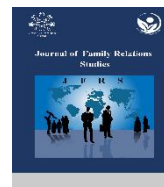




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Research Paper

Analyzing Effective Individual, Interpersonal, and Social Factors in Reducing Marital Infidelity in the Virtual Space: A Qualitative Study



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ABSTRACT

Objective: While the virtual space has positive functionalities, it can also have potentially harmful effects on families and couples. The present qualitative study aimed to explore the individual, interpersonal, and social factors that could help reduce marital infidelity in the virtual space, using a phenomenological method.

Methods: The statistical population of the study included couples with a history of virtual infidelity referred from the family court in Urmia city. The sample size consisted of 81 participants (12 women and 6 men) who were selected through non-random purposive sampling. The tool of the current research was a semi-structured interview that was conducted in the context of individual, interpersonal, and social factors influencing the prevention of marital infidelity in cyberspace.

Results: The data were coded and analyzed using thematic coding. After coding the interviews and categorizing the themes, a total of 7 individual indicators (differentiation, avoiding extremes in marital life, foresight, preventing a crisis in life, strengthening individual competencies, maintaining physical and mental health, and possessing family, ethical, and spiritual competencies), 3 interpersonal indicators (the ability to communicate effectively, both verbally and nonverbally, the presence of intimacy in life, and diminishing interpersonal conflicts), and 4 social indicators (the nature of one's job and economic status, the presence of stringent laws, promoting a healthy lifestyle, and the existence of diverse healthy and joyful programs in society) were identified.

Conclusion: The results indicate that if couples possess the necessary individual and interpersonal skills and society provides the required actions and facilities, the likelihood of virtual infidelity may significantly decrease.

1. Introduction

Undoubtedly, the increasing use of media has undeniable benefits and importance in people's lives and their relationships. However, amidst this progress, many couples are facing various impacts and are at risk of severe damage (Klich & Bialecki, 2024; Filimon et al., 2021), to the extent that we are witnessing a growing

statistic reflecting a deepening gap in trust between them and the emergence of clandestine relationships (Ghasdi Khuzani, 2014). Statistics show that 22-25% of men and 11-15% of women have had sex outside of their marital relationship at least once (Filimon et al, 2021).

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In Iran, the prevalence of extramarital relationships is not known; however, the total of related studies in this field indicates an increase in such relationships (Joorbonyan et al., 2024). In mass communication theories, the media is considered to play a key role in shaping an individual's attitudes and lifestyle. The cultivation theory by Gerbner et al (1994) is one such theory that can be highlighted. This theory states that cognitive impact is one of the most significant effects of media, meaning that media can determine how the audience conceptualizes reality, and the audience's interpretation or understanding of the world around them is based on what is portrayed in the media world (Hasanabadi et al., 2017). Based on this theory, it can be understood that the growing use of media leads to changes in individual attitudes and creates new mental images and ineffective viewpoints (Heidari, 2018). Research findings indicate that addiction to media predicts behaviors related to beliefs and convictions and decreases individuals' romantic relationships and their satisfaction with those relationships; however, this happens indirectly and influences many other factors (Dortaj et al., 2018; Zhang, 2019).

Excessive and unrestrained internet relationships seriously harm trust and loyalty between couples, leading to marital disputes, separation, and even infidelity (Filimon et al., 2021). However, with easy access to the internet and cyberspace, a person may be in contact online with someone other than their partner (Sahni & Jain, 2018). Online relationships can be destructive in cyber-related infidelities, even without face-to-face or sexual contact (Bozoyan & Schmiedeberg, 2022; Roman, 2020). A significant number of couples report having cheated during their marriage. Estimates can vary from 2% to 33% depending on specific sources used (Bhowmik, 2020), with recent studies indicating that approximately 22% to 25% of men and 11% to 15% of women in the United States reported having sex outside of their marriage at least once, with men engaging in extramarital affairs at nearly twice the rate of women (Harris, 2018; Cornish et al, 2020). In Iran, although the exact percentage of this issue isn't clear, researches show that marital infidelity is prevalent and on the rise (Bahonar et al, 2022). Rogier and colleagues (2021) believe that individuals who spend a lot of time online often face challenges in their familial relationships, as the way family members communicate with each other can lead to social issues, including addiction to the internet (Nowak et.al, 2022). In essence, the digital space has transformed all kinds of relationships, rights, and responsibilities related to roles within the family, which may lead to a decrease in family communications and an increase in conflicts (Lopez-Fernandez & Kuss, 2020), ending in gradual numerous disputes, frequent criticisms,

