Love and Deception: Exploring the Lived Experience of Deceptive Men in Romantic Relationships

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Abstract

A romantic bond that is formed through reliance on deception constitutes a lust-driven and tension-inducing craving that, in addition to harming the victim, can also entrap the deceiver in severe and enduring suffering—ambiguous forms of suffering whose clarification has thus far been largely neglected in the literature. The objective of the present study was to explore the lived experience of deceptive men in unstable and deception-laden romantic relationships. The present study employed a qualitative design based on interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). Using purposive sampling, the researcher selected and interviewed 18 individuals who had current or previous experiences of emotional deception. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and ultimately analyzed using the interpretative phenomenological analysis method proposed by Smith et al. (2009). Exploration of the participants' lived experiences led to the identification of four superordinate themes: the death of secure beliefs and the consolidation of their contradictions; love as a fabricated lust with fourfold masks; soothing cognitive–moral justifications; and a hell called: the inability to love. Examination of the lived experiences of emotional deceivers revealed that emotional deception and engagement in false romantic relationships, apart from transient pleasures, leave profound and lasting suffering in these individuals. This destructive suffering gradually renders this group pessimistic toward themselves, others, human relationships, and life as a whole, making the re-experience of peace in their personal, relational, and social worlds difficult and, in some cases, virtually impossible.

Keywords: *love; deception; men; deceiver; interpretative phenomenological analysis.*

1. Introduction

Romantic relationships are often positioned as contexts for intimacy, mutual care, and psychological security; yet they also constitute settings in which deception can emerge, stabilize, and profoundly shape how individuals think, feel, and behave toward partners and toward intimacy as a whole. Empirical and theoretical scholarship has long acknowledged that deception is not an exceptional event in close relationships but rather a recurring interpersonal behavior that may include lying, cheating, withholding information, or strategically managing impressions to obtain relational, sexual, emotional, or material outcomes (Kowalski et al., 2003). Within contemporary relationship science, deception is increasingly examined not only as a discrete act but as a relational process that can reorganize meaning-making, alter attachment-relevant expectations, and change relational decision-making over time (Redlick & Vangelisti, 2018; Smith et al., 2023). Accordingly, a psychological understanding of romantic deception requires attending to both the immediate interpersonal function of deceptive behavior and the longer-term intrapersonal costs that may accrue for those who deceive, those who are deceived, and the relational system that contains them.

A central challenge for the psychology of romantic deception is that the phenomenon is heterogeneous. Deception may occur in everyday relational contexts (e.g., minor lies, concealment, impression management), in emerging adult relationships where norms of exclusivity and honesty are still consolidating, and in high-harm contexts such as romance fraud in which deception is systematic, predatory, and financially or emotionally exploitative (Carter, 2021; Easterling et al., 2019; Saxey et al., 2022). Studies of undergraduate relationships, for example, indicate that lying and cheating occur with meaningful frequency and are embedded in the negotiation of commitment, desire, and social reputation (Easterling et al., 2019). In emerging adulthood, financial deception has been documented as a salient and understudied form of relational dishonesty, reflecting both economic vulnerability and relational bargaining around shared resources (Saxey et al., 2022). At the more severe end, romance fraud demonstrates how deception can be systematized through grooming, coercion, and exploitation, yielding deep psychological harm for victims and providing a criminological lens on relational manipulation (Carter, 2021). These diverse manifestations suggest that "deception in romance" spans normative, ambiguous, and criminal dynamics, each with distinct psychological mechanisms and outcomes.

A complementary strand of research focuses on specific modalities through which romantic deception is enacted and sustained. Deceptive affectionate messaging—communicative expressions of affection that are strategically deployed rather than genuinely felt—has been conceptualized as a mechanism for influencing partners' perceptions, maintaining access to relational benefits, and regulating relational risk (Smith et al., 2023). From an evolutionary and interpersonal communication perspective, deceptive affectionate messages may function as mate-retention behaviors, designed to reduce the likelihood of partner loss or increase a partner's investment, even when the sender's affective state is incongruent with the message (Redlick & Vangelisti, 2018). This literature underscores a key psychological tension: romantic deception may involve affective performance that mimics intimacy while simultaneously undermining the very trust and safety on which intimacy depends. The resulting relational climate can produce escalating uncertainty, heightened vigilance, and destabilization of perceived commitment.

The social-cognitive mechanisms that enable deception, and that reduce internal resistance to harming another person through deception, are also increasingly salient. Bandura's model of selective moral disengagement provides a widely used framework for understanding how individuals cognitively restructure harmful conduct, displace responsibility, minimize consequences, and dehumanize victims, thereby weakening self-sanctions such as guilt and shame (Bandura, 2002). In romantic contexts, moral disengagement can manifest as justifying infidelity, reframing exploitation as mutual benefit, or construing partners as undeserving of honesty. Importantly, moral disengagement is not merely a post hoc narrative; it can become a stable cognitive style that facilitates repeated deception and shapes self-concept, partner perception, and expectations about relational trustworthiness. Hence, studying deceivers' meaning-making is critical for understanding how deception becomes normalized within their relational repertoire.

Person-level variables further complicate the psychology of romantic deception. For instance, research indicates that narcissistic traits—both agentic and communal—predict different types of lies in romantic relationships, highlighting the role of self-presentation motives and entitlement in deceptive behavior (Harhoff et al., 2023). Similarly, attachment dynamics are implicated in online dating

deception, suggesting that relational insecurity may shape how individuals manage intimacy and disclosure under conditions of heightened ambiguity and rapid partner evaluation (Mosley et al., 2020). In addition, the interplay of sexuality, resources, and relational goals can drive deception, particularly when sex and money become central currencies within romantic exchanges (Hill et al., 2023). These findings collectively imply that romantic deception is rarely explained by a single motive; rather, it emerges from interacting dispositional vulnerabilities, relational incentives, and contextual affordances.

The role of emotion in deception has received substantial theoretical attention, particularly through models that position emotion as both an antecedent and a tool of deception. The Emotion Deception Model emphasizes how emotional experiences can motivate deception, how emotional displays can be strategically managed to mislead others, and how deception can in turn generate emotional consequences that reshape future behavior (Gaspar & Schweitzer, 2013). Building on this foundation, a more recent theoretical model connects emotional intelligence to deception, proposing that emotion-related skills may increase an individual's capacity to deceive effectively (e.g., by reading partners' cues, regulating expressions, and maintaining consistency), while also shaping the ethical boundaries of deceptive action (Gaspar et al., 2022). In romantic contexts, where emotional signaling is a primary medium of connection, these models are especially pertinent: deception may depend on sophisticated emotional performance, but sustained emotional performance can carry psychological costs, including emotional numbness, self-alienation, and chronic interpersonal distrust.

