

Identifying the Antecedents and Consequences of Online Infidelity in Marital Relationships: A Meta-Synthesis Approach

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aimed to identify and explain the antecedents and consequences of online infidelity in marital relationships.

Methods and Materials: This applied qualitative study employed a systematic review and meta-synthesis approach. Relevant studies were systematically searched in reputable national and international databases in accordance with the PRISMA guidelines. Following screening and methodological quality assessment, 29 eligible studies were included in the final synthesis. The extracted evidence was analyzed through coding, categorization, and conceptual synthesis to identify recurring concepts and higher-order themes related to online infidelity. The reliability of the coding process was assessed using Cohen's kappa coefficient, which yielded a value of 0.83, indicating a high level of inter-coder agreement.

Findings: The synthesis indicated that the antecedents of online infidelity can be conceptualized within five major domains: relationship dissatisfaction, individual and personality-related factors, characteristics of cyberspace and digital technologies, contextual and structural factors, and motivational and justificatory processes. The consequences were organized into six major domains: individual psychological and emotional consequences, relational and interpersonal consequences, cognitive and meaning-related consequences, social and familial consequences, consequences specifically associated with the online nature of infidelity, and adaptive and coping processes. The integrated findings further suggest that online infidelity does not result from a single determinant; rather, it emerges through the interaction of individual vulnerabilities, marital dynamics, social conditions, and technological affordances. Its effects similarly extend beyond the couple relationship and influence psychological well-being, family cohesion, trust, interpersonal functioning, and subsequent coping responses.

Conclusion: Online infidelity is a multidimensional phenomenon requiring integrated preventive and therapeutic approaches that simultaneously address individual, relational, social, and technological determinants. The proposed framework may inform couple interventions, media-literacy programs, communication-skills training, and family-health policies in the digital era.

Keywords: *Online infidelity; Marital relationships; Antecedents; Consequences; Meta-synthesis.*

1. Introduction

Infidelity is one of the most consequential relational events in intimate partnerships because it challenges assumptions of exclusivity, trust, emotional security, and commitment that ordinarily organize marital relationships. Although definitions of infidelity vary across individuals, couples, cultures, and clinical contexts, it is generally understood as behavior involving emotional, sexual, or relational intimacy with a third party in violation of explicit or implicit agreements within the primary relationship. The boundaries of what constitutes infidelity are not always stable, however, and may range from sexual intercourse to emotionally intimate communication, flirtation, secrecy, or other behaviors perceived as threatening the exclusivity of the couple bond (Moller & Vossler, 2015). From a sociological perspective, extradyadic relationships are also embedded in broader transformations in intimacy, sexuality, gender roles, and expectations of self-fulfillment within modern partnerships (Giddens, 2013; Morgan, 2014). Contemporary intimate relationships increasingly carry expectations of emotional closeness, sexual satisfaction, companionship, personal growth, and mutual recognition, which can increase both the salience of relational dissatisfaction and the consequences of perceived betrayal (Finkel & Eastwick, 2015). At the same time, changing social attitudes toward sexuality, marriage, and personal autonomy may alter how individuals interpret relational boundaries and moral expectations surrounding infidelity (Clery, 2023; Tkachenko et al., 2023). Accordingly, infidelity should not be understood merely as an isolated behavioral violation; rather, it reflects the intersection of individual motives, relationship dynamics, cultural norms, available opportunities, and wider transformations in intimate life.

The rapid diffusion of digital technologies has substantially altered the conditions under which intimacy and extradyadic involvement may occur. Mobile phones, social networking platforms, messaging applications, online dating services, and other forms of networked communication have blurred the boundaries between public and private life and have created continuous possibilities for

interpersonal connection beyond physical co-presence (Huisman et al., 2012; Wajcman et al., 2008). Digital media can strengthen relationships by facilitating communication and connectedness, but excessive, secretive, or boundary-violating use may also disrupt couple interaction and reduce face-to-face engagement (Morgan et al., 2017). Research in Iran has similarly shown that participation in cyberspace and virtual social networks can affect the quality, form, and boundaries of communication between spouses (Heydari, 2020; Latifi, 2015). Within this technological environment, online infidelity has emerged as a distinct but overlapping form of relational betrayal. It may involve cybersexual activity, sexualized messaging, emotional intimacy, secret communication, online dating, exchange of explicit content, or other digitally mediated interactions that one or both partners regard as violations of exclusivity (Adams, 2019; Vossler, 2016). Importantly, online infidelity cannot be reduced simply to conventional infidelity conducted through a different medium, because digital environments introduce distinctive affordances, including anonymity, immediacy, accessibility, low cost, concealability, persistence of digital traces, simultaneous communication with multiple others, and ambiguity regarding whether virtual interactions should be considered “real” infidelity (Oliullah & Murtuza, 2025, 2026).

One of the central challenges in this field is the lack of a universally accepted boundary between normative online interaction and online infidelity. Partners may differ considerably in whether they classify pornography use, intimate messaging, sexting, online flirting, maintaining dating profiles, emotionally intimate communication, or parasocial attachment as betrayal (Adams, 2019; Vossler & Moller, 2020). Such ambiguity has clinical significance because conflict may arise not only from the behavior itself but also from disagreement regarding its meaning. Vossler and Moller showed that partners' perceptions of Internet infidelity are shaped by secrecy, emotional investment, sexual content, relational consequences, and violation of expectations, rather than by the medium alone (Vossler & Moller, 2020). More recent work has further emphasized emotional, sexual, and technological dimensions of online infidelity and the ways in which virtual environments

complicate conventional distinctions between emotional and sexual betrayal (Oliullah & Murtuza, 2026). Digital platforms may even contribute discursively to the normalization or legitimization of extradyadic involvement by framing it in terms of self-care, authenticity, autonomy, or relationship management (Schneider, 2026). These developments suggest that online infidelity is simultaneously a behavioral, relational, cognitive, and culturally mediated phenomenon whose meaning is constructed through both couple-level expectations and the normative architecture of digital environments.

Research on the antecedents of infidelity has consistently indicated that no single factor adequately explains why individuals engage in extradyadic relationships. Relationship dissatisfaction, weak commitment, unmet emotional or sexual needs, reduced intimacy, unresolved conflict, and availability of attractive alternatives are among the most frequently identified relational predictors (Belu & O'Sullivan, 2024; Kaya & Şakiroğlu, 2023; Rokach & Chan, 2023). Machine-learning evidence has similarly suggested that relationship satisfaction, love, sexual desire, and characteristics of the relationship may be more informative in predicting infidelity than many demographic variables (Vowels et al., 2022). However, relational dissatisfaction interacts with individual vulnerabilities and motivations, including sensation-seeking, unrestricted sociosexual orientation, insecure attachment, low self-regulation, personality characteristics, anger, neglect, sexual motives, emotional motives, and desires for validation or novelty (Fife et al., 2026; Hackathorn & Ashdown, 2021). Qualitative models of infidelity decision-making further show that individuals may move through non-linear processes in which unmet needs, contextual opportunities, self-justification, and perceived alternatives interact over time (Fife et al., 2026; Perez et al., 2023). Protective processes are equally important: secure attachment, explicit boundaries, supportive beliefs about monogamy, satisfying sexual relationships, value congruence, and effective coping skills may reduce vulnerability to infidelity (Fye & Mims, 2019). Thus, a comprehensive explanation requires simultaneous attention to risk and protective factors operating at individual, relational, and contextual levels.