emotional disconnect, unresolved issues, and marital dissatisfaction (Loneragan et. al, 2021; Alizadeh Noug Behraman, 2020). Therefore, the breakdown of communication between partners often results in feelings of loneliness and psychological pressure, which leads to attempts by partners to establish emotional connections with a third person and ultimately infidelity which sets the stage for crises in the emotional and secure relationships of couples (Ngwasheng, Paul Mbedzi, 2024; Luo & Yu, 2022; Basereh et al, 2024). Victims of infidelity frequently experience intense negative emotions such as decreased psychological and physiological well-being, lowered self-esteem, severe hopelessness, self-doubt, depression, and anxiety (Cabral, 2017; Thompson et. al, 2020), as well as loss of trust, harm to self-esteem, disruption of other relationships, and financial consequences along with difficulties in emotion regulation (Lopez-Fernandez & Kuss, 2020). Additionally, the revelation of this phenomenon can create feelings of guilt, anxiety, fear, worry, depression, shock, aggression, anger, hatred, resentment, hopelessness, and empathy in children (Tan & Yasin, 2020).

Some researchers view marital infidelity as an individual harm and believe that personal dysfunctions like sexual and emotional promiscuity (Selterman et al, 2019), the satisfying of physiological needs (Omarzu et al, 2012), weak faith and religious beliefs (Choopani et al, 2019), lack of commitment (Fye & Mims, 2018), and absence of true love (Selterman et al, 2019) are the main factors driving couples toward this interpersonal crisis. Others emphasize that interpersonal factors like emotional dissatisfaction (Choopani et al, 2019), sexual narcissism (Warach et al, 2018), insecure attachment styles (Beltrán-Morillas et al, 2019), communication insecurity, and conflicts among couples (Shamala & Kanthy, 2021) are the key contributors to this harm. Other underlying factors for marital infidelity include financial and economic problems, the desire for flashy and luxurious lifestyles, the pursuit of higher social status, variety in acquiring sexual appeal, a lack of complete understanding between partners about each other's needs (Nasiri et al, 2022), the absence of emotional and intimate connection (Maphosa et al, 2017), weak moral foundations, mismatched and forced marriages, uninformed marriages based on emotions, unsatisfied healthy sexual needs within the family structure, lack of attraction toward spouses, revenge against a partner's cheating behavior, personality or psychological issues of one partner, and retaliatory revenge against excessive and unreasonable doubts from spouses (Wanjiru et al, 2020). A review of the research background on the factors related to marital infidelity shows that these factors are generally categorized

into three areas: individual differences (such as personality traits and attitudes), relationship nature (like commitment level and relationship satisfaction), and environmental conditions (like opportunities for infidelity or the attraction of a third party). Misuse of the option for polygamy and temporary marriage for men, along with society's lenient and permissive attitudes towards male infidelity, the influence of friends, satellite TV, and pornographic films, as well as the facilitatory role of the internet and mobile phones in creating opportunities for interaction with the opposite sex, all serve as underlying conditions and causes of marital infidelity (Sudani et. al, 2012; Fathi et. al, 2013).

Today, families spend a significant amount of their daily time using various media, obtaining a notable portion of their knowledge and information this way (Shepherd, 2023). These cultural and social changes have strengthened the choices and freedoms of couples regarding selecting spouses and other interactions, and they may also alter their expectations concerning having satisfying sexual and emotional relationships in life (Mesbah et. al, 2022). On the other hand, when new values conflict with traditional values, it can lead to negative outcomes. Furthermore, if these new tendencies and expectations are not ingrained in individuals' character structures, they may become lost in finding guidance for their attitudes and actions, and there's a potential that dissatisfaction in couples' relationships could drive them toward extramarital connections (Ferron et. al, 2017).

Despite this, various research findings have shown that having certain characteristics can promote marital stability among couples, prevent conflicts between them, and eliminate the factors that lead to infidelity in a shared life, especially in the online space. For example, studies have indicated that there is a connection between the differentiation of couples and their constructive interactions (Clyde et. al., 2020), differentiation, increased intimacy and marital satisfaction (Saemi et al., 2018; Ghooarzi, 2019), emotional competence and greater adaptability (Woldarsky, 2006), an individual's religious affiliations and their lack of inclination towards marital infidelity (Atkins et. al., 2005), a healthy work environment and a healthy lifestyle (Gemmer, 2013), no experience of sexual relations before marriage and no incidents of marital infidelity (Gomar, 2013), emotional maturity and absence of marital infidelity (Rajabi & Abbasi, 2018; Barzegar & Honarparvaran, 2018), intimacy and lack of marital infidelity (Pananakhonsab, 2019), sexual satisfaction and the absence of inclination toward marital infidelity (Ghooarzi, 2019), mental and psychological well-being and lack of inclination toward marital infidelity (Vidourek & Burbage, 2018), as well as

financial problems and the likelihood of extramarital relationships (Dew et al., 2022). In this regard, it is worth noting that the researches conducted have each focused on some psychological characteristics related to infidelity or the absence of it, and there is a lack of comprehensive research studying the impact of various individual, interpersonal, and social factors on reducing marital infidelity, especially in the online environment. Therefore, the researcher aims to phenomenologically examine the role of the mentioned factors in reducing marital infidelity in the online space, not only to fill the research gap but also to provide a comprehensive picture of the role of various factors in preventing infidelity in the online space. It is hoped that families and relevant stakeholders will take a step towards preventing infidelity in the online environment in order to enhance the family structure within Iranian-Islamic culture.