Beyond deception itself, relationship dissolution and relational trauma constitute critical outcomes and contexts in which deception becomes psychologically consequential. Love trauma symptoms have been linked to psychological pain, experiential avoidance, and difficulties with interpersonal forgiveness, illustrating pathways through which relational ruptures can be internalized as enduring distress (Ertazai et al., 2024). Qualitative evidence also highlights how love trauma is shaped by sociocultural contexts and gendered expectations, including the lived experiences of female students navigating relational loss and its psychological sequelae (Jamshidian Naeini et al., 2024). In Iranian samples, recurrent heartbreak has been theorized as a process with patterned meanings and coping trajectories, reinforcing the value of qualitative approaches for understanding how individuals interpret and respond to repeated relational injuries (Dindoust et al., 2023). While these studies often focus on those who are harmed or rejected, they indirectly raise a neglected question: what psychological trajectories unfold for individuals who repeatedly deceive, exploit, or abandon partners while narrating these actions as "love"?

Related qualitative and cultural scholarship indicates that romantic relationships are embedded in broader social institutions and normative scripts that shape how intimacy, commitment, and deception are understood. Research on early marriage, for example, documents complex lived experiences shaped by structural constraints, cultural meanings, and power dynamics that can influence vulnerability to deception and relational harm (Majidi et al., 2023). Studies on friendships and cross-gender relationships among university students likewise suggest that relational involvement can produce wide-ranging personal and social consequences, which may include shifts in identity, responsibility, and relational expectations (Javanmard et al., 2022). Additionally, transformations in love under crisis conditions—such as the COVID-19 period—illustrate how relational meanings are malleable, context-dependent, and responsive to broader threats and constraints (Rafiei et al., 2023). At the same time, the rise of virtual love and digitally mediated relationships has introduced new interactional environments where deception may be easier to enact, harder to detect, and more rapidly amplified through platform affordances and anonymity (Mosley et al., 2020; Soleimani, 2023). These contextual dynamics highlight that romantic deception is not solely an individual pathology; it is also a phenomenon shaped by social norms, technological infrastructures, and relational scripts.

Another important body of evidence emphasizes the bidirectional relation between love, intimacy, and relational satisfaction, particularly through the lens of love styles and intimacy as mediating mechanisms. Findings that intimacy mediates the association between love styles and relationship satisfaction underscore the centrality of authentic closeness and mutual understanding for relational well-being (Ercan, 2025). When deception becomes a recurrent relational strategy, it plausibly undermines intimacy formation and maintenance, thereby impairing satisfaction and stability while increasing relational anxiety and distrust. This erosion may be particularly relevant for those who routinely perform affection without congruent emotional investment, as deceptive affectionate messages can create short-term compliance yet degrade long-term relational safety (Redlick & Vangelisti, 2018; Smith et al.,

2023). Consequently, deception can be conceptualized as an intimacy-disrupting process that changes both relational structure and individual capacity for closeness.

Detection processes also matter. Research examining deception detection in romantic relationships suggests that relationship involvement can shape how accurately individuals identify deception, with gender differences and mentalizing capacities operating as mediating mechanisms (Wang et al., 2023). If romantic involvement can alter deception detection, repeated cycles of deception may also alter deceivers' expectations that others are deceptive, thereby fostering generalized distrust and hypervigilance. Such shifts may become self-reinforcing: distrust encourages defensive relational strategies, which can elicit conflict and disengagement, further reinforcing cynical beliefs about love and commitment. In this way, romantic deception is not only an interpersonal event but also a cognitive-affective learning process that can reorganize schemas about people, intimacy, and the self.

While much of the deception literature addresses ordinary relational dishonesty, infidelity, and deception detection, adjacent research on marital infidelity provides further insight into existential and meaning-based dimensions of deceptive relational conduct. Qualitative work on men's marital infidelity has identified existential phenomena—such as emptiness, meaning seeking, and identity conflicts—that accompany or motivate extradyadic involvement (Choupani et al., 2021). In parallel, broader reviews of love and infidelity emphasize both causes and consequences, including relational dissatisfaction, opportunity structures, and the psychological aftermath for partners and for relational functioning (Rokach & Chan, 2023). These findings suggest that deception-related behaviors may be intertwined with deeper existential concerns, self-concept tensions, and attempts to regulate psychological pain—elements that are often obscured in purely quantitative models.

A further conceptual bridge is offered by scholarship on lying as a moral choice. Work examining moral reasons for lying in close relationships underscores that deception can be framed by actors as morally motivated, protective, or pragmatic, even when it generates harm (Hodel et al., 2024). This perspective reinforces the importance of exploring the moral narratives and justificatory frameworks through which deceivers interpret their conduct. Such narratives may align with moral disengagement mechanisms—e.g., minimization and responsibility displacement—while also drawing on culturally available scripts about love,

masculinity, entitlement, and relational exchange (Bandura, 2002). The complexity of these interpretive layers indicates a need for methodologies that can capture meaning-making, ambiguity, and contradiction.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is particularly well suited for investigating these processes because it centers on how individuals make sense of their lived experiences, and it attends to both the participant's meaning-making and the researcher's interpretive engagement with that meaning (Smith et al., 2009). IPA has been widely used in psychology to examine experiences that are emotionally charged, morally complex, and deeply embedded in identity and relational contexts. In the present topic area, IPA can illuminate how deceptive men describe "love," how they interpret the motivations and consequences of deception, how they experience guilt or defensiveness, and how repeated deception may transform their beliefs about trust, worthiness, lovability, and intimacy. This approach is particularly valuable where the phenomenon is under-theorized or where existing theory does not capture culturally specific meanings.

Moreover, recent developments in adjacent domains underscore that deception and self-deception are evolving in response to technological and social change. The emergence of human–AI emotional relations, for example, raises new questions about self-deception, authenticity, and the construction of intimacy with non-human agents, suggesting that the boundaries of "romantic belief" and "emotional truth" are increasingly negotiable (Kaczmarek, 2025). At a sociological level, research on homogamous relationships in academia indicates that "love" is also situated within institutional contexts and can shape life trajectories, including career patterns and opportunity structures (Velicu et al., 2025). Such perspectives reinforce that romantic experience is not merely private; it is interwoven with social systems that can amplify incentives for impression management, concealment, and strategic relational decisions. In a clinical and developmental register, discussions of trauma in adolescents further highlight that relational distress is often minimized or concealed ("I'm fine"), emphasizing the importance of sensitive, experience-near inquiry into hidden suffering and defensive narratives (Smith, 2025). Taken together, these contemporary threads suggest that deception—interpersonal or intrapersonal—may be increasingly normalized, yet psychologically costly.