In online contexts, these antecedents are further shaped by technological opportunity structures. Digital environments can lower behavioral inhibition and increase access to potential alternative partners without requiring substantial geographic mobility or face-to-face contact (Kaya & Şakiroğlu, 2023; Vossler, 2016). Media-related

factors such as anonymity, constant accessibility, low cost, normalization of extramarital communication, pornography exposure, and excessive social-media use may facilitate progression from apparently innocuous interaction to emotionally or sexually charged relationships (Dehnavi et al., 2025; Shakiba et al., 2023). Online spaces may also provide opportunities for concealment and selective self-presentation, allowing individuals to construct alternative identities or relational experiences that differ from their offline lives. In addition, sexual-health risks remain relevant in digitally initiated extradyadic encounters, particularly when online contact transitions into offline sexual relationships and communication about protection is inadequate (Denes & Speer, 2018). These mechanisms illustrate why online infidelity requires a technologically informed conceptualization. The Internet is not simply a neutral channel through which pre-existing motives are expressed; its affordances can shape opportunity, disinhibition, boundary ambiguity, reinforcement, escalation, and the persistence of relational consequences.

Within the Iranian context, the antecedents of marital infidelity are similarly multidimensional but are embedded within particular cultural, familial, religious, and structural conditions. Qualitative and meta-synthesis studies have identified emotional and sexual dissatisfaction, insecure attachment, personality vulnerabilities, family-of-origin experiences, premarital relationships, social opportunities, changing values, declining religiosity, economic conditions, media exposure, and demographic factors as relevant correlates of infidelity (Ghaem Mohammadi et al., 2023; Sharifi Sa'ei & Azad Armaki, 2021). Other Iranian studies have emphasized marital conflict, impaired intimacy, forced or poorly matched marriages, sensation-seeking, previous relational experiences, unmet needs, and deficiencies in self-control or emotional regulation (Afshari Kashanian et al., 2019; Jamali et al., 2020). Grounded-theory research has further highlighted processes of blaming the spouse, rationalizing the extradyadic relationship, and using contextual explanations to legitimize behavior (Tajbakhsh et al., 2020). These findings demonstrate that infidelity in Iran cannot be interpreted exclusively through individual psychopathology or moral failure. Rather, it develops through interactions among couple dissatisfaction, personal vulnerabilities, normative pressures, opportunity structures, family history, and broader cultural change. This contextual complexity is especially important when investigating online infidelity, because digital technologies may introduce transnational values and new relational opportunities into

environments where traditional norms regarding marriage and fidelity remain highly salient.

The consequences of infidelity are equally complex and can extend well beyond the immediate disruption of trust. Betrayed partners commonly report anger, shame, anxiety, depression, intrusive thoughts, rumination, reduced self-esteem, grief, and trauma-like reactions (Rokach & Chan, 2023; Wdowiak et al., 2024). Online infidelity may intensify some of these responses because digital evidence can be repeatedly revisited, messages can remain permanently accessible, and the betrayal may have occurred within the shared domestic environment through devices that previously symbolized ordinary communication (Filimon, 2025). In Asian contexts, the psychological and sexual-health consequences of digital infidelity may be compounded by stigma, limited help-seeking, and barriers to professional services (Bhattacharjee, 2025). Iranian meta-synthetic evidence likewise indicates consequences spanning psychological, cognitive, familial, social, economic, physical, and child-related domains (Sharifi Sa'ei, 2022). Accordingly, infidelity may affect not only the unfaithful partner and the betrayed partner but also children, family networks, social functioning, occupational stability, and broader psychosocial well-being.

Relationally, disclosure of infidelity often initiates a prolonged and unstable process rather than an immediate, singular outcome. Couples may move between confrontation, surveillance, ambivalence, attempts at repair, withdrawal, separation, and renegotiation of relational boundaries (Hertlein et al., 2022). Digital infidelity is particularly relevant to surveillance because suspicions may lead partners to inspect phones, social-media accounts, cloud storage, location data, or other digital traces. Studies of online infidelity forums have documented the use of spyware, tracking applications, keyloggers, and account-access strategies in intimate partner surveillance, demonstrating that betrayal may generate secondary privacy and safety concerns (Tseng et al., 2020). Following disclosure, some couples move toward dissolution, while others attempt relational reconstruction. Qualitative research on divorce related to cyberspace-based infidelity has described grief, difficulty accepting reality, defensive processes, decisions about preserving or ending the marriage, and gradual adjustment (Pakmanesh et al., 2024). At the same time, attachment-focused work suggests that recovery is not necessarily linear; partners may alternate between emotional approach and withdrawal while attempting to restore safety and trust (Butler et al., 2022).

Individual recovery following infidelity or breakup similarly involves meaning-making, identity reconstruction, emotional processing, and adaptation (Fife et al., 2022). These findings indicate that consequences should include not only pathological outcomes but also dynamic coping and adaptation processes.

The persistence and visibility of digital records also distinguish online infidelity from many forms of conventional extradyadic involvement. Screenshots, archived messages, photographs, account histories, and social-media traces may preserve evidence long after the relationship has ended, thereby sustaining rumination and complicating trust repair (Filimon, 2025; Hertlein et al., 2022). At the same time, excessive digital media use can independently reduce marital quality by displacing face-to-face interaction, decreasing shared time, and creating perceptions of neglect (Morgan et al., 2017). Systematic-review evidence concerning habitual consumption of online sexual content has likewise linked such patterns with decreased intimacy, emotional distancing, conflict, and diminished relationship quality (Dehnavi et al., 2025). These processes reinforce the need to distinguish antecedents, enabling conditions, and consequences. For example, excessive digital engagement may function as a predisposing context before infidelity, as a behavioral component during the infidelity, and as a source of continuing conflict after disclosure. A conceptual framework that separates these temporal and functional roles is therefore necessary for both research and clinical application.

Despite the growing literature, existing knowledge remains fragmented. Some studies concentrate on conventional marital infidelity without isolating digital mechanisms; others focus on online sexual behavior, media use, surveillance, pornography, or platform dynamics without integrating them into a comprehensive model of online infidelity. Reviews have identified important predictors and consequences, but the field still lacks sufficient integration across individual, relational, sociocultural, and technological levels (Belu & O'Sullivan, 2024; Wdowiak et al., 2024). The coexistence of emotional, sexual, technological, motivational, and justificatory processes further complicates theoretical synthesis (Oliullah & Murtuza, 2026; Schneider, 2026). In addition, findings derived from Western settings cannot automatically be generalized to societies in which family cohesion, religion, stigma, gender expectations, and marital norms may differ substantially. This limitation is particularly relevant in Iran, where locally generated studies have documented culturally

specific antecedents and consequences, while global digital platforms simultaneously expose users to changing norms and opportunities (Ghaem Mohammadi et al., 2023; Sharifi Sa'ei & Azad Armaki, 2021). Integrating international and Iranian evidence can therefore provide a more contextually sensitive understanding of how online infidelity develops and what follows from it.

A meta-synthesis is especially suitable for addressing this gap because it enables systematic integration of heterogeneous qualitative and conceptually relevant findings into higher-order categories while preserving contextual meaning. Such an approach can move beyond enumerating isolated risk factors by identifying recurring patterns, relationships among concepts, and broader explanatory domains. It can also clarify how marital dissatisfaction, personality characteristics, motives, digital affordances, cultural conditions, and justificatory processes converge as antecedents, and how psychological distress, relational disruption, family consequences, technology-specific challenges, and coping processes emerge as consequences. By synthesizing evidence across these domains, a more coherent framework may support assessment, prevention, couple therapy, media-literacy interventions, and family-health policy. It may also help clinicians distinguish between factors that predispose individuals to online infidelity, mechanisms that facilitate its development, and consequences that require intervention after disclosure.

Accordingly, the aim of the present study was to identify and synthesize the antecedents and consequences of online infidelity in marital relationships through a qualitative meta-synthesis approach.

2. Methods and Materials

In this study, a qualitative meta-synthesis approach was employed to integrate the findings of previous studies and develop a coherent framework of antecedents (factors predisposing individuals to online infidelity) and consequences that would have explanatory and practical applicability within the national context. Meta-synthesis was used to identify the antecedents and consequences of online

infidelity in marital relationships. Meta-synthesis is a qualitative approach for the systematic integration and interpretation of findings from previous studies, enabling the extraction of shared concepts and patterns. In terms of purpose, this study was applied, and in terms of nature, it was descriptive-explanatory. The methods of data collection and analysis were qualitative. Given the procedural nature of the meta-synthesis method, its stages are not repeated in the methodology section. Accordingly, the stages of the meta-synthesis are presented step by step in the Findings section together with their practical implementation, including the search, screening, extraction, analysis, and synthesis of findings, so that both the research process and the results obtained at each stage can be documented.

3. Findings and Results

In this study, the meta-synthesis process was conducted according to the seven-stage model of Sandelowski and Barroso (2007), comprising the following stages: formulation of the research question, systematic literature search, selection and screening of studies, data extraction, analysis and synthesis of concepts, quality appraisal, and presentation of the final results. The study population comprised all scientific research articles published in Iranian databases (Magiran, Noormags, Irandoc, Civilica, SID, and the Comprehensive Portal of Humanities) between 2016 and 2026 and in international databases (Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, Emerald, Springer, Wiley, and Google Scholar) between 2015 and 2026. The search keywords included combinations such as “online infidelity,” “cyber adultery,” “infidelity consequences,” and “infidelity antecedents”; their Persian equivalents were used in the Iranian databases. Overall, 321 article titles were identified, and after duplicate and irrelevant records were removed, 29 articles were selected for the final analysis. The inclusion and exclusion criteria included relevance to online infidelity, marital relationships, and the Iranian cultural context and were applied through a multistage screening process. The inclusion and exclusion criteria for the selected articles are presented in the following table.

Table 1

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria for Articles

Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion
Language of the article	English and Persian	Languages other than English and Persian
Study period	Iranian studies: 2016–2026; international studies: 2015–2026	Studies published before the specified periods
Research method	Studies employing qualitative or mixed methods	Studies lacking a systematic methodological approach

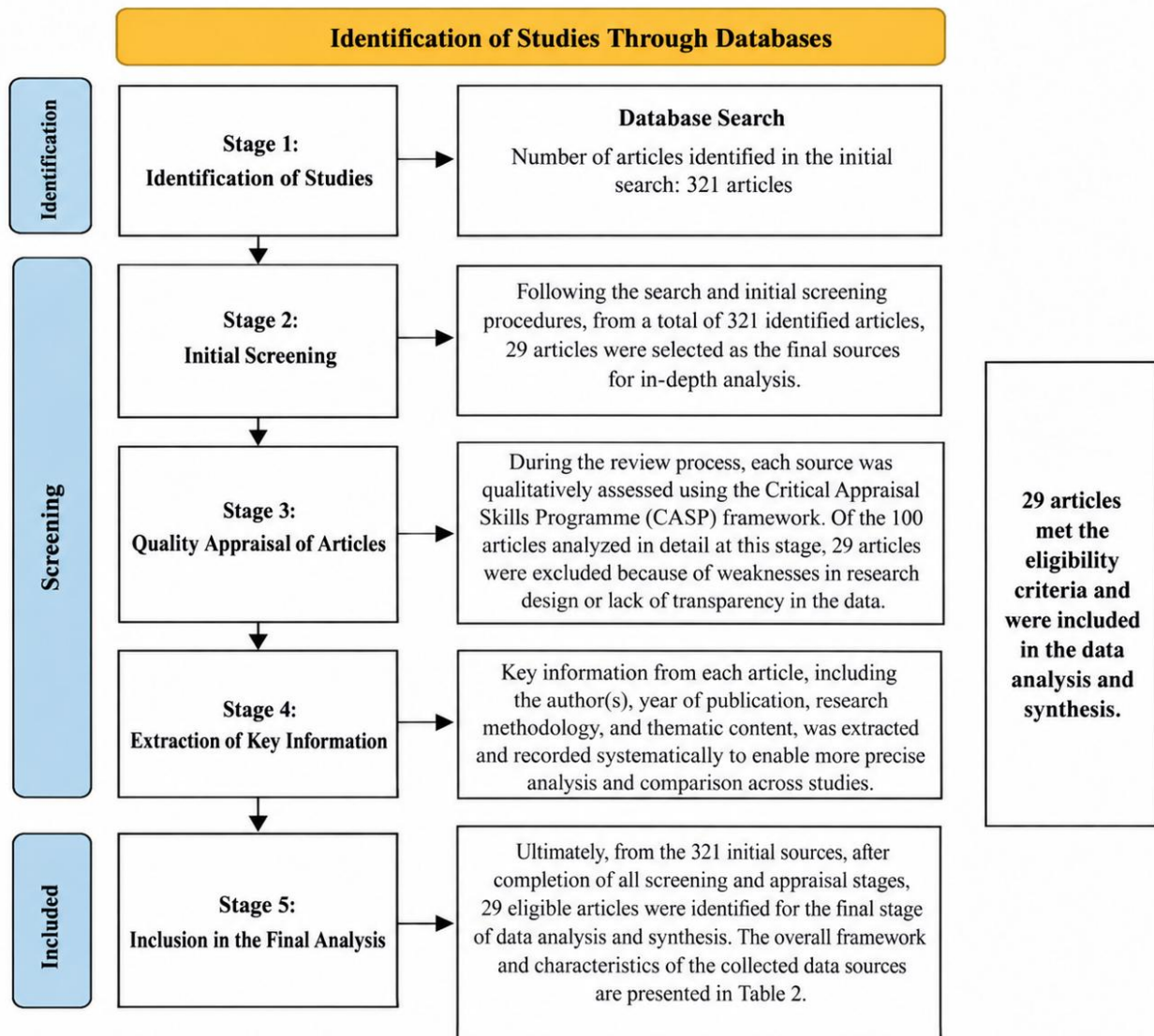
Study content	Articles related to infidelity and online infidelity	Articles outside the subject area or not examining infidelity
Type of source	Reputable scientific journals	Unofficial websites and non-scientific reports

Following the initial search and screening procedures, of the 321 identified articles, 29 were selected as the final sources for in-depth analysis. In the next stage, the researcher began a detailed examination of the remaining texts while simultaneously extracting the key points from each article. During the review process, each source was qualitatively appraised using a critical appraisal skills framework. Of the 100 articles examined in detail at this stage, 29 were excluded because of weaknesses in research design or insufficient transparency of the data. Ultimately, from among the 321 initial sources, 29 articles were

determined to be eligible for the final stage of data analysis and synthesis after completion of all refinement and appraisal stages. Following several stages of screening and application of the exclusion criteria, the PRISMA protocol was used to assess the eligibility of the articles. Ultimately, 29 documents relevant to the objectives of the present study (Table 2) were selected and analyzed. The key concepts extracted from these sources were categorized and presented in the form of subdimensions and major dimensions (Table 3). The stages of study appraisal and review are also presented in the flow diagram.

Figure 1

Flowchart of the Article Screening and Selection Process



Studies published in reputable Iranian and international journals that had examined the antecedents and consequences of online infidelity in marital relationships were searched and reviewed. The study inclusion and exclusion criteria are presented in Table 1. Findings from

articles that addressed various dimensions of online infidelity, including predisposing factors, motivations, and individual, familial, social, and psychological consequences, are reported in Table 2.

Table 2

Summary of the Reviewed Documents

Code	Authors and Year	Study Title	Journal/Source	Type of Study	Methodology	Key Findings
S1	Fife et al. (2026)	The Decision-Making Process Regarding Infidelity Among Emerging Adult Women	<i>Journal of Marital and Family Therapy</i>	Original research (qualitative)	Interviews; grounded theory method	Women in unsatisfactory relationships and with unmet needs engage in justificatory processes motivated by factors such as seeking validation or excitement. These three factors operate like interconnected gears, making the decision to engage in infidelity nonlinear and dynamic. Following infidelity, guilt, shame, anger, reduced self-esteem, and sometimes symptoms of depression and anxiety are observed in both partners.
S2	Oliullah et al. (2026)	Explaining Online Infidelity in Romantic Relationships	Gaylord College, University of Oklahoma	Original research	Interviews and thematic analysis	Online infidelity has three dimensions: emotional, sexual, and technological. Anonymity, ease of access, and the persistence of messages distinguish it from traditional infidelity. Its effects extend beyond romantic relationships and are associated with diminished trust, secrecy, and profound psychological consequences.
S3	Schneider (2026)	Legitimation of Infidelity on Dating Platforms	<i>New Media & Society</i>	Original research (qualitative)	Discourse analysis of five prominent dating platforms	These platforms redefine infidelity as self-care, relationship care, honesty with oneself, progressivism, and belonging to a like-minded community. Within this discourse, infidelity is framed not as a moral failure but as a means of maintaining balance in modern life.
S4	Bhattacharjee (2025)	The Impact of Digital Infidelity on Mental and Sexual Health in Asian Societies	<i>Indian Journal of Health, Sexuality and Culture</i>	Original research (systematic review)	Systematic review using a multidimensional approach	In Asian societies, social stigma, limited awareness, and restricted access to health services intensify the risks associated with online infidelity. Escapism, emotional dissatisfaction, and disinhibition encourage risky behaviors and may result in sexually transmitted infections, psychological distress, and family disruption.
S5	Filimon (2025)	Women's Experiences of Online Infidelity and Attachment Injury	<i>New Trends in Psychology</i>	Original research (qualitative)	Interviews; thematic analysis	Online infidelity inflicts a profound injury on the emotional bond. After discovering infidelity, women may experience sexual aversion, intrusive mental imagery, rumination, surveillance behaviors, and conflicting responses such as excessive proximity-seeking or complete withdrawal.
S6	Belu et al. (2024)	Predictors of Infidelity Among Couples	<i>The Journal of Sexual Medicine</i>	Review article	Systematic review of previous literature	The strongest predictors are low commitment and poor relationship quality. Low conscientiousness, low agreeableness, neuroticism, anxious attachment, and unrestricted sociosexual orientation also increase risk. Sexual dissatisfaction plays a more prominent role among men,

							whereas emotional dissatisfaction is more salient among women.
S7	Wdowiak et al. (2024)	A Review of Infidelity Relationships	<i>Polish Journal of Public Health</i>	Review article	Comprehensive literature review		Infidelity is rooted in unmet needs, with anger, neglect, lack of intimacy, and environmental opportunities contributing to its occurrence. It often leads to relationship dissolution and is associated with anger, shame, jealousy, depression, and sometimes suicidal ideation. Gender differences in the perception of and responses to infidelity remain substantial.
S8	Rokach et al. (2023)	Love and Infidelity: Causes and Consequences	<i>International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health</i>	Review article	Extensive narrative review		Infidelity may arise as a response to unmet needs and, in some cases, situational opportunities. The experience may constitute a threat to emotional security and evoke trauma-like reactions. Insomnia, weight loss, depression, anxiety, and reduced self-esteem are common consequences and may occasionally culminate in suicide.
S9	Kaya et al. (2023)	Factors Influencing Online Infidelity	<i>Current Approaches in Psychiatry</i>	Review article	Systematic review using the PRISMA protocol		Low satisfaction, weak commitment, loneliness, insecure attachment, and the availability of high-quality alternative partners are among the most important factors associated with online infidelity. Power and influence within the relationship also play a determining role.
S10	Vowels et al. (2022)	Predicting Infidelity Using Machine Learning	<i>The Journal of Sex Research</i>	Original research (quantitative)	Random forest algorithm		Relationship satisfaction, love, sexual desire, and relationship duration were the strongest predictors. Demographic and individual variables were less influential, and gender differences in infidelity appear to be diminishing.
S11	Hertlein et al. (2022)	Experiences of Infidelity Through Internet Communication	<i>Sexual and Relationship Therapy</i>	Original research (qualitative)	Content analysis of three focus groups		The online infidelity process unfolds across eight stages, from intuition to relationship termination: suspicion, searching for evidence, discovery, confrontation, partner response, ambivalence, termination, and establishment of new rules. Ambiguity inherent in digital environments makes rebuilding trust difficult.
S12	Hackathorn et al. (2021)	Motivations for Infidelity and Satisfaction With the Extradynamic Relationship	<i>The Journal of Sex Research</i>	Original research (quantitative)	Survey		Sexual motives are stronger among men, whereas emotional motives, including frustration, neglect, and anger, are stronger among women. Factors such as unrestricted sociosexual orientation, lower sexual guilt, and religiosity also contribute to the formation of motives.
S13	Vossler et al. (2020)	Partners' Perceptions and Experiences of Internet Infidelity	<i>Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy</i>	Original research (mixed methods)	Mixed-methods survey		Online infidelity is confusing and distressing. Ambiguity concerning whether virtual behaviors are "real" intensifies disagreement between partners. The home itself becomes the setting for infidelity, while concealed identities challenge relational trust.
S14	Tseng et al. (2020)	Partner Surveillance Tools in Infidelity Forums	<i>USENIX Security Symposium</i>	Original research (mixed methods)	Content analysis		Forum users recommend advanced technologies such as spyware, tracking applications, keyloggers, and access to cloud accounts to monitor partners. Approximately one-third of discussions lead to intensified surveillance, and the spyware industry uses such environments for marketing.
S15	Adam (2019)	Perceptions of Infidelity: Comparing Sexual, Emotional, Online, and Parasocial Behaviors	<i>Interpersona</i>	Original research (mixed methods)	Factor analysis		Behaviors such as sexting and sexual Snapchat interactions are perceived as being as distressing as physical infidelity. Women and individuals in committed relationships classify a

								wider range of behaviors as infidelity and respond more strongly. Attachment to celebrities may also be perceived as a form of infidelity, similar to pornography consumption.
S16	Fye et al. (2019)	Protective Factors Against Infidelity	<i>The Family Journal</i>	Original research (qualitative)	Interviews and grounded theory analysis			Fidelity is sustained through small and continuous efforts across six areas: secure attachment, a dynamic sexual relationship, clear boundaries, alignment with values, beliefs supporting monogamy, and coping skills. These factors function as an interconnected network protecting the relationship against infidelity.
S17	Denes et al. (2018)	Sexual Health Communication in the Search for Extradysadic Relationships	<i>International Journal of Sexual Health</i>	Original research (quantitative)	Analysis of 819 personal advertisements on Craigslist			Personal advertisements seeking extradysadic relationships often emphasize being "clean," while condom use is rarely mentioned. Men seeking men express the greatest concern about sexual health and sometimes indicate concern about transmitting infections to their primary partner.
S18	Morgan et al. (2017)	Perceived Problems Associated With a Partner's Media Use	<i>Marriage & Family Review</i>	Original research (qualitative)	Thematic analysis			Excessive partner media use is associated with feeling ignored, reduced face-to-face communication, and diminished quality time. Use in inappropriate situations and persistent distraction are other commonly reported concerns.
S19	Vossler (2016)	A Critical Ten-Year Review of Internet Infidelity	<i>The Family Journal</i>	Review article	Systematic review			The seven "A" model—accessibility, anonymity, affordability, approximation, acceptability, ambiguity, and accommodation—provides a framework for understanding vulnerabilities associated with online infidelity. Online infidelity can be as damaging as face-to-face infidelity, although sufficient empirical evidence supporting treatment models remains lacking.
S20	Moller and Vossler (2015)	Defining Infidelity in Research and Counseling	<i>Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy</i>	Original research (qualitative)	Interviews with seven couples and thematic analysis			Infidelity is a fluid and context-dependent construct. Definitions among counselors and clients range from penetrative sexual intercourse to any behavior that threatens the emotional bond. This ambiguity complicates therapists' work and requires them to collaboratively construct definitions with clients.
S21	Dehnavi et al. (2025)	Consequences of Habituation to Viewing Sexual Content Online for the Decline in Marital Relationship Quality	<i>Family Psychology (Iranian Family Psychology Association)</i>	Original research (systematic review)	Systematic review using the PRISMA protocol			Habituation to sexual content in cyberspace undermines marital trust and is associated with increased infidelity, emotional divorce, reduced intimacy, tension, and maladjustment. It is also associated with risky sexual behaviors, violence, modeling unrealistic relationships, depression, isolation, and destabilization of family values.
S22	Pakmanesh et al. (2024)	Examining Processes Leading to Divorce Following Infidelity in Cyberspace: A Qualitative Approach	<i>Socio-Cultural Changes</i>	Original research (qualitative)	Thematic analysis; in-depth interviews			Consequences of online infidelity include excessive social media use leading to reduced trust, increased jealousy, and emotional separation. The divorce process resulting from virtual infidelity comprises three stages: grief (attachment to the past, difficulty accepting reality, meaning-seeking, and personal growth); adjustment (attempts to preserve the relationship, decision-making

							regarding divorce, internal conflict, creation of a support network, and planning for the future); and defense mechanisms (denial, suppression, rationalization, and escape from pain). Emotional consequences include shock, anger, guilt, reduced self-esteem, loneliness, depression, fear of the future, and feelings of failure; relational consequences include diminished trust, communication problems, loss of intimacy, and disruption of social relationships.
S23	Shakiba et al. (2023)	Examination of Media-Related Factors Contributing to Increased Internet Infidelity Among Students	<i>Technology and Scholarship in Education</i>	Original research (qualitative)	Descriptive-analytical		Media-related factors contributing to online infidelity are divided into two categories: predisposing factors (Internet addiction, anonymity, ease of access, and low cost) and weakening factors (promotion of irreligiosity, lifestyle changes, erosion of privacy, and globalization). By normalizing extradyadic relationships and weakening cultural values, media create conditions conducive to online infidelity.
S24	Sharifi-Sa'ei (2023)	Consequences of Marital Infidelity in Iran: A Meta-Synthesis Study	<i>Contemporary Sociological Research</i>	Original research (qualitative systematic review)	Qualitative synthesis	meta-	The consequences of infidelity in Iran can be classified into eight domains: emotional and psychological (depression, anxiety, anger, reduced self-esteem), cognitive (mental confusion, altered values), familial (divorce, violence, revenge, emotional separation), social (distrust, isolation, insecurity), economic (threats to employment and property), individual (sexually transmitted infections and reduced quality of life), physical (insomnia, cardiac problems, and hormonal disturbances), and child-related consequences (academic decline, psychological harm, and insecure attachment).
S25	Ghaem Mohammadi et al. (2023)	Identifying Antecedent, Predisposing, Contextual Factors, Strategies, and Consequences of Marital Infidelity in Yazd Using a Qualitative Grounded Theory Approach	<i>Disability Studies</i>	Original research (qualitative)	Grounded theory; semi-structured interviews		Antecedents included personality-related factors (psychological problems, jealousy, pessimism, fear, novelty-seeking, and lack of self-control), sexual deviations (incestuous tendencies, pornography use, masturbation, and anal sex), unmet needs, and deficiencies (financial management and affection). Contextual factors included communication problems, communication with acquaintances, norm violations such as addiction, domestic violence and voyeuristic behavior, and modeling. Background factors included family histories of infidelity, premarital relationships, childhood influences, differences in beliefs and education, forced marriage, comparison, and humiliation. Consequences included erosion of family social capital through distrust, reduced commitment, and increased conflict.
S26	Sharifi Sa'ei and Armaki (2021)	Factors Contributing to the Formation of Marital Infidelity in Iran: A Meta-Synthesis Study	<i>Review of Social Issues in Iran</i>	Original research (qualitative systematic review)	Qualitative meta-synthesis; analysis of 87 Iranian scientific research articles using three-stage coding		Factors associated with infidelity in Iran fall into nine domains: psychological (personality and insecure attachment), social (opportunities for infidelity and deviant peers), cultural (changing values and declining religiosity),

							economic (high income and financial problems), relational (sexual and emotional dissatisfaction, violence, and loneliness), familial (family history of divorce or infidelity), individual (novelty-seeking and sexual addiction), media-related (social networks and satellite media), and contextual (young age and male gender). Sexual and emotional dissatisfaction were the most important factors, and infidelity was reported more frequently among men and younger individuals.
S27	Jamali et al. (2020)	Predisposing Factors for Men's Extramarital Relationships: A Qualitative Study of Women's Experiences	<i>Rehabilitation Research in Nursing</i>	Original research (qualitative)	Descriptive phenomenology; Colaizzi analysis; semi-structured interviews		Factors contributing to men's infidelity fall into five categories: maladaptive characteristics of the woman (psychological disorders, feelings of worthlessness, fear of infidelity, controlling behavior, and permissiveness); maladaptive characteristics of the man (psychological disorders, multiple previous relationships, low self-confidence, sensation-seeking, and pornography addiction); disruption of couple intimacy (unmet needs, humiliation, comparison, threats of divorce, and interference by others); marriage with a high likelihood of failure (forced marriage, lack of premarital familiarity, and educational/cultural incompatibility); and dysfunctional family background (parental addiction, divorce, violence, lack of guidance, and insufficient support).
S28	Tajbakhsh et al. (2021)	Grounded Theory Analysis of the Process of Marital Infidelity Formation	<i>Contemporary Sociological Research</i>	Original research (qualitative)	Grounded theory; semi-structured interviews		Causes of infidelity included emotional incompatibility, behavioral problems, and deterioration of the sexual relationship. Contextual factors included weak religious beliefs, hedonistic attitudes, age, occupation, duration of marriage, peer influence, premarital relationships, and cyberspace. Strategies included blaming the spouse, justifying the relationship, and misuse of religion. Consequences involved erosion of family social capital through distrust, reduced commitment, and increased tension and family conflict.
S29	Afshari Kashanian et al. (2019)	Identifying Predisposing Factors for Marital Infidelity Among Women	<i>Counseling Research</i>	Original research (qualitative)	Grounded theory; interviews		Causes of infidelity were classified into three categories: predisposing factors (monotony in life, inherent weaknesses in marriage, suppression of sexual/emotional needs, and societal transformation); maintaining factors (sensation-seeking, relinquishment of responsibility, creativity in concealment, and discovery of new characteristics); and responses (desire for divorce, relationship repair, and enduring psychological pressure).

In the fifth stage, which was devoted to the analysis and synthesis of qualitative findings, all factors extracted from the studies were initially treated as codes. During the analysis process, related codes were grouped into categories, and the main concepts were identified. Subsequently, related

concepts were organized into broader classifications referred to as "categories." In the sixth stage, inter-coder agreement and Cohen's kappa coefficient were used to ensure the quality and accuracy of the extracted data. For this purpose, the researcher compared the coding results with those of

another coder who was an expert in family studies and marital relationships. All indicators, textual statements, and codes extracted from the 29 selected articles were provided to the second coder, who was asked to independently examine and classify the concepts. Agreement between the two coders was calculated using Cohen's kappa coefficient. Following several rounds of review and revision, the percentage of agreement between the coders gradually increased and exceeded the 80% threshold. This procedure was repeated until the kappa coefficient reached 0.83, indicating very good and acceptable agreement between the

coders and demonstrating a high level of validity and reliability in the coding and categorization process. In addition, the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme checklist was used for qualitative appraisal and validation of the selected articles, providing a criterion for assessing the scientific and methodological quality of the studies under analysis. Finally, in the seventh stage, the findings were presented in Table 3, which consisted of two sections, namely consequences and antecedents. Each dimension included categories, subcategories, and initial codes related to online infidelity in marital relationships.

Table 3

Categories, Subcategories, and Initial Codes Related to Online Infidelity in Marital Relationships

Domain	Main Category	Subcategory	Integrated Codes	Source Code
Antecedents	Context of dissatisfaction in the primary relationship	Emotional and sexual dissatisfaction	Initial lack of psychological and emotional intimacy; emotional neglect; feelings of worthlessness and being ignored as an unmet primary need; sexual dissatisfaction; reduced quality of the sexual relationship; physical distance	S1, S6, S7, S8, S9, S10, S12, S21, S25, S26, S28, S29
Antecedents	Context of dissatisfaction in the primary relationship	Dysfunctional communication and unresolved conflicts	Reduced quality and quantity of communication; inability to express needs; frequent unresolved conflicts; rejection of requests; absence of intimate conversations; communicative distance	S1, S18, S25, S28, S29
Antecedents	Context of dissatisfaction in the primary relationship	Incompatibility in values and lifestyle	Differences in religious beliefs, culture, and education; forced marriage or marriage without sufficient prior acquaintance; incongruence in goals and lifestyles	S25, S26, S27, S28
Antecedents	Individual and personality-related factors	Maladaptive personality characteristics and clinical history	High neuroticism; low agreeableness; low conscientiousness; insecure attachment; personality disorders; history of depression/anxiety before the infidelity; low self-confidence; pessimism; pathological jealousy	S6, S9, S25, S26, S27, S28
Antecedents	Individual and personality-related factors	Sensation-seeking and novelty-seeking	Seeking excitement and novelty; sexual and emotional variety-seeking; unrestricted sociosexual orientation; escape from monotony; lack of commitment to monogamy	S1, S12, S17, S25, S26, S27, S28, S29
Antecedents	Individual and personality-related factors	Background and prior history	Multiple previous relationships; history of infidelity; exposure to parental infidelity or divorce; childhood influences; multiple premarital relationships; maladaptive upbringing	S25, S26, S27, S28
Antecedents	Individual and personality-related factors	Deficits in self-regulation and coping skills	Poor self-control; lack of stress-coping skills; impulsivity; limited behavioral inhibition; poor emotion regulation	S25, S28, S29
Antecedents	Contextual and structural factors	Cultural, religious, and value-related factors	Declining religiosity; changes in traditional values; globalization; weakening social norms; reduced social stigma surrounding infidelity; attitudinal ambivalence	S4, S23, S26, S27, S28
Antecedents	Contextual and structural factors	Economic, occupational, and demographic factors	Financial difficulties; high income; financial independence; employment in highly interactive environments; occupational stress; younger age; gender; relationship duration; engagement or cohabitation status	S1, S6, S7, S10, S24, S25, S26, S28
Antecedents	Cyberspace-related factors	Accessibility, anonymity, and normative normalization	Easy access; anonymity; low cost; simultaneous communication with multiple individuals; redefinition of infidelity; normalization of extradyadic relationships in the media	S2, S3, S19, S21, S23, S26, S28
Antecedents	Cyberspace-related factors	Addiction and excessive use of digital media	Addictive use of social networks; pornography consumption; digital distraction; reduced face-to-face quality time; substitution of virtual communication for in-person interaction	S18, S21, S22, S23, S24
Antecedents	Cyberspace-related factors	Technical and content-related characteristics of the platform	Recording and persistence of digital evidence; ambiguity regarding boundaries of virtual behavior; sexting; parasocial relationships; access to alternative partners; content sharing	S2, S13, S15, S19, S20, S21, S23
Antecedents	Motivations and justificatory processes	Emotional and power-related motives	Seeking affection and validation; attempts to compensate for unmet needs; proving one's self-worth; reclaiming power; resisting control; asserting independence	S1, S12, S25, S27, S29
Antecedents	Motivations and justificatory processes	Justificatory processes before disclosure	Cognitive legitimization; blaming the spouse as an anticipatory justification; rationalization; comparing the primary partner with a third party; feeling trapped; self-deception	S1, S3, S25, S28, S29

Consequences	Psychological, physical, and cognitive consequences	Emotional, and consequences	clinical, physical	Guilt; shame; humiliation; anger; jealousy; reduced self-esteem; hopelessness; grief; newly emerging or intensified depression/anxiety; trauma-like symptoms; rumination; suicidal ideation; insomnia; somatic symptoms	S1, S2, S4, S5, S7, S8, S22, S24, S25
Consequences	Psychological, physical, and cognitive consequences	Disturbance and reconstruction of meaning	and of	Cognitive confusion; intrusive mental imagery; transformation of moral values; ambivalence; identity redefinition; personal growth; reconstruction of the value system; gaining insight	S3, S5, S13, S22, S24
Consequences	Relational, social, and familial consequences	Destruction of trust, relationship rupture, and violence		Chronic distrust; suspicion; controlling behaviors, including technological surveillance such as spyware and keyloggers; reduced commitment; collapse of intimacy; emotional and legal separation; domestic violence; retaliatory behaviors	S1, S2, S5, S7, S8, S11, S13, S14, S21, S22, S24, S25
Consequences	Relational, social, and familial consequences	Social, familial, and economic consequences		Social isolation; social stigma; reduced support; psychological and academic problems among children; insecure attachment among children; disruption of parent-child relationships; occupational threats; legal expenses; division of property; reduced income	S4, S22, S24, S25, S26
Consequences	Consequences specific to online infidelity	Challenges in definition and persistence of digital evidence		Ambiguity in identifying online infidelity; disagreement between partners concerning the boundaries of virtual relationships; difficulty rebuilding trust because of the persistence of digital evidence; need to establish new relationship rules; fear of information disclosure; digital concealment; misuse of recorded content	S2, S5, S11, S13, S14, S20, S21, S22, S23
Consequences	Adaptive and coping processes	Stages of grief and adjustment		Shock; denial; anger; self-blame; acceptance of reality; decision-making regarding continuation or termination of the relationship; rebuilding one's life	S1, S8, S22, S24
Consequences	Adaptive and coping processes	Defense and coping mechanisms following disclosure		Denial; suppression; projection; blaming others as a psychological defense; emotional distancing; substance use; excessive engagement in work	S22, S24, S25, S

The review and synthesis of the findings from 29 studies indicated that the antecedents of online infidelity in marital relationships can be organized into five main categories: a context of dissatisfaction in the primary relationship, individual and personality-related factors, contextual and structural factors, cyberspace-related factors, and motivations and justificatory processes (Figure 2). Among these categories, dissatisfaction in the primary relationship was the most frequently identified and played a foundational role in the development of online infidelity. The findings indicated that deficiencies in emotional and sexual intimacy, dysfunctional communication, unresolved conflicts, and incompatibility in values and lifestyles undermine the quality of the marital relationship and may lead individuals to seek fulfillment of emotional and affective needs through online relationships. The second category comprised individual and personality-related factors, indicating that a tendency toward online infidelity is not solely the product of relationship problems; individual characteristics also contribute to its occurrence. Personality vulnerabilities, sensation-seeking, previous experiences, and deficiencies in self-regulation and emotion regulation increase an individual's predisposition to enter online extradyadic relationships, particularly when these factors co-occur with marital dissatisfaction. Contextual and structural factors were also identified as influential social and cultural conditions. Changes in cultural values, weakening normative restrictions, economic circumstances, and

demographic characteristics create a context in which the likelihood of engaging in online relationships may increase. These findings demonstrate that online infidelity is not merely an individual behavior but is also influenced by social and cultural conditions. The fourth category comprised cyberspace-related factors, which highlight the distinctive characteristics of this form of infidelity. Easy access, anonymity, excessive use of digital media, and the communication affordances of online platforms facilitate the development of parallel relationships and make the boundaries of marital relationships increasingly ambiguous. Therefore, cyberspace serves not only as a medium through which infidelity occurs but also as a facilitating factor in its initiation and maintenance. The final category comprised motivations and justificatory processes. The findings indicated that individuals commonly enter online relationships to satisfy emotional needs, obtain validation, restore a sense of self-worth or power, and simultaneously employ cognitive mechanisms such as rationalization, legitimization of the behavior, and blaming the spouse to reduce internal conflict. Overall, the findings indicate that online infidelity results from the simultaneous interaction of relational, individual, social, technological, and cognitive factors.

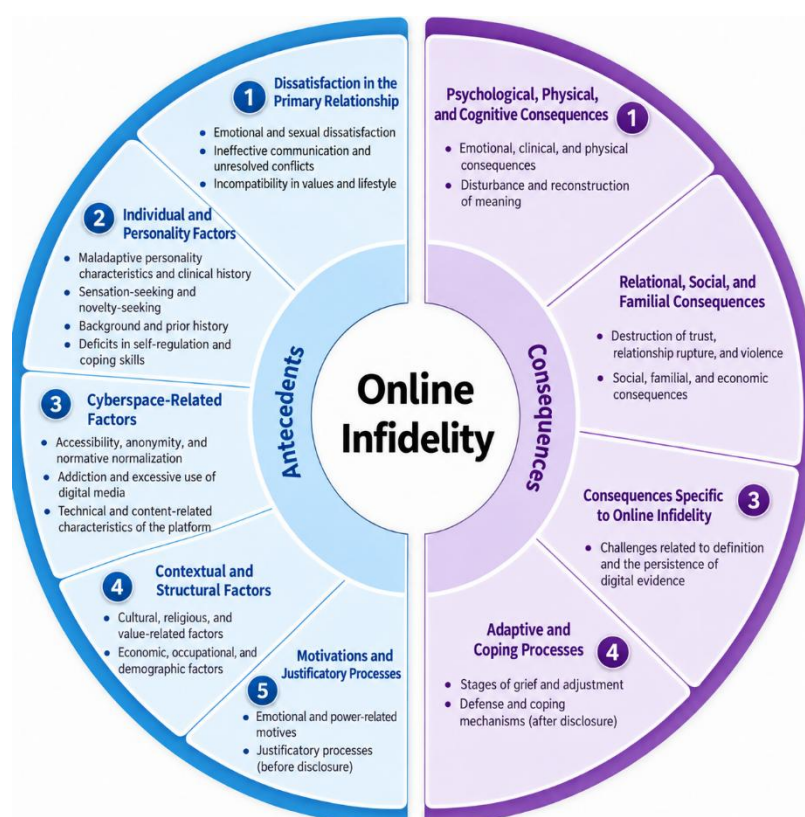
The review and synthesis of findings from 29 studies indicated that the consequences of online infidelity can be classified into four major categories: psychological, physical, and cognitive consequences; relational, social, and

familial consequences; consequences specific to online infidelity; and adaptive and coping processes (Figure 2). Among these categories, psychological, physical, and cognitive consequences were the most frequently reported. The findings indicated that the experience of online infidelity is associated with a broad range of emotional reactions, including shame, anger, anxiety, and depression, together with somatic symptoms and cognitive disturbance. Nevertheless, some individuals subsequently undergo processes of reflection, identity reconstruction, and redefinition of their value systems. The second category comprised relational, social, and familial consequences, indicating that the effects of online infidelity extend beyond the individual experience. Destruction of trust, diminished intimacy, increased conflict, separation, and violence, together with outcomes such as social isolation, impaired family functioning, problems among children, and economic pressures, were among the most important consequences reported in the studies. These findings indicate that online infidelity can substantially affect family stability and

networks of social relationships. Consequences specific to online infidelity constituted the third main category and distinguish this phenomenon from traditional infidelity. Ambiguity in defining the boundaries of infidelity, the persistence of digital evidence, difficulties in rebuilding trust, and concerns regarding the dissemination of private information are among the most important challenges specific to the online environment and underscore the need to redefine relationship rules and boundaries. The final category comprised adaptive and coping processes. The findings showed that following disclosure of online infidelity, individuals generally move through a gradual process of grief, acceptance, and decision-making concerning the future of the relationship, while employing either adaptive or maladaptive coping strategies. Thus, coping with online infidelity can be understood as a dynamic process that begins with an initial crisis and, depending on individual and relational resources, may culminate in either relationship reconstruction or dissolution. The following figure presents the conceptual model of the study.

Figure 2

Final Conceptual Model of the Study



4. Discussion

The present meta-synthesis was conducted to identify and integrate the antecedents and consequences of online infidelity in marital relationships. The synthesis of 29 studies showed that the antecedents of online infidelity could be organized into five main categories: dissatisfaction in the primary relationship, individual and personality-related factors, contextual and structural factors, cyberspace-related factors, and motivations and justificatory processes. The consequences were classified into four major categories: psychological, physical, and cognitive consequences; relational, social, and familial consequences; consequences specific to online infidelity; and adaptive and coping processes. Overall, the findings support a multidimensional conceptualization in which online infidelity is not produced by a single cause and does not result in a single type of outcome. Rather, it emerges from the interaction of relational vulnerabilities, individual predispositions, social and cultural conditions, digital affordances, and cognitive-motivational processes, while its consequences unfold across psychological, relational, familial, social, and technological domains.

The first and most prominent antecedent category was dissatisfaction in the primary relationship. Emotional and sexual dissatisfaction, ineffective communication, unresolved conflict, and incompatibility in values and lifestyle were repeatedly identified as conditions that may increase vulnerability to online infidelity. This finding is consistent with research emphasizing relationship dissatisfaction, weak commitment, unmet emotional needs, and reduced relational quality as central predictors of infidelity (Belu & O'Sullivan, 2024; Kaya & Şakiroğlu, 2023; Wdowiak et al., 2024). The present synthesis also accords with evidence showing that relationship satisfaction, love, sexual desire, and relationship characteristics are among the strongest predictors of infidelity (Vowels et al., 2022). From this perspective, online involvement with a third party may function as an alternative channel through which unmet needs for affection, validation, sexual satisfaction, or emotional responsiveness are pursued. This interpretation is also supported by qualitative work suggesting that feelings of neglect, emotional disconnection, relational monotony, and unmet needs can precede infidelity decisions (Afshari Kashanian et al., 2019; Fife et al., 2026; Jamali et al., 2020). Thus, dissatisfaction in the primary relationship may be considered not merely one risk factor

among many, but an important relational context within which other vulnerabilities become more consequential.

The second antecedent category concerned individual and personality-related factors, including maladaptive personality characteristics, clinical history, sensation-seeking, novelty-seeking, previous relational experiences, and deficits in self-regulation and coping skills. This finding aligns with studies showing that traits such as neuroticism, low conscientiousness, low agreeableness, insecure attachment, unrestricted sociosexuality, impulsivity, and novelty-seeking may elevate the likelihood of extradyadic involvement (Belu & O'Sullivan, 2024; Hackathorn & Ashdown, 2021; Kaya & Şakiroğlu, 2023). The role of sensation-seeking and the search for novelty appears especially relevant to online contexts, where new interpersonal encounters can be accessed rapidly and with relatively little initial cost or commitment. The present findings further support the idea that prior experiences, including multiple previous relationships, exposure to parental infidelity, or earlier extradyadic behavior, may shape expectations and behavioral scripts concerning fidelity. Iranian studies have likewise identified low self-control, emotional dysregulation, previous relational experiences, and personality vulnerabilities as important antecedents (Ghaem Mohammadi et al., 2023; Sharifi Sa'ei & Azad Armaki, 2021; Tajbakhsh et al., 2020). These results suggest that online infidelity is more likely when relational dissatisfaction co-occurs with individual tendencies that reduce inhibition or increase responsiveness to external opportunities.

A third important category was contextual and structural factors. Cultural, religious, value-related, economic, occupational, and demographic conditions were identified as part of the broader environment in which online infidelity develops. This finding underscores that infidelity is socially embedded rather than purely individual. Changes in sexual norms, marriage expectations, and attitudes toward autonomy may modify the perceived acceptability of extradyadic behavior (Clery, 2023; Giddens, 2013; Tkachenko et al., 2023). In the Iranian context, previous meta-synthetic and qualitative findings have also emphasized the role of cultural change, weakening of traditional norms, reduced religiosity, economic conditions, employment contexts, peer influences, and demographic characteristics (Ghaem Mohammadi et al., 2023; Sharifi Sa'ei & Azad Armaki, 2021). These contextual factors may not directly cause infidelity, but they can influence the availability of opportunities, perceived consequences,

normative restraints, and the meaning assigned to online interactions. The results therefore support an ecological understanding in which online infidelity is shaped by both the immediate marital relationship and the wider social system.

Cyberspace-related factors constituted the fourth antecedent category and distinguished online infidelity from traditional forms of infidelity. Accessibility, anonymity, normative normalization, excessive digital-media use, pornography consumption, and the technical features of digital platforms were found to facilitate online extradyadic involvement. This result is strongly consistent with previous literature identifying accessibility, anonymity, affordability, ambiguity, and related technological affordances as mechanisms that reduce barriers to online infidelity (Vossler, 2016). Studies have also shown that the Internet can provide constant access to potential alternative partners, increase opportunities for secret communication, and blur relational boundaries (Oliullah & Murtuza, 2025, 2026; Vossler & Moller, 2020). The findings concerning excessive digital use and pornography are also consistent with evidence linking problematic media use and habitual exposure to sexual content with reduced marital intimacy, diminished trust, and poorer relationship quality (Dehnavi et al., 2025; Morgan et al., 2017). In addition, Iranian research has highlighted anonymity, ease of access, low cost, and the normalization of extramarital relationships in digital media as contributing factors (Shakiba et al., 2023). These findings indicate that cyberspace should not be conceptualized simply as a neutral setting in which pre-existing infidelity occurs; rather, its technical and social affordances actively shape opportunity, concealment, escalation, and normalization.

The fifth antecedent category involved motivations and justificatory processes. Participants in the reviewed studies appeared to enter online extradyadic relationships for reasons such as seeking affection, validation, emotional compensation, power, autonomy, or restoration of self-worth. At the same time, cognitive processes such as rationalization, blaming the spouse, comparing the primary partner with another person, and legitimizing the behavior helped reduce internal conflict. These findings are in line with research showing that sexual, emotional, retaliatory, self-esteem-related, and novelty-seeking motives are central to infidelity (Hackathorn & Ashdown, 2021). Grounded-theory studies of infidelity decision-making have similarly demonstrated that the decision to engage in infidelity often develops through gradual processes of dissatisfaction,

opportunity, self-justification, and shifting moral boundaries (Fife et al., 2026; Perez et al., 2023). In the Iranian context, blaming the spouse and rationalizing the extradyadic relationship have also been identified as important components of the infidelity process (Tajbakhsh et al., 2020). The present findings therefore suggest that online infidelity often involves not only behavioral opportunity but also an internal cognitive process through which individuals reinterpret the meaning and acceptability of their actions.

With regard to consequences, the most prominent category involved psychological, physical, and cognitive outcomes. The synthesis identified guilt, shame, anger, jealousy, reduced self-esteem, hopelessness, grief, anxiety, depression, trauma-like reactions, rumination, intrusive imagery, insomnia, somatic symptoms, and in some cases suicidal ideation. These findings closely align with prior research indicating that infidelity can produce severe emotional distress and responses resembling trauma or attachment injury (Filimon, 2025; Rokach & Chan, 2023; Wdowiak et al., 2024). The present findings also support evidence suggesting that online infidelity may be especially psychologically disruptive because the digital nature of the betrayal permits repeated exposure to messages, images, or other evidence. In Asian contexts, these consequences may be intensified by stigma and limited access to support services (Bhattacharjee, 2025). The identification of cognitive confusion, disturbed meaning, and identity reconstruction further indicates that infidelity can challenge basic assumptions about the relationship, the partner, and the self. However, the presence of personal growth and reconstruction of meaning in some studies also suggests that the aftermath is not uniformly pathological and may include adaptive reorganization over time.

The second major consequence category involved relational, social, and familial effects. Chronic distrust, suspicion, reduced commitment, collapse of intimacy, emotional separation, divorce, violence, retaliatory behaviors, social isolation, harm to children, and economic pressures were among the recurrent findings. This pattern is consistent with evidence that infidelity may destabilize the couple bond and erode family social capital (Ghaem Mohammadi et al., 2023; Sharifi Sa'ei, 2022). Online infidelity may produce additional relational disruption because digital communication can continue in concealed ways even after disclosure, making trust restoration more difficult. Qualitative studies have shown that couples may move through suspicion, evidence-seeking, confrontation, ambivalence, and renegotiation of boundaries after Internet-

based infidelity (Hertlein et al., 2022). The findings regarding emotional separation and divorce are also consistent with Iranian work describing grief, conflict, indecision, and eventual relationship dissolution following cyberspace-related betrayal (Pakmanesh et al., 2024). At the same time, relational recovery is possible and may involve gradual restoration of attachment security and trust through repeated cycles of approach and withdrawal (Butler et al., 2022).

The third consequence category was specific to the online nature of the infidelity. Ambiguity in defining whether certain virtual behaviors constitute infidelity, disagreement between partners about digital boundaries, the persistence of digital evidence, concealment, fear of information disclosure, and misuse of stored content emerged as distinctive challenges. This finding is strongly aligned with previous research demonstrating that couples often disagree about whether behaviors such as sexual messaging, online flirting, virtual intimacy, or parasocial involvement should be considered infidelity (Adams, 2019; Moller & Vossler, 2015; Vossler & Moller, 2020). In addition, the permanent or semi-permanent nature of digital traces can keep the betrayal psychologically present long after the behavior itself has ended. The results concerning surveillance are also supported by evidence that partners may respond to suspected or discovered infidelity by using tracking software, spyware, keyloggers, account access, or other digital monitoring strategies (Tseng et al., 2020). Therefore, online infidelity creates a paradox in which the same technologies that facilitate secrecy can also intensify detection, monitoring, and repeated re-exposure to evidence.

The fourth consequence category involved adaptive and coping processes. The synthesis indicated that individuals frequently pass through stages involving shock, denial, anger, self-blame, grief, acceptance, and decisions about whether to maintain or terminate the relationship. Both adaptive and maladaptive coping strategies were identified. These findings are consistent with research on individual healing after infidelity and relationship dissolution, which highlights emotional processing, meaning-making, reconstruction of identity, and gradual adaptation (Fife et al., 2022). Similarly, qualitative studies of post-infidelity adjustment have described ambivalence, grief, defensive responses, attempts at relational repair, and eventual decisions about the future of the relationship (Hertlein et al., 2022; Pakmanesh et al., 2024). The present synthesis therefore suggests that the consequences of online infidelity should be conceptualized dynamically. The initial crisis may

lead to deterioration and dissolution, but in some cases it may also initiate processes of reflection, boundary renegotiation, personal growth, and relationship reconstruction.

5. Conclusion

Taken together, the findings indicate that online infidelity is best understood through an integrative framework. Relational dissatisfaction may create vulnerability, individual characteristics may reduce inhibition or heighten motivation, contextual and cultural factors may shape norms and opportunities, and digital platforms may facilitate access and concealment. Motivational and justificatory processes then provide a pathway through which online involvement can be initiated and sustained. After disclosure, consequences unfold across psychological, cognitive, physical, relational, familial, social, and technological domains, while coping and adaptation determine whether the aftermath moves toward recovery or further deterioration. This integrated pattern is compatible with broader theories of contemporary intimacy, which emphasize the increasing importance of emotional fulfillment, self-realization, and negotiated relational boundaries (Finkel & Eastwick, 2015; Giddens, 2013). It also reinforces the need to distinguish online infidelity from purely offline infidelity without treating them as entirely separate phenomena.

6. Limitations & Suggestions

The present study has several limitations. First, the findings were derived from previously published studies and were therefore dependent on the methodological quality, conceptual definitions, sampling strategies, and reporting practices of those studies. Second, online infidelity was not defined uniformly across the reviewed literature, and some studies examined behaviors such as sexting, pornography use, secret online communