence of extramarital relationships (Atkins et al., 2001). As families generally perceive the societal atmosphere and the changes resulting from the advent of modernity to some extent, based on their traditional or non-traditional structure and belief or disbelief in religious values and convictions, they generally either grant their children unrestricted freedom in relationships with the opposite sex and in performing religious rituals or create a set of restrictions and compulsions on their children's actions and relationships to preserve them. Each of these actions by parents can, in a way, create a value and normative gap between two generations, parents and children, and thus serve as a factor in the occurrence of extramarital relationships in their future. According to research by Atkins and Kessel (2008), religious teachings emphasize the importance of marriage, fidelity, and the prohibition of extramarital relationships (Atkins & Kessel, 2008). In a study, Tuttle and Davis (2015) found that

religiosity reduces the likelihood of extramarital relationships among couples (Tuttle & Davis, 2015). Also, Atkins, Baucom, and Jacobson (2001) stated that in happy marriages, religious values can strengthen the primary relationship (Atkins et al., 2001). In other words, religion has the ability to protect spouses from extramarital relationships during life crises, thereby reducing the occurrence of extramarital relationships.

The overall conclusion from the research findings indicates that extramarital relationships are one of the damaging phenomena that occur as a result of a chain of individual-personality, familial, cultural-social factors, and beliefs and religious convictions. Considering that the current research findings provide a comprehensive understanding of the causes of this social problem, the results derived from this study can aid in planning for the prevention, reduction, and elimination of the driving factors, thereby helping to improve societal health and assist experts, counselors, and stakeholders in the family and social issues domain.

Based on the results, it is suggested that mass media, such as broadcasting, play a more constructive role in organizing scientific-specialized seminars for increasing the knowledge and awareness of couples in enhancing life skills and mental health, teaching positive couple therapy skills, and public education on better management and positive use of virtual social networks. Also, disruption in marital relationships plays a significant role in the inclination towards extramarital relationships. Therefore, examining the quality and quantity of marital relationships and aiding in their improvement can act as a deterrent factor. It is recommended that the nature of couples' marital relationships be transparently examined by social workers, and any potential related disorders be identified.

5. Limitations & Suggestions

The present study encounters several limitations that warrant attention. Firstly, the reliance on self-reported data introduces the potential for social desirability bias, where participants might underreport behaviors or feelings perceived as socially unacceptable. The qualitative nature of the study, although rich in detail, limits the generalizability of the findings to a broader population due to the specific sample and context in which the study was conducted. Additionally, the cross-sectional design restricts the ability to establish causality between identified factors and the development of online extramarital relationships.

Furthermore, the study focuses primarily on male perspectives, which may not fully capture the complexity of these relationships, including the experiences and influences of the female partners involved. Lastly, the evolving nature of online platforms and the private nature of extramarital interactions may mean that not all relevant factors and dynamics were fully explored.

The results of the current study can have both educational and therapeutic applications and be considered in therapeutic and prevention protocols. For example, the findings can be utilized in pre-marriage education, prevention of online extramarital relationships, and identifying signs indicating that a marriage is at risk of an extramarital relationship. Additionally, the research results can pave the way for future studies.

Acknowledgments

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

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

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

Transparency of Data

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

Funding

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

Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed in this article.

References

Atkins, D. C., Baucom, D. H., & Jacobson, N. S. (2001). Understanding infidelity: Correlates in a national random