Despite the breadth of scholarship on deception, infidelity, deception detection, online dating dishonesty, and love trauma, a notable gap persists: the lived experience of

the deceiver, particularly in contexts where deception is relationally central and repeatedly enacted, remains insufficiently illuminated. While criminological research has richly described the "inner workings" of romance fraud, its primary focus is often on offender tactics and victimization dynamics rather than on the offender's enduring psychological sequelae and transformations in self- and relationship-related beliefs (Carter, 2021). Likewise, research on love trauma and heartbreak typically centers on those who experience rejection or betrayal, leaving open the question of whether and how those who deceive encounter their own forms of suffering, emptiness, or relational incapacity (Dindoust et al., 2023; Ertazai et al., 2024). Yet, theoretical frameworks would predict that repeated moral disengagement, emotional performance, and exploitative relational exchange could yield cumulative intrapersonal costs, including cynicism, emotional blunting, shame dynamics, and compromised capacity for genuine intimacy (Bandura, 2002; Gaspar & Schweitzer, 2013).

The present study therefore focuses on deceptive men's lived experiences in romantic relationships characterized by emotional deception and relational instability, using an interpretative phenomenological approach to capture meaning-making, contradictions, and the perceived psychological consequences of deceptive relational patterns (Smith et al., 2009). Specifically, this study is positioned at the intersection of research on romantic deception as a common yet consequential relational behavior (Easterling et al., 2019; Kowalski et al., 2003), theoretical models linking emotion and deception (Gaspar et al., 2022; Gaspar & Schweitzer, 2013), moral-cognitive explanations of harmful conduct (Bandura, 2002; Hodel et al., 2024), and clinical-phenomenological accounts of love trauma and relational distress (Ertazai et al., 2024; Jamshidian Naeini et al., 2024). By integrating these literatures, the study aims to clarify how deception is narrated as "love," how justificatory systems are constructed, and how repeated deception may transform beliefs about trust, worthiness, lovability, and intimacy, potentially culminating in emotional numbness, chronic relational anxiety, and a hostile worldview (Rokach & Chan, 2023; Soleimani, 2023; Wang et al., 2023).

The aim of this study was to explore, through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, the lived experience of men who engage in emotional deception within romantic relationships and to identify the core meanings, justifications, and perceived psychological consequences associated with these deception-based relational patterns.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

The present study was conducted using a qualitative approach and employed an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) design. Interpretative phenomenology is one of the most widely used qualitative approaches, developed with the purpose of understanding and interpreting the latent meanings embedded in human experiences related to the phenomena under investigation. The primary aim of this research design is to focus on how individuals make sense of their lived realities and to uncover the hidden layers of experience within their cultural, social, and existential contexts. Within this framework, the researcher concentrates on the participants' narratives and representations in order to move beyond mere description and achieve a deeper interpretation and understanding of the studied experiences. The fundamental rationale for applying this design lies in determining whether the phenomenon under study requires semantic exploration and interpretation within the context of individuals' lives and identities.

The participant population of the present study consisted of men aged 20 to 30 years residing in Shahindezh who had experienced at least one instance of emotional deception of women, physical, sexual, or financial exploitation, and subsequent abandonment without justification. The sampling method was purposive sampling. The sample size was determined based on the principle of data saturation. The interview process continued until saturation was achieved. Data saturation occurred at the fifteenth interview, and in order to ensure saturation, three additional interviews were conducted, all of which confirmed informational redundancy and the absence of new data. Accordingly, the final sample size consisted of 18 participants.

In the present study, based on the research objectives and in order to obtain the richest possible data, participants were selected from diverse regions, age groups, educational backgrounds, occupations, and socioeconomic conditions. Inclusion criteria required participants to be between 20 and 30 years of age, to have caused at least one person to become emotionally attached through emotional deception and false expressions of love, and after dependency and exploitation (physical, sexual, or financial), to have abandoned the individual without any convincing justification. Additional inclusion criteria were a minimum education level of lower secondary school, willingness to participate in the interview, and absence of drug and alcohol dependence. Absence of personality disorders, assessed through administration of the

Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI), was also required. If during the interview process the interviewer concluded that the participant was being evasive, attempting to present himself favorably, lacked sufficient honesty in responses, or provided incomplete and superficial answers, the interview was discontinued and another participant was recruited as a replacement. To assess concealment, deception, and impression management, the researcher did not rely solely on subjective judgment but also considered the participants' responses on the Lie and Defensiveness scales of the MMPI. Furthermore, participants who failed to attend follow-up interview sessions (some interviews extended over two or more sessions) or refused to review and confirm the accuracy of the extracted codes and meanings were excluded from the study and replaced.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Participants

No.	Age	Gender	Marital Status and Children	Education	Occupation	Age at First Relationship	Age at Last Relationship	Number of Relationships	Type of Deception	Purpose of Deception
1	34	Male	Married / No children	Bachelor's	Employee	18	34	6	Emotional	Sexual
2	31	Male	Single	High school diploma	Self-employed	21	31	4	Emotional	Sexual–Financial
3	36	Male	Single	Primary school	Self-employed	23	36	9	Emotional	Sexual
4	29	Male	Divorced / No children	Lower secondary	Self-employed	17	28	3	Emotional	Sexual
5	27	Male	Single	High school diploma	Self-employed	24	26	5	Emotional	Sexual
6	31	Male	Single	Primary school	Self-employed	20	31	2	Emotional	Sexual–Financial
7	33	Male	Single	Lower secondary	Self-employed	19	33	2	Emotional	Sexual
8	35	Male	Single	Bachelor's	Employee	23	34	4	Emotional	Sexual
9	32	Male	Single	Lower secondary	Self-employed	17	30	6	Emotional	Sexual
10	33	Male	Single	High school diploma	Self-employed	21	32	4	Emotional	Sexual
11	36	Male	Married / No children	Lower secondary	Self-employed	20	26	5	Emotional	Sexual
12	25	Male	Single	Master's	Employee	19	25	7	Emotional	Sexual–Financial
13	28	Male	Divorced / No children	High school diploma	Self-employed	22	26	6	Emotional	Sexual
14	34	Male	Single	Lower secondary	Self-employed	21	34	5	Emotional	Sexual
15	37	Male	Single	Master's	Self-employed	17	36	3	Emotional	Sexual
16	38	Male	Divorced / No children	High school diploma	Self-employed	19	38	3	Emotional	Sexual
17	24	Male	Single	Lower secondary	Self-employed	19	23	4	Emotional	Sexual–Financial
18	25	Male	Single	High school diploma	Self-employed	21	25	2	Emotional	Sexual

The number of participants in the study was 18. All participants were male, with a mean age of 31 years. Two participants were married, three were divorced, and the remainder were single; none of the non-single participants had children. Two participants had primary education, six had lower secondary education, one had an associate degree, six had a high school diploma, two had a bachelor's degree, and two had a master's degree. Three participants were employees and fifteen were self-employed. The minimum age at first deceptive relationship was 17 years and the maximum was 23 years. The minimum age at the last deceptive relationship was 23 years and the maximum was 36 years. Three participants had experienced only two deceptive relationships, while the others had experienced more than two. All participants engaged in emotional deception in their relationships; four participants reported both sexual and financial exploitation as their intent, while the remaining participants reported solely sexual exploitation.