2. Materials and Methods

This research was conducted using a qualitative method with a phenomenological approach, focusing on the experiences and opinions of couples regarding infidelity in the online space. The statistical population of this study included couples seeking divorce due to extramarital relationships in the virtual world who, in 2020, willingly referred themselves to psychological counseling centers in Urmia city, through a referral from the Family Intervention and Divorce Reduction Center and the Social Emergency Department (123). The samples were selected purposefully. The sampling process continued until data saturation and finally included 18 people (13 women and 5 men). Interviews were conducted individually and face-to-face, centered on the context of marital infidelity online. To adhere to ethical principles, the purpose of this research was thoroughly explained to the participants at the outset. Criteria for entering the interview included: having extramarital relationships in the virtual world, being unmarried, an age range of 20-50 years, and being referred from the Family Intervention and Divorce Reduction Center and the Social Emergency Department (123).

In executing the research process, participants were first asked for their consent to participate in the study at the counseling and psychological services centers in Urmia. Then, participants were selected based on entry criteria from among the attendees. In accordance with ethical principles, the following points were taken into consideration: 1) Information obtained from the interviews was used without disclosing names. 2) Confidentiality of information was announced at the start of the interviews. 3) Participants were assured that the information gathered would not be used against them at any time. 4) Additionally, research questions were asked

in various ways and with additional explanations to maintain the accuracy and reliability of the data in this study and to reduce the likelihood of incorrect data from participants. Interviews were conducted individually and face-to-face. Semi-structured interviews were carried out by a doctoral student specializing in counseling at the center (Bakhish), with questions such as: Can you describe infidelity in the online space? How did your relationship with the third party in the virtual world begin? In your view, what personal characteristics could prevent online marital infidelity? How do you think interpersonal relationships (including communication with a partner, etc.) can prevent infidelity in the online space? In your opinion, what strategies can society implement to curb or minimize online infidelity? and continued with follow-up questions with the interviewer's probing and tracking. These questions stemmed from the research background and were in line with the theoretical frameworks. The interviews were transcribed and coded in written form, and this process continued until data saturation was reached. Finally, thematic analysis was used to analyze the data, and the process of analyzing codes was reviewed in collaboration with counseling professors. Credibility, confirmability, and reliability criteria were employed to ensure the accuracy of the data.

3. Results

This research was conducted with the participation of 13 women and 5 men. The age range of the participants was

from 24 to 45 years, with an average age of 34.05 years. The youngest participant was 24 years old, while the oldest was 45. In terms of gender, the study included 13 women and 5 men. Most women were housewives, and most men were employees. In terms of education, 3 participants had completed middle school, 2 had a high school diploma, 11 held a bachelor's degree (BA), 1 had a master's degree (MA), and 1 had a doctoral degree (PhD). After analyzing the interviews, 93 primary concepts and 84 secondary concepts related to 3 main concepts were identified, which are presented below. Individual factors were highlighted among the indicators related to the factors affecting the reduction of infidelity in the virtual space. In relation to individual factors effective in preventing infidelity in the virtual space, it has been suggested that couples who possess emotional maturity can better control their sensual desires and regulate their psychological and emotional needs, take responsibility for their actions, and adhere to ethical standards (Rajabi & Abbasi, 2020).

The secondary concepts related to this indicator include differentiation, avoidance of extremism and wastage in shared life, forward-thinking, prevention of a crisis occurring in life, strengthening individual competencies, having physical and mental health, and possessing family, ethical, and spiritual competencies to protect individuals from the dangers of the virtual space, which are presented in Table 1, along with primary themes and sample statements from the interviewees.

Table 1. Basic concepts, sub-concepts, and main concepts extracted from the analysis of interviews (individual indicator)