- sample. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 15(4), 735-749. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0893-3200.15.4.735>
- Atkins, D. C., & Kessel, D. E. (2008). Religiousness and Infidelity: Attendance, but not Faith and Prayer, Predict Marital Fidelity. *Journal of marriage and family*, 70(2), 407-418. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2008.00490.x>
- Coop Gordon, K., & Mitchell, E. A. (2020). Infidelity in the Time of COVID-19. *Family Process*, 59(3), 956-966. <https://doi.org/10.1111/famp.12576>
- Cravens, J. D., & Whiting, J. B. (2014). Clinical Implications of Internet Infidelity: Where Facebook Fits In. *The American Journal of Family Therapy*, 42(4), 325-339. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01926187.2013.874211>
- Farabi, M., Teimouri, S., & Rajaei, A. (2023). Comparing the effect of cognitive behavioral couple therapy and integrative behavioral couple therapy on communication patterns in couples with extramarital relationships. *International Journal of Behavioral Sciences*, 16(4), 241-247. https://www.behavsci.ir/%26url=http://www.behavsci.ir/article_165839.html
- Ghafoorian, P., Asghari ebrahim abad, M. j., Abdekhodaei, M. s., & Kimiaee, S. a. (2018). The Role of Individual, Familial, Social and Religious Factors in Extramarital Relationships of Married Women and Introducing a Treatment Model Based on the Related Factors: A Qualitative Study. *Women's Studies Sociological and Psychological*, 16(4), 7-42. <https://doi.org/10.22051/jwsp.2019.23012.1867>
- Habibi Askarabad, M., & Hajiheydari, Z. (2015). A Qualitative Study for Investigating the Reasons of Sexual Infidelity of Couples who have Asked for Divorce in Family Court. *Journal of Family Research*, 11(2), 165-186. https://jfr.sbu.ac.ir/article_96356_4f3c25c4268c3cce942fa24f91385c74.pdf
- Harris, C. (2018). *Characteristics of emotional and physical marital infidelity that predict divorce* [Alliant International University]. <https://search.proquest.com/openview/33c42af0a02462c73ff45d4133cffe5/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750>
- Jahan, Y., Chowdhury, A. S., Rahman, S. M. A., Chowdhury, S., Khair, Z., Huq, K. A. T. M. E., & Rahman, M. M. (2017). Factors involving extramarital affairs among married adults in Bangladesh. *International Journal of Community Medicine and Public Health*, 4(5), 1379-1386. <https://doi.org/10.18203/2394-6040.ijcmph20171506>
- McKeever, N. (2020). Why, and to What Extent, Is Sexual Infidelity Wrong? *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, 101(3), 515-537. <https://doi.org/10.1111/papq.12316>
- Murray, C. E., & Campbell, E. C. (2015). The Pleasures and Perils of Technology in Intimate Relationships. *Journal of Couple & Relationship Therapy*, 14(2), 116-140. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15332691.2014.953651>
- Navabinejad, S., Rostami, M., & Parsakia, K. (2024). Influences of Family Structure and Intimacy on Emotional Divorce: A Cross-Sectional Analysis. *Journal of Psychosociological Research in Family and Culture*, 2(1), 23-30. <https://journals.kmanpub.com/index.php/jprfc/article/view/2193>
- Norton, A. M., & Baptist, J. (2014). Couple boundaries for social networking in middle adulthood: Associations of trust and satisfaction. *Cyberpsychology: Journal of Psychosocial Research on Cyberspace*, 8(4), Article 2. <https://doi.org/10.5817/CP2014-4-2>
- Octaviana, B. N., & Abraham, J. (2018). Tolerance for emotional internet infidelity and its correlate with relationship flourishing. *International Journal of Electrical and Computer Engineering (Ijece)*, 8(5), 3158-3168.

https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3227221

- Parsakia, K., & Darbani, S. A. (2022). Effectiveness of strength-based counseling on self-worth of divorced women. *Applied Family Therapy Journal (AFTJ)*, 3(1), 687-700. <https://journals.kmanpub.com/index.php/afj/article/view/938>
- Parsakia, K., & Rostami, M. (2023). Digital Intimacy: How Technology Shapes Friendships and Romantic Relationships. *AI and Tech in Behavioral and Social Sciences*, 1(1), 27-34. <https://doi.org/10.61838/kman.aitech.1.1.5>
- Rodrigues, D., Lopes, D., & Pereira, M. (2017). Sociosexuality, Commitment, Sexual Infidelity, and Perceptions of Infidelity: Data From the Second Love Web Site. *The Journal of Sex Research*, 54(2), 241-253. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2016.1145182>
- Saadati, N., & Parsakia, K. (2023). The Predictive Role of Parents' Marital Relationship Quality on The Adolescents' Psychological Capital. *Journal of Adolescent and Youth Psychological Studies (JAYPS)*, 4(8), 139-146. <https://doi.org/10.61838/kman.jayps.4.8.16>
- Sanchez, L., Whisman, M. A., Hughes, J. A., & Gordon, K. C. (2022). Diversity in the prevalence and correlates of extramarital sex in a probability sample of Latino adults. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 36(4), 555-564. <https://doi.org/10.1037/fam0000942>
- Taqadusi, M. s., Mazaheri, M. A., Shokri, O., & Zabihzadeh, A. (2017). A Comparison of Types of Confrontation of People with Ethical Situations in Cyberspace and Real World. *IO(39)*, 97-122. http://www.jsfc.ir/article_57086_f422e2722b506d13761c81d97586d95a.pdf
- Tuttle, J. D., & Davis, S. N. (2015). Religion, Infidelity, and Divorce: Reexamining the Effect of Religious Behavior on Divorce Among Long-Married Couples. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, 56(6), 475-489. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10502556.2015.1058660>
- Vaillancourt-Morel, M.-P., Dugal, C., Poirier Stewart, R., Godbout, N., Sabourin, S., Lussier, Y., & Briere, J. (2016). Extradysadic Sexual Involvement and Sexual Compulsivity in Male and Female Sexual Abuse Survivors. *The Journal of Sex Research*, 53(4-5), 614-625. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2015.1061633>
- Weiser, D. A., & Weigel, D. J. (2015). Investigating experiences of the infidelity partner: Who is the "Other Man/Woman"? *Personality and individual differences*, 85, 176-181. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2015.05.014>
- Wiebe, S. A., & Johnson, S. M. (2017). Creating relationships that foster resilience in Emotionally Focused Therapy. *Current opinion in psychology*, 13, 65-69. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2016.05.001>