2.2.   Measures

Data were collected through in-depth, two-way dialogical interviews. Prior to conducting the interviews, the researcher reviewed the theoretical and empirical literature on love, romantic relationships, emotional deception, and romantic

relationship dissolution. Based on this review, general interview questions were designed to initiate the interview process. To evaluate the quality and validity of these questions, they were submitted to a collaborating researcher who specialized in qualitative research, and the interview protocol was refined according to the feedback received. Interviews began with general questions regarding romantic relationships and romantic failure, such as: "With what intention did you enter the relationship?", "Was the love you expressed genuine?", "How did you persuade her to enter the relationship?", "How did deceiving her make you feel?", "After leaving the relationship and now, how has your perception of romantic relationships changed?", "Do you still wish to experience a romantic relationship?", "What is your view of love?", "Have your past relationships had a negative impact on you?", "If you could return to the past, would you establish these relationships again?", "Apart from pleasure, have these relationships caused you harm?", and "What valuable things have these relationships taken from you?" Follow-up exploratory questions such as "Could you elaborate further?" were used to obtain more comprehensive and clearer information. Eighteen in-depth interviews were conducted, each lasting between 60 and 120 minutes. The time and location of each interview were determined in advance by mutual agreement between the researcher and the participant. Some interviews extended over more than one session in order to achieve richer and more complete data. Data were collected, recorded, coded, and classified into initial concepts, subthemes, and main themes over an eight-month period. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and subsequently analyzed. To adhere to ethical standards and protect participants' rights, informed consent was obtained after explaining the objectives of the study. Participants were assured that all information would remain confidential and anonymized, and that the audio recordings would be deleted after completion and publication of the article. Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time.

2.3. Data analysis

For analysis of the interview data, the six-stage analytical framework proposed by Smith et al. (2009), one of the most comprehensive approaches in interpretative phenomenological analysis, was employed. The first stage involved repeated reading of the transcripts and familiarization with participants' narratives. After recording and verbatim transcription of the interviews with linguistic and emotional details, the texts were reviewed multiple times to develop an overall interpretative understanding. The second stage consisted of initial noting, including descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments. In this phase, 380 initial concepts were extracted, which after refinement and integration were reduced to 100 final concepts. The third stage involved identification of emergent themes, and the fourth stage involved clustering and reviewing these themes to construct the analytical meaning structure. In the fifth stage, following iterative movement between the themes and achievement of a satisfactory interpretative structure, the themes were named. The final stage involved report writing, with the results presented in the Findings section. Throughout the entire analytical process—from question design, interviewing, analysis, to final reporting—the researcher was assisted by another expert in qualitative methods and interpretative phenomenological analysis who had five years of experience in romantic breakup therapy. The principal researcher also possessed ten years of experience in qualitative research methods and two years of experience in romantic breakup therapy.

To examine the credibility and reliability of the findings, the trustworthiness framework proposed by Guba and Lincoln (1989) was applied. To ensure credibility and accuracy, the analyst endeavored to ground the analysis in the participants' statements and beliefs, minimizing the influence of personal assumptions and biases, and using them only to complement the analytical process when necessary. To enhance the credibility of the data, the researcher established a close and trusting relationship with participants, thereby facilitating open disclosure and reducing the likelihood of concealment or incomplete information. In addition, the researcher improved interview skills prior to data collection through extensive practice and mastery of the interview questions, which further strengthened the internal validity and richness of the collected data. To enhance dependability, the researcher collaborated with and was supervised by a qualitative analysis expert (PhD in Counseling and experienced in romantic breakup therapy) throughout the entire research process, thereby substantially increasing the stability and consistency of the coding process and findings. Finally, to ensure confirmability, the researcher returned the extracted interpretations from each interview to the participants for verification and applied necessary modifications based on their feedback.

3. Findings and Results

The death of secure beliefs and the consolidation of their contradictions; love as a fabricated lust masked by fourfold disguises; soothing cognitive–moral justifications; and the hell of the inability to love—these constitute the terrifying and enduring wounds that, according to the exploration of the lived experiences of deceptive individuals, emotional deception of others gradually inflicts upon them. These wounds, by fostering pervasive psychological–emotional insecurity and cultivating a hostile worldview within this group, have rendered the experience of secure intimacy difficult for them to achieve, and it is not unexpected that even if this difficulty does not culminate in their permanent avoidance of intimate bonding, it transforms the experience of safety and tranquility within such relationships into an enduring impossibility for them.

Table 2

Analysis of the Lived Experience of Deceptive Men in Romantic Relationships

Initial Concepts or Sample Participant Statements	Subthemes	Main Theme
"I completely lost my ability to trust anyone's honesty, love, and commitment." – "I developed severe doubt and distrust toward others' affection and loyalty." – "I think—no, I deeply believe—that anyone who claims love and friendship will abandon you the moment they find a better opportunity." – "Love is nothing but a cost–benefit calculation; once the costs outweigh the benefits, it disappears." – "Belief in others' constant presence, availability, and commitment is a myth."	First Victim: Death of trust – consolidation of distrust	Death of Secure Beliefs and Consolidation of Their Contradictions
"I began to doubt my own worth—whether I am valuable enough for someone to stay." – "After these experiences, I became certain that I am extremely worthless; who keeps a worthless person?" – "I turned myself into someone so worthless that no one wants me, let alone stays with me." – "I feel so worthless that I am sure I can easily be replaced in relationships."	Second Victim: Death of self-worth – consolidation of worthlessness	
"A deep wound in me is the belief that I am unlovable." – "Yes, I was and still am immoral, but I paid for it; the price was believing I am nothing and no one can love me." – "Deception is lethal; it implanted in me the belief that I am a miserable, unlovable, repulsive person." – "I am intolerably unlovable and I am sure that any expression of affection from others is merely a lie."	Third Victim: Death of lovability – consolidation of being unlovable	
"In every relationship I enter, I am sure I will be abandoned." – "I abandoned so many people that now I am certain I will be abandoned; that's why I don't attach." – "Relationships are meaningless and full of loss; I didn't think this way before, but for years now I know it's the truth." – "Who am I? What do I have that would be a reason for someone not to abandon me?"	Fourth Victim: Death of assurance in the other's permanence – consolidation of the certainty of abandonment	
"Recently I realized that I believe something is wrong with me." – "I blame myself for everything, whether it's my fault or not." – "I criticized myself so much that I believe I am defective and weak." – "I deceived a lot, but the price was believing that I deserve any insult." – "I have become someone who accepts being despicable, miserable, and immoral." – "It is my right to be trampled; lasting relationships are only a dream for me."	Fifth Victim: Death of perfection and adequacy – consolidation of defectiveness and shame	
"Do you know what hypervigilance is? Every moment feels like an alarm: Has she gone? Will she go? Is she deceiving me?" – "Because I deceived others, I assume everyone is the same." – "My negativity has intensified; every relationship ended because of my groundless suspicions."	Sixth Victim: Death of healthy reasoning (logic and realism) – consolidation of catastrophic thinking	
"Commitment—if it exists—is forced and driven by fear of loss." – "Infidelity proves that commitment, sacrifice, and love are lies."	Commitment: the first deception to legitimize the illusion of love	Love: A Fabricated Lust with Fourfold Masks
"Everything is about benefit; self-sacrifice does not exist." – "Love is just desire with imaginary labels like devotion and sacrifice."	Sacrifice: the second deception to legitimize the illusion of love	
"Your pain is my pain—that's a lie." – "If becoming one is real, why is there so much separation and divorce?"	Unity: the third deception to legitimize the illusion of love	
"I don't love the person; I love what they have." – "People want each other for their possessions, not for who they are."	"I love you for who you are, not what you have": the fourth deception to legitimize the illusion of love	
"Did I tell her to fall in love?" – "She chose it herself." – "When her family rejected me, I had no choice but to leave."	Projection of responsibility: She chose to love of her own will	Soothing Cognitive–Moral Justifications
"Why are we always the bad ones? She enjoyed it too."	Dehumanization / attribution of blame	
"What I did was bad, but not that bad."	Advantageous comparison (moral disengagement)	
"It was a mutual decision; she is also responsible."	Diffusion of responsibility	
"Nothing serious happened; you exaggerate."	Minimization of consequences	
"I have become emotionally numb." – "I cannot love anyone." – "They say I am cold; my emotions are dead."	Emotional numbness	The Hell of the Inability to Love
"My whole life is meaningless sex and relationships." – "I have no motivation." – "I don't know who I am or where I am going."	Death of motivation / existential emptiness	
"I am always worried—about being deceived, rejected, or failing."	Relational insecurity / chronic anxiety	
"Life is a battlefield; if you are not a predator, you will be prey." – "The more committed you are, the more you suffer."	Hostile worldview	