Main concept	Sub-concepts	Basic concepts	Examples of narratives/statements from interviewees
Individual	Differentiation in relation to being immersed in the landscape of virtual networks.	Having self-esteem and a positive self-image to steer clear of the false values of the virtual world, expressing feelings easily with a partner rather than venting frustrations with strangers online, managing a partner's presence in the digital space, maintaining a strong personality when interacting with the opposite sex online, entering marriages with awareness to avoid aimless browsing for lost connections, and shunning being misled by seductive behaviors in the virtual space.	I think if a person has self-esteem, they won't be out there in the virtual space begging for love and validation anymore (participants 1,2, 3, 6, 13, 15, 16, and 17). I didn't have the courage to criticize my spouse's behavior, so I would just back off, and then later get caught up in the virtual space (participants 5 and 7).
	Staying away from extremes in shared life by drawing inspiration from social media networks.	Planning for leisure time in real relationships and not in virtual space, resisting unhealthy lifestyles and body changes in the digital world, monitoring life and relationships with others to control illicit relationships in the virtual space, and not overindulging in fun and entertainment, especially online.	My husband had turned his whole life into work, work, and more work. I was just at home, feeling lonely and lost in the virtual space (participants 3, 4, 5, 9, 10, 11, 13, 14, 16, 17, and 18). It's necessary to keep an eye on your partner sometimes; unfortunately, I didn't do that, and by the time I realized it was too late (participants 1 and 10).
	Contemplation in the area of uncontrolled communications in the virtual space	Awareness of the difficulties after divorce following the revelation of infidelity in social media, avoiding watching porn films, fear of reputation, and not seeking revenge on the spouse.	If a person thinks about divorce and the issues that come afterward, they won't go looking for these things on social media. (Participants 4, 5, and 9) My husband was involved in social media, and then I found out he was in touch with someone. No matter what I did, it didn't get any better, so I found someone and got my revenge. (Participants 3, 5, and 18)

Main concept	Sub-concepts	Basic concepts	Examples of narratives/statements from interviewees
	Preventing a crisis in life	Not being addicted to avoid getting involved with treacherous people, having no tension in marital issues, the ability to have children, and satisfying emotional needs in the past, to steer clear of fulfilling them in the virtual space.	I think addiction to drugs and alcohol can also destroy someone's life, and a person could end up looking to sell these things in the online world and come across some shady characters, leading to potential betrayal. This has happened in my life. (Participants 1, 2, 5, 12, 13, 16, and 17). I've always been the one asking for things in our marital issues, and my wife didn't care at all, constantly complaining instead. (Participants 3, 14, 16, 17, and 18).
	Strengthening individual capabilities in dealing with the distractions of the virtual space.	Purposefulness and responsibility in life, the presence of honesty and commitment in a shared life, having a job and investing energy in the right path, time management, having a high financial capacity before marriage, emotional satisfaction with each other, being equipped with problem-solving methods instead of seeking revenge, generating positive excitement in life, not being prideful and apologizing instead of avoiding problems, having a high level of education, being attractive, and not being overly demanding.	"If a person has a goal and is focused on their own progress and life, I don't think they would be looking for someone in the virtual space, and all their time and life would be dedicated to achieving their goal (participants 3, 4, 5, 7, 9, 11, and 13). If a husband and wife love each other and enjoy each other's emotional company, they would never look for their lost one in the virtual space (participants 8, 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 11, 12, 14, 17, and 18)."
	Having physical and mental health	The absence of physical and mental disorders, having sexual satisfaction to avoid fantasizing about it in virtual space, not suppressing emotions and not expressing them in virtual space, not having sexual disorders, possessing a healthy identity, and the behavioral and sexual maturity of both parties.	"Most of the time, couples who have sexual issues and do not enjoy each other seek out the virtual space (participants 4, 5, 6, 9, and 11). I believe that if both parties have the necessary skills and behavioral and sexual maturity in their marital relationships, neither of them will look for someone else in the virtual space (participants 4, 7, 8, and 9)."
	Possessing family, moral, and spiritual competence	Having religious beliefs, preserving individual and family identity and authenticity, respecting the boundaries of the family of origin, maintaining a healthy lifestyle, adhering to ethical standards, being conscientious in the face of a partner's sacrifices, being truthful to each other in a shared life, and benefiting from proper family upbringing.	"If a person has a proper family background, they won't look for betrayal, whether in the real world or in the virtual space (participants 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, and 11). A truly religious person will never betray their partner (participants 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 12, 13, 15, 16, 17, and 18)."

One of the key indicators derived from interviews with research participants was the interpersonal index. It seems that individuals who fear intimacy do so because they lack inner experiences, including thoughts, feelings, and emotions that could be anxiety-inducing, leaving them neither understood nor able to understand. This causes each partner to feel unsatisfied with their close relationships, and that dissatisfaction can lead one or both partners to seek out extramarital affairs (Pananakhonsab, 2019).

Sub-concepts of the interpersonal index include factors like the ability to express emotions to one another and marital intimacy, which lead to effective verbal and non-verbal communication in real life, as opposed to the tempting communications found in virtual spaces. This also diminishes the impactful interpersonal differences that can drive someone to fill voids in the online world. These concepts, along with initial ideas and sample statements from interviewees, are presented in Table 2.

Another indicator that emerged from the interviews with the participants was the social factor. In today's cultural and social context, couples need to smartly pay attention to each other's values, attitudes, needs, concerns, and problems to make accurate judgments about one another and ultimately assess the quality of their relationship, keeping in mind the moral value of striving for shared interests. The possession of moral values is essential for any kind of social participation, as the continuous presence of individuals in groups and their close interpersonal relationships depend on their perception of how this issue is respected.

The sub-concepts of the social indicator included the nature of work, the existence of strict laws regarding infidelity in society, the promotion of healthy lifestyles within the community, and the availability of various joyful programs, which are presented alongside the primary concepts and sample statements from the interviewees in Table 3.

Table 2. Key concepts, sub-concepts, and main concepts extracted from interview analysis (interpersonal indicator)

Main concept	Sub-concepts	Basic concepts	Examples of narratives/statements from interviewees
Interpersonal	The ability to establish effective verbal and non-verbal communication	Pleasant verbal exchanges between couples strengthen healthy and strong interpersonal relationships, support each other's morale, and help avoid being drawn into infidelity in virtual spaces.	"When a person connects with their spouse and children instead of getting caught up in the virtual world, I think the marriage becomes more stable" (participants 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, and 14). "Weak relationships with those around you can sometimes lead a person to disconnect from everything and get caught up in the virtual world, leading to subsequent events" (participants 5, 6, 7, 8, 11, and 12).
	Having intimacy in real life and not just expressing emotions online	Not being suspicious of each other, having closeness in a shared life, drawing strength from each other, not being shy about showing affection to your partner in front of others, having sexual satisfaction in marriage, being comfortable with your partner to express feelings, supporting each other emotionally, feeling happiness in life, not having a sharp tongue, and completely fulfilling needs are all important.	"In marriage, partners should not be suspicious or pessimistic toward one another, as skepticism can create a rift between them, leading them to seek what they are missing in the virtual space." (Participants: 3, 4, 6, 9, 13, 14, 17, and 18). "I always felt like I had lost everything in my life and had become depressed. I lost hope in everything and entered the virtual space." (Participant 9)
	Fading interpersonal conflicts affect the temptation to fill the voids in the online space.	They need to have an understanding of life, not have cultural differences, have no conflicts between families to avoid runaway situations, have a small age gap between spouses at the time of marriage, and have no class differences.	"I think cultural differences increase the distances between each other, and the closer the tastes are, the more respect couples have for each other, and they won't look for a third party" (participants 9, 15, 16, and 18). "My mother-in-law caused a rift between my husband and me, and it led to getting caught up in the online world, which resulted in further issues" (participants 2, 5, and 7).

Table 3. Key concepts, sub-concepts, and main concepts extracted from interview analysis (social indicator)

Main concept	Sub-concepts	Basic concepts	Examples of narratives/statements from interviewees
Social	The nature of the job and the economic situation have an impact on the tendency to seek companionship in the virtual space.	The type of job and business in the virtual world, night shifts, long periods away from home, and loneliness, along with healthy income and economic advancement, the absence of economic problems, and proper and logical cost management	"My spouse had a business and rented out villas for travelers and also advertised in the virtual space... this led him to establish a relationship with a lady online" (Participant 2). "My spouse's job often took him on missions, which led him to connect with women in virtual spaces due to the distance from family" (Participant 8).
	Strict laws regarding infidelity	The stigma of cheating hasn't gone away, and there are harsh legal penalties for illicit relationships in cyberspace.	"When an issue like cheating—whether in real life or online—loses its stigma, everyone easily gets involved in it" (Participants 4, 5, 8 and 9). "When someone cheats and the court and the law don't take any action, they easily pursue such activities, and the online space becomes the best hangout for that" (Participants 3, 4, 5, 11, 13, 14, 16, 17, and 18).
	Promoting a healthy lifestyle in society	Not having sexual relationships before marriage, the absence of divorce being viewed as normal, the lack of inappropriate interactions with the opposite sex in online spaces, appropriate dressing in public, and setting good examples in the community.	"My husband always said, 'It doesn't matter if you're not around.' So many young women have gotten divorced and are looking for someone else, especially in the online world (Participant 13)." "Unfortunately, in our society, interacting with the opposite sex isn't too hard, and if you're a little clever, you'll get caught (Participants 3, 4, 5, 9, 10, 11, 13, 14, 16, 17, and 18)."
	Having various fun and healthy programs in the community.	Properly relieving emotions in the community, holding authorized and enjoyable concerts in the community, and having healthy recreational activities in life.	"If a person's excitement is channeled in the right direction, like through studying, working, effective communication with family, and leisure activities, then there won't be any energy left for other things" (participants 4, 5, 6, 9, and 12). "Healthy recreation prevents a person from chasing a bunch of their dreams in the virtual space" (participants 5, 7, 8, 12, 14, and 15).

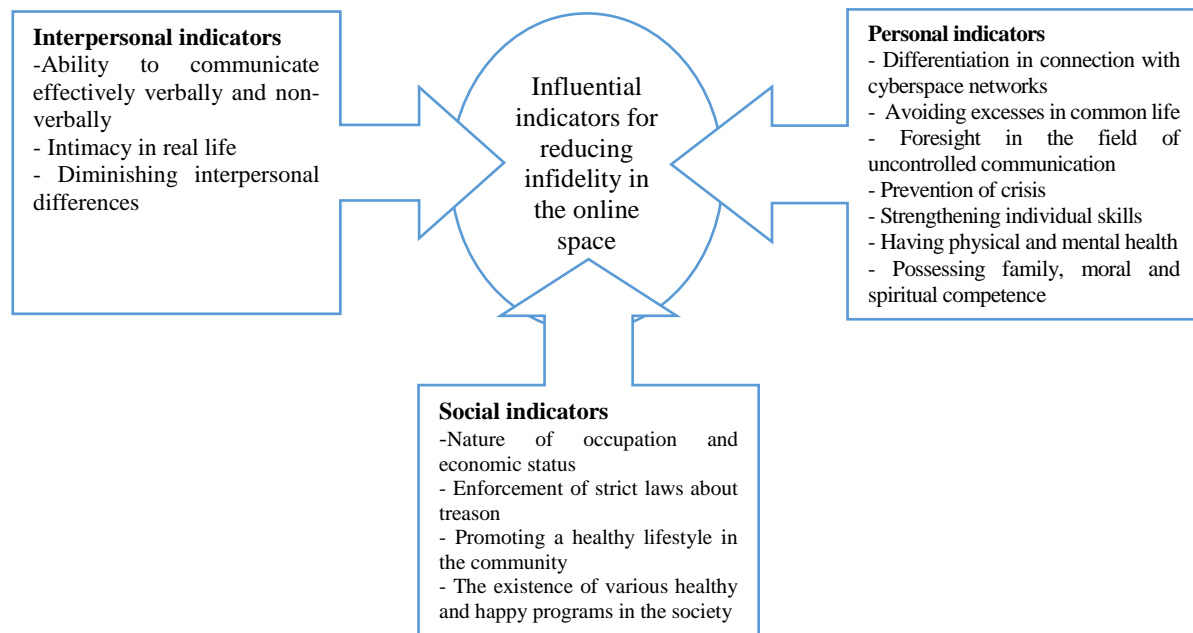


Figure 1. Individual, interpersonal and social factors influencing the reduction of infidelity in cyber space

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study aimed to explore the individual, interpersonal, and social indicators that influence the reduction of infidelity in the virtual space among couples attending counseling centers. Overall, the results from the interviews indicated that if a person possesses the necessary personal and interpersonal competencies and the community enjoys favorable conditions, it becomes possible to prevent infidelity in the virtual space for couples. The result obtained aligns with the findings of Islamzadeh et al (2019) and Choopani et al (2017), who indicated that three categories of factors act as deterrents to secret relationships: internal factors (self-awareness, spirituality, and fear), external factors (environment and culture, foresight, and family), and communicative factors (including spiritual intimacy and relational intimacy). Regarding the factors that influence the prevention of infidelity in cyberspace, the first factor is individual factors' group which its secondary concepts suggest that if a person possesses the necessary personal characteristics and readiness, such as differentiation, mental health, and a balanced personality, the likelihood of infidelity in cyberspace decreases. The findings align with the research results of Thompson et al. (2020), López-Fernández and Kuss (2020), Clyde et al. (2020) and Saemi et al. (2018). Regarding the influential individual factors in reducing online infidelity, various research findings have indicated that higher differentiation is correlated with increased intimacy and marital satisfaction (Roman, 2020). More differentiated individuals are capable of applying their personal

positions in relationships and paying attention to their thoughts and feelings, independent of their need to conform to others' expectations. Due to considering others' expectations while holding onto their personal stances, these individuals value their partners more in marital life and have a clear identity in relationships with others, leading to a lesser inclination toward infidelity (Safarzadeh Shirali & Bavi, 2019; Yousef-Pouri & Bahrami, 2021; Lampis, Cataudella & Agus, 2018). On the other hand, creating and maintaining intimate relationships and fulfilling emotional and psychological needs during marriage is an art and skill that, apart from mental health and healthy initial experiences, requires logical perspectives, communication skills, life skills, and fulfilling specific duties, a significant portion of which forms an individual's family heritage (Fatehollahi Motlagh et al., 2022). Furthermore, researches have shown that factors such as friendship and love, respect and appreciation, trust and loyalty, good communication, fulfilling sexual relations, shared values, cooperation and mutual support, enjoying time together, the ability to be flexible when faced with change, spirituality, belief in the institution of marriage, the assumption of a lasting life (Bachand & Caron, 2001), personality traits and responsibility, intimacy and the quality of sexual relationships, quality of shared life and leisure activities, the harmony and adaptability of couples, commitment and fidelity, having values, shared culture and spiritual experiences, as well as occupational and financial issues, are cited as factors that contribute to satisfying and sustaining marriages (Karayi et al., 2016).

In this regard, Clyde and his colleagues (2020) found that the differentiation of couples can influence their reactions to mistakes and misconceptions about each other, leading to constructive interactions between them. For this reason, it is effective in reducing the weakening of negative interaction cycles, reconstructing interaction patterns, strengthening communication, and increasing intimacy and marital satisfaction among couples (Saemi et.al, 2018). Ghoodarzi (2019) also showed in his research that the level of differentiation negatively predicts infidelity and cheating in marriage. Given the prevalence of religious culture in Iranian society and considering the findings of past studies in the area of infidelity, a clear relationship between religious tendencies and the likelihood of cheating was not anticipated (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983). However, more recent researches have shown that there is a strong relationship between an individual's religious attachments and their inclination towards infidelity. Atkins and colleagues (2005) examined variables such as closeness to God, prayer, and other religious factors in relation to people's cheating and concluded that religious attachments have an inverse relationship with the likelihood of infidelity among different individuals. Another reason that Atkins and Kessl present is that participating in religious ceremonies not only consumes a person's time and energy on religious matters but also, beyond that, changes an individual's ideological orientation by finding religious friends in these social groups, steering them from enjoying material matters to finding pleasure in spiritual affairs (Atkins et al., 2005). The individual's illicit relationships before marriage were an important factor in individual indicators which can carry over into the post-marriage phase, even in virtual spaces. In this context, various research results indicate that the likelihood of infidelity among different individuals has a relationship with their experiences of sexual relationships before marriage.

Levine (1975) found that the likelihood of infidelity and the frequency of these betrayals have a strong correlation with women's experiences of premarital sexual relationships. He stated that a woman who has had more sexual partners before marriage is more likely to struggle with marital commitments after getting married and become involved in cheating relationships (cited from: Gemmerr, 2013). Meanwhile, other researchers have indicated in their studies that merely having premarital sexual experience doesn't significantly increase the chances of cheating after marriage; rather, it's a determining factor before marriage. In this context, Treas & Giesen (2000) presented an index stating that for each sexual partner experienced before marriage, the probability of infidelity after marriage increases by "one

percent." So, according to this approach, if a woman or man has had sexual relations with ten people before marriage, the likelihood of them cheating after marriage is ten percent higher than someone who hasn't had those experiences. Additionally, Forste and Tanfer (1996) noted in their study that individuals with the most history of marital infidelity had experienced at least four sexual partners in their premarital relationships.

The second factor was interpersonal elements, which include the ability to express emotions to one's partner and marital intimacy. This leads to the ability to establish effective verbal and non-verbal communication in real life compared to the enticing connections in cyberspace and the diminishing impact of interpersonal conflicts that can tempt individuals to fill their emotional voids online. The results obtained align with the findings of researchers such as Ngwasheng, Paul Mbedzi (2024), Luo and Yu (2022), Pananakhonsab (2019). To explain the result obtained, it can be said that having intimacy among couples is a significant factor in creating stable marriages, while avoiding heartfelt relationships is one of the reasons why family life fails, leading to issues such as marital infidelity (Pananakhonsab, 2019). Intimacy is a closeness, similarity, and personal romantic or emotional relationship with another person, which requires deep understanding and comprehension of the individual, as well as articulating thoughts and feelings that reflect their similarities (Labrecque and Whisman, 2019). According to Bagarozzi (2001), true intimacy is an interactive process made up of several interconnected components, with the core of this process being the recognition, understanding, and acceptance of the other person, empathy for their feelings, and appreciation of their unique perspective on the world (Saemi, Besharat, and Asgamejad Farid, 2019). Emotionally competent individuals can recognize their emotions, understand their implicit meanings, and express their emotional states more effectively to others. Compared to those who lack the ability to understand and express emotional states, these individuals have greater success in coping with negative experiences and show better adaptability in relation to their environment and others. When it comes to couples, it seems that both the man and woman express emotions that are less threatening, rather than showing strong feelings. As a result, troubled couples get stuck in rigid patterns and interaction cycles that they reinforce themselves, repeating them over and over again. Their inability to handle the emotions they're caught up in leads to them remaining in a state of turmoil and increasing discord over unresolved issues (Woldarsky, 2006). In fact, if there's no intimacy between spouses, one partner feels emotionally deficient and empty, sensing that they're not understood or appreciated. This emptiness

makes a person more susceptible to slipping and infidelity. The stronger the feeling of this emptiness, the greater the individual's search for fulfillment, increasing the likelihood of a third party entering their emotional world (Ajam, 2016).

Finally, the third factor was the social context, which included sub-concepts like the nature of the job and economic status influencing the tendency for companionship-seeking in virtual spaces, the existence of strict laws regarding the harms of virtual environments, the promotion of a healthy lifestyle in society instead of engaging in polluted online spaces, and the availability of various healthy and joyful programs in the community contrasting with the seductive programs found online. The results align with the findings of Soudani and colleagues (2012), and Fathi and colleagues (2013). When it comes to the social factors impacting marital infidelity in the virtual world, one variable that is very challenging to examine in the context of infidelity is the role of "opportunities" in triggering cheating; researchers in this field find it difficult to define opportunities operationally (Roman, 2020). For example, opportunity can refer to the number of people a person interacts with during the day, or it can describe individuals who, for various work, educational, and similar reasons, spend significant amounts of time away from home and apart from their partners (Gemmer, 2013). Researchers have stated that the workplace acts as a potential opportunity to form new relationships. Various studies show that nearly half of people's infidelities are with "colleagues," since individuals spend most of their time away from home, at work, and with coworkers (same source). Research indicates that couples who live apart for any reason have more opportunities for cheating (Gemmer, 2013). Married men and women who are geographically distant from their spouses have increased chances of infidelity. The fact that a person's partner is not consistently present around them can be seen as an opportunity for betrayal. Moreover, geographical distance, especially if it is prolonged, creates a kind of pressure for couples caused by the lack of an emotional and sexual partner, which in turn, disrupts their sexual and emotional stability, leading them to seek fulfillment of their needs with someone else (same source, 2013:44). Another aspect of changes in marital infidelity within society can be found in the economic status of citizens. Another aspect of the changes in infidelity within society should be explored in relation to the economic situation of citizens. Previous research has shown that a person's economic standing can influence their sexual and emotional behaviors. The findings from the study by Treas & Giesen (2000) indicate that employment has a positive correlation with infidelity; individuals who are

employed are more likely to cheat than those who are unemployed, as a job provides both economic power and greater social opportunities. However, if both partners are unemployed, the likelihood of cheating decreases. Infidelity tends to rise when one partner is employed while the other is not (Blow & Hartnett, 2005). On the other hand, various studies show a strong relationship between income level and the likelihood of cheating (Dew et. al, 2022). Atkins et al (2005) mentioned that individuals with higher average incomes are more likely to engage in infidelity. They suggest that higher income generates more resources, allowing individuals to engage in cheating activities with greater power in online networks. They also explain that the increased likelihood of infidelity is not solely due to higher income, but rather the money creates more opportunities for the individual to cheat. Another indicator that came up in interviews with couples regarding their inclination towards online interactions with others was the lack of fulfilling and enjoyable leisure time in their lives. Leisure is a cultural-social phenomenon that has emerged in various forms throughout the social and individual lives of people since the inception of society and social culture. This topic holds particular significance in Iran. The uncontrolled growth of urban societies, increasing unemployment, the rise of the relative welfare of citizens, and the globalization of many cultural and social phenomena have created new opportunities and patterns for spending leisure time (Feizollahzadeh et al., 2014). In this regard, Avunduk (2021) conducted a study titled "The relationship between satisfaction with leisure time and addiction to social networks among students." In this research, 1983 students from Turkey participated, and the results indicated a significant negative correlation between satisfaction with leisure time and addiction to social networks among students. Therefore, if couples can plan for recreation and enriching their leisure time in their shared life, individuals may search for these experiences in virtual networks less frequently, reducing the likelihood of infidelity in these spaces. Overall, it can be said that an issue like marital infidelity can vary significantly between different societies; therefore, it is essential to investigate the experiences of such a phenomenon in light of the cultural, human, and social characteristics of that society.

Overall, the results of this research highlighted the individual, interpersonal, and social factors that influence the prevention of infidelity in the online space, emphasizing even more the reality that these impactful factors should be considered to prevent or reduce infidelity among couples in virtual settings. Among the limitations of this study was the lack of existing research background, which made it challenging to draw effective patterns.

Additionally, since the findings of this study were based on interviews with participants, it isn't possible to definitively explain the cause-and-effect relationship between the conditions discussed. Finally, the limitation of the sample to accessible individuals and a small community from which the sample was drawn restricts the transferability of the findings. Therefore, based on the results obtained and to address these limitations, it is recommended that future research related to this study select a larger community sample, investigate older age groups, and analyze the factors influencing the reduction of online infidelity while also proposing a model in this area by increasing the sample size. Also, families, psychologists and counselors can take the necessary measures to prevent this in young couples by examining the effective factors in preventing infidelity in cyber space.

5. Ethical Considerations

Compliance with ethical guidelines

All ethical principles were considered in this article.

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Authors' contributions

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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