1. Death of Secure Beliefs and Consolidation of Their Contradictions

Six secure and psychologically adaptive beliefs—whose presence is essential for forming an intimate relationship—were, under the influence of emotional deception and based on the exploration of the participants' own lived experiences, extinguished permanently in this group, and each of these beliefs was replaced by a fully contradictory belief. These six beliefs, as casualties of deception, are as follows:

First victim: Death of trust—consolidation of distrust.

Examples of meanings reflecting the death of trust and the consolidation of distrust following emotional deception were identified through analysis of the deceivers' lived experiences; several are presented below.

Participant No. 2 stated:

"I completely lost my capacity to trust anyone's honesty, love, and commitment. In my view, believing in others' presence, availability, and lasting commitment is a myth."

Participant No. 9 stated:

"I developed intense doubt and distrust toward other people's affection and loyalty."

Participant No. 13 stated:

"Love! It's nothing more than a calculation. The moment the cost side outweighs the benefit, it disappears. I think—better to say I truly believe—that anyone who claims love and friendship, if they find a desirable opportunity, will easily throw you away. I even proved this to myself in my marriage—everything was lies and manipulation. 'I love you, I'm in love,' and in the end…"

Second victim: Death of worthiness—consolidation of worthlessness.

Examples of meanings reflecting the death of worthiness and the consolidation of worthlessness following emotional deception were identified through analysis of the deceivers' lived experiences; several are presented below.

Participant No. 1 stated:

"I started doubting my own worth—whether I'm valuable enough for someone to stay with me. Even though I got married, this doubt is still rooted in me and it grows more and more every day."

Participant No. 15 stated:

"After these experiences, I became sure of one thing: I'm extremely worthless. Who keeps a worthless person?"

Participant No. 9 stated:

"I turned myself into someone so worthless that nobody wants me, let alone stays with me. Honestly, I'm so worthless that someone else will easily replace me."

Third victim: Death of being lovable—consolidation of being unlovable.

Examples of meanings reflecting the death of being lovable and the consolidation of being unlovable following emotional deception were identified through analysis of the deceivers' lived experiences; several are presented below.

Participant No. 7 stated:

"A deep wound that has formed in me is that I think I'm not lovable at all; I'm disgusting."

Participant No. 9 stated:

"It's true I was immoral and I still am, but I paid the price. The price is that I believe I'm nothing that someone could love."

Participant No. 17 stated:

"I am unbearably unlovable, and I am certain that any expression of affection from others is purely a lie."

Fourth victim: Death of assurance in the other's enduring presence—consolidation of the certainty of abandonment.

Examples of meanings reflecting the death of assurance in the other's enduring presence and the consolidation of the certainty of abandonment following emotional deception were identified through analysis of the deceivers' lived experiences; several are presented below.

Participant No. 10 stated:

"In any relationship I enter, I'm sure of one thing: I'll be abandoned. I abandoned so many people that now I'm certain I'll be abandoned, so I don't attach."

Participant No. 15 stated:

"Relationships are meaningless and full of loss. I didn't think this way before, but for the past few years I've realized it. I don't get into relationships because I'm sure I'll be abandoned."

Participant No. 18 stated:

"Who am I? What am I? What do I have that could be a reason not to abandon me?"

Fifth victim: Death of perfection and adequacy—consolidation of defectiveness and shame.

Examples of meanings reflecting the death of perfection and adequacy and the consolidation of defectiveness and shame following emotional deception were identified through analysis of the deceivers' lived experiences; several are presented below.

Participant No. 3 stated:

"Recently I realized something: I believe there's something wrong with me—I'm defective and weak. I've become someone who takes the blame for everything, whether it's my fault or not."

Participant No. 18 stated:

"I've become someone who has accepted that I'm contemptible, miserable, and immoral. Whatever they say to me, I accept without question."

Participant No. 6 stated:

"It's true I deceived a lot, but the price was that I consider it others' right to insult me in any way. The reality is that I deserve to be trampled, and I'm sure a lasting relationship is only a dream for me."

Sixth victim: Death of healthy thinking (logic and realism)—consolidation of pessimistic/catastrophic thinking.

Examples of meanings reflecting the death of healthy thinking (logical reasoning and realism) and the consolidation of pessimistic/catastrophic thinking following emotional deception were identified through analysis of the deceivers' lived experiences; several are presented below.

Participant No. 4 stated:

"Do you know what hypervigilance is? Have you seen someone waiting for a call or for someone to come? That's what I became in a relationship—every moment was an alarm: Did she go? Will she go? Is she deceiving me? … That's why even my marriage ended in divorce."

Participant No. 8 stated:

"Let me say something as a kind of confession: since I myself did many wrong things and deceived others, I think the other person is like that too. I make small things very big."

Participant No. 11 stated:

"Sometimes I feel like I've become stupid. With the last person I was with, I became suspicious and I would say, 'Aha, she did that for this reason,' and so on. My negativity has increased a lot. Now I have a wife; I know well that this relationship will also fall apart for the same reason as my previous relationships."

2. Love: A Fabricated Lust with Fourfold Masks

Emotional deception of others creates relationships that are superficial, pleasure-oriented, and devoid of commitment; based on the deceivers' lived experiences, this has rendered their view of love entirely negative and led them to regard love as nothing more than lust and desire, intertwined with "spiritual" masks or lies—namely commitment, self-sacrifice, becoming one, and "I want you for who you are, not for what you have." These components foster the illusion that love is something different from, or even contrary to, desire.

Commitment: The first deception to render the illusion of love believable.

Exploration of participants' lived experiences yielded meanings indicating that this group had no belief in the existence of commitment within intimate relationships and considered it a deception or lie used to secure acceptance of the illusion of love. Several examples are presented below.

Participant No. 8 stated:

"Commitment—if it exists—is forced; it's out of fear that I might lose the other person."

Participant No. 17 stated:

"Step away a little from that idealized person who shouts about love, and see how easily they get cozy with someone else."

Participant No. 13 stated:

"Infidelity—infidelity is the reason commitment is a lie. It's the reason sacrifice is a lie. It's the reason love is a lie. In the relationship, both I and she were caught up in this, and in the end it became divorce."

Self-sacrifice: The second deception to render the illusion of love believable.

Exploration of participants' lived experiences yielded meanings indicating that this group did not believe in self-sacrifice within intimate relationships and considered it another deception or lie used to secure acceptance of the illusion of love. Several examples are presented below.

Participant No. 14 stated:

"For me, everything is about benefit; everything is two plus two equals four."

Participant No. 10 stated:

"It was in her interest, that's why she stayed—who wants suffering? 'I stayed for you; I endured hardship'—all of that is fantasy and illusion."

Participant No. 12 stated:

"Something called self-sacrifice doesn't exist for me, at least. To put it better, love is the same as desire; we just attach some nonsense to it like devotion and self-sacrifice and…"

Becoming one: The third deception to render the illusion of love believable.

Exploration of participants' lived experiences yielded meanings indicating that they rejected the common belief that an intimate relationship entails becoming one and merging of two people, and instead viewed it as another lie and deception that constructs an illusion called love. Several examples are presented below.

Participant No. 2 stated:

"Your pain is my pain, your suffering is my suffering—by God, it's a lie."

Participant No. 15 stated:

"Maybe I try to reduce the sadness of the person I'm with when they're upset, but that's only to reduce my own discomfort."

Participant No. 6 stated:

"If becoming one and all that is real, then why are there so many separations and divorces? Move a little away from the idealization and you realize it's all fake."

"I want you for who you are, not what you have": The fourth deception to render the illusion of love believable.

Exploration of participants' lived experiences yielded meanings indicating that they completely rejected the claim that, in intimate relationships, one wants the other person for themselves rather than for what they possess, and considered it another deception used to secure acceptance of the illusion of love. Several examples are presented below.

Participant No. 18 stated:

"I don't fall in love with the person; I fall in love with what they have."

Participant No. 6 stated:

"I don't accept that love happens only once. If that were true, why do so many people fall in love again? The reason is that I don't love the person; I love what they have—if someone else has the same things, I'll fall in love again."

Participant No. 3 stated:

"People want each other for the things in their backpack, not for themselves."

3. Soothing Cognitive–Moral Justifications

When individuals engage in behavior that is unethical and harmful to others, they typically employ various justifications to protect themselves from moral sanctions such as remorse, guilt, and self-blame. Do emotional deceivers also resort to justification to silence their internal moral monitor and avoid post-deception moral sanctions? Exploration of emotional deceivers' lived experiences in the present study showed that, in order to justify their unethical actions and the exploitation they enact from the beginning to the end of the relationship under the slogan of "I love you," they use highly complex and soothing cognitive–moral sophistries such as displacement of responsibility, dehumanization or victim-blaming, advantageous comparison, diffusion of responsibility, and minimization of consequences. These strategies are largely effective in suppressing, denying, and overall rendering unconscious the moral sanctions resulting from deception, thereby facilitating acceptance and even repetition of this inhumane behavior.

Projection of responsibility: She fell in love by her own choice, not by my coercion.

Exploration of participants' lived experiences identified meanings indicating that these individuals used projection of responsibility to reduce distress associated with emotional deception, exploitation, and unjustified abandonment of the deceived person. In this way, they not only deny responsibility for the relationship and its dissolution, but also emphasize that the other party entered the relationship willingly and was aware of its ending. Several examples are presented below.

Participant No. 2 stated:

"It's ridiculous—did I tell her to fall in love with me? She fell in love; I always kept boundaries… And another thing: when I saw her family didn't accept me, I had to leave her."

Participant No. 13 stated:

"Was I standing over her so she wouldn't sleep at night, worry, and torture herself?"

Participant No. 9 stated:

"It's her fault; if she looks at her behavior, she'll understand why I ended it."

Dehumanization or attribution of blame: She is cunning, dishonest, and self-interested.

Another cognitive–moral justification these individuals used to soothe the distress arising from emotional deception and harming others was dehumanization or blaming the other party. In this way, by assigning false labels such as cunning, manipulative, and self-interested to the partner, they framed deceiving her as natural and even deserved. Several examples are presented below.

Participant No. 12 stated:

"You think she didn't know what I wanted? She knew—she wanted it too."

Participant No. 14 stated:

"Why are we always the bad ones? I swear she enjoyed it; she stayed for pleasure and now she acts like a victim."

Participant No. 3 stated:

"They act like good people. Yes, I hurt her, but lying was her food. She was also playing me, saying she loved me, but I knew it was fake."

Advantageous comparison (bad vs. worse): When it is 'very bad,' 'bad' becomes normal.

Exploration of participants' lived experiences identified meanings indicating that these individuals used advantageous comparison to shield themselves from distress associated with harming others. In this comparison, they emphasized that their actions were not extremely bad or ugly, and that worse and more destructive behaviors also exist. Several examples are presented below.

Participant No. 10 stated:

"What did I do, in your opinion? It's not like I committed a crime!"

Participant No. 6 stated:

"I did something bad, yes—but there are levels of bad."

Participant No. 15 stated:

"I'm not the same as people who rape by force!"

Diffusion of responsibility (she was also at fault): If you ate the melon, you must accept the shaking.

During exploration of participants' lived experiences, meanings were identified suggesting that by emphasizing that the other person was also responsible for initiating and ending the current relationship—and that responsibility did not rest solely on them—this group reduced distress arising from emotional deception and soothed themselves. Several examples are presented below.

Participant No. 3 stated:

"Do you go toward someone unless they show a green light?"

Participant No. 11 stated:

"Well, I suffered too—it wasn't only her. It was a two-person decision; it wasn't just me."

Participant No. 5 stated:

"If she didn't enjoy it, she wouldn't accept it."

Minimization of consequences: Nothing happened! Aren't you exaggerating?

Exploration of participants' lived experiences identified meanings indicating that these individuals minimized the consequences of emotional deception for the other person and the harms inflicted on her, thereby reducing the intensity of distress arising from this reprehensible act and largely protecting themselves from subsequent discomfort. Several examples are presented below.

Participant No. 9 stated:

"What happened? Did she lose her arms and legs? It was a shared pleasure—I didn't kill her!"

Participant No. 17 stated:

"We talked for a few months; all that drama afterward doesn't make sense."

Participant No. 9 stated:

"We exchanged 'I love you' for a while, and then it ended."

4. The Hell of the Inability to Love

The harshest cost that emotional deception of others inscribed on the mental world of deceivers was ushering them into a hell called the inability to love. These individuals pointed to a profound experience of emotional numbness, the death of motivation and a sense of emptiness, excessive relational anxiety, and a hostile view of life. These are wounds that were etched into them after repeated deception and, as they described, have rendered them incapable of loving and of the kind of affectionate relating that they now feel they need. It is a terrifying hell and the erasure of an innate human capacity called love.

Emotional numbness.

Absolute emotional numbness was the first blow of emotional deception to the deceivers' capacity to love, identified through exploration of participants' lived experiences. Several illustrative meanings are presented below.

Participant No. 4 stated:

"I've become very indifferent toward love and romance, and sometimes I think I have no feelings at all. I didn't think I was like this, but it was proven to me even in marriage."

Participant No. 17 stated:

"There was someone I entered a relationship with—she was great and loved me a lot, but no matter what I did, I couldn't feel anything for her."

Participant No. 9 stated:

"When I look at myself in the mirror, I'm more like a statue than a statue—devoid of any feeling. They've told me a hundred times how cold I am; it's like my feelings have died."

Death of motivation—emptiness.

Death of motivation and emptiness constituted the second blow of emotional deception to the deceivers' capacity to love, identified through exploration of participants' lived experiences. Several illustrative meanings are presented below.

Participant No. 11 stated:

"My whole life has become sex and relationships—and purposeless. I don't even know how I ended up getting married."

Participant No. 17 stated:

"I truly have no motivation. I've become apathetic and I can't even tolerate myself. At this age I realized I never figured out what my path is, what I want, where I should go."

Participant No. 5 stated:

"I don't know what I'm doing and what I should do. Sometimes I say, 'Your time is up—where are you?' It's like nothing matters anymore."

Relational insecurity or relational anxiety.

Relational insecurity or relational anxiety was the third blow of emotional deception to the deceivers' capacity to love, identified through exploration of participants' lived experiences. Several illustrative meanings are presented below.

Most participants emphasized pervasive relational anxiety and stated:

"What if I get deceived? What if I get tricked? Will I reach it or not? Will I be accepted or not? Where will I be in a few years? With this situation, it's better not to go. In the end, I'll fail—and a thousand other thoughts, all negative. My mother says I'm always worried; it's like I eat worry and exhale worry."

A hostile view of life.

The final blow of emotional deception to the deceivers' capacity to love was a hostile view of life, identified through exploration of participants' lived experiences. Several illustrative meanings are presented below.

Participant No. 14 stated:

"Intimacy is a tool people use to exploit each other; rather, the more committed you are, the more you get hurt."
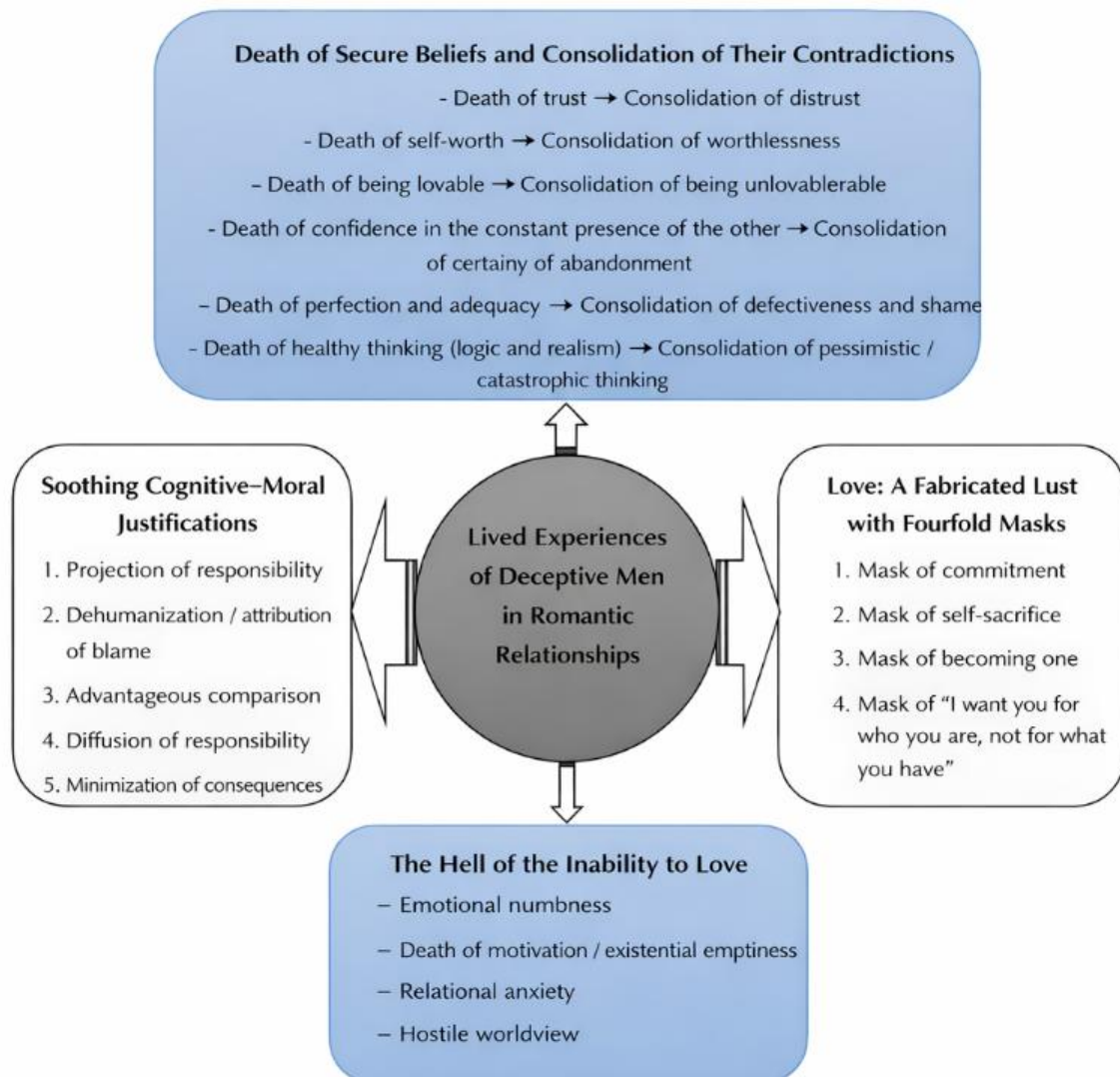
Participant No. 7 stated:

"Rules are a tool people use to exploit each other, and I sincerely and rationally believe that benefit—not morality—is the foundation of relationships and life."

Participant No. 3 stated:

"If you're not a wolf, you'll be harmed; life is like a jungle—if you don't kill, they'll kill you."

Figure 1

Final Model of the Study

4.   Discussion

The present study explored the lived experience of men who engage in emotional deception within romantic relationships and identified four interrelated and psychologically significant domains: (1) the death of secure relational beliefs and the consolidation of their contradictions, (2) love as a fabricated form of lust masked by relational illusions, (3) the use of soothing cognitive–moral justifications, and (4) the experience of an existential "hell" marked by emotional numbness, motivational collapse, relational anxiety, and a hostile worldview. Together, these findings offer a coherent psychological portrait of how sustained emotional deception reorganizes self-concept, relational cognition, and emotional functioning.

The first major finding—the collapse of core secure relational beliefs (trust, worthiness, lovability, permanence of the other, adequacy, and rational trust in reality)—demonstrates how repeated deception destabilizes the foundational assumptions necessary for intimacy. These results align closely with models of attachment and relational security, which emphasize that stable romantic bonds rely on predictable availability, emotional safety, and confidence in mutual commitment. Empirical research indicates that deception and betrayal undermine attachment security and heighten hypervigilance, distrust, and relational avoidance (Mosley et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2023). The participants' narratives revealed that deceptive behavior, rather than protecting them from vulnerability, gradually destroyed their own capacity to trust and to perceive themselves as worthy and lovable partners. This internal erosion mirrors findings from love trauma studies, which show that repeated relational injury leads to deep restructuring of self-beliefs and emotional expectations (Ertazai et al., 2024; Jamshidian Naeini et al., 2024). However, a novel contribution of the present study is that these destructive processes were observed not in victims of betrayal, but in perpetrators of deception, suggesting that relational harm is bidirectional and that moral transgression carries long-term intrapersonal costs.

The second core theme—redefining love as merely lust masked by illusions of commitment, sacrifice, unity, and unconditional acceptance—reflects a profound shift in relational meaning systems. Participants no longer conceptualized love as an emotionally grounded bond but as a transactional, pleasure-oriented exchange. This resonates with sociopsychological analyses that frame modern romantic relationships as increasingly commodified and instrumentalized, particularly in environments shaped by digital interaction and shifting social norms (Hill et al., 2023; Soleimani, 2023). Literary and cultural analyses likewise describe the erosion of idealized romantic love into illusory narratives that conceal self-interest and desire (Boro, 2023). Furthermore, research on deceptive affectionate messaging indicates that affection can be strategically deployed to regulate partners' behavior and secure relational benefits without genuine emotional investment (Redlick & Vangelisti, 2018; Smith et al., 2023). The present findings extend this literature by showing that repeated reliance on such strategies ultimately transforms the deceiver's own beliefs about love, replacing emotional meaning with cynicism and disillusionment.

The third domain—soothing cognitive–moral justifications—provides direct empirical support for Bandura's theory of selective moral disengagement (Bandura, 2002). Participants employed classic disengagement mechanisms, including responsibility displacement, victim-blaming, advantageous comparison, diffusion of responsibility, and minimization of consequences. These mechanisms allowed them to neutralize guilt and maintain a coherent self-image while engaging in exploitative behavior. Similar patterns have been documented in romance fraud perpetrators, who normalize exploitation through complex moral rationalizations (Carter, 2021). The present findings demonstrate that such cognitive restructuring is not confined to criminal deception but operates within everyday romantic relationships. Importantly, the long-term effect of this disengagement was not emotional relief, but progressive emotional flattening, alienation, and loss of authentic relational capacity—outcomes predicted by emotion-based models of deception (Gaspar et al., 2022; Gaspar & Schweitzer, 2013).

The final theme—the "hell of the inability to love"—captures the cumulative psychological consequences of sustained deception. Emotional numbness, motivational collapse, chronic relational anxiety, and a hostile worldview emerged as dominant experiences. These results closely parallel existential accounts of relational breakdown and infidelity, in which individuals report emptiness, loss of meaning, and identity fragmentation (Choupani et al., 2021; Rokach & Chan, 2023). Qualitative research on recurrent heartbreak similarly documents cycles of emotional exhaustion and meaninglessness that erode psychological

resilience (Dindoust et al., 2023). The present study extends these findings by demonstrating that such suffering is not limited to the betrayed partner but deeply affects the deceiver, producing a self-perpetuating cycle of relational dysfunction.

5. Conclusion

Taken together, these findings support a systemic and self-destructive model of emotional deception: deceptive behavior initially serves instrumental goals (e.g., pleasure, control, avoidance of vulnerability), but over time dismantles the deceiver's emotional architecture, moral coherence, and relational competence. This model aligns with recent philosophical and psychological discussions of self-deception, which argue that persistent deception destabilizes the agent's own epistemic and emotional integrity (Kaczmarek, 2025). The results further suggest that emotional deception is not merely a behavioral problem but an identity-transforming process with enduring psychological sequelae.

The primary limitation of this study lies in its qualitative design and culturally specific sample, which may restrict generalizability to other populations and sociocultural contexts. The reliance on retrospective self-report introduces the possibility of memory bias and post-hoc rationalization. Additionally, the exclusive focus on male participants prevents conclusions about gender differences in the lived experience of emotional deception.

Future studies should employ mixed-method designs to integrate phenomenological findings with quantitative measurement of attachment security, emotional regulation, and moral disengagement. Comparative research involving women and diverse cultural groups would deepen understanding of gendered and cultural variations. Longitudinal designs are recommended to trace how deceptive relational patterns evolve over time and how therapeutic intervention may alter these trajectories.

Clinical interventions should prioritize dismantling cognitive–moral justifications, restoring emotional awareness, and rebuilding secure relational beliefs. Relationship education programs should explicitly address the hidden psychological costs of deception for both partners. Preventive efforts should focus on emotional literacy, moral accountability, and development of authentic intimacy skills in adolescents and young adults.

Authors' Contributions

M.C. conceptualized the study, designed the qualitative framework, and supervised the research process. A.A. conducted the interviews, performed the interpretative phenomenological analysis, and managed data organization. Both authors collaboratively interpreted the findings, contributed to manuscript writing and revision, approved the final version, and accept full responsibility for the integrity and accuracy of the work.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

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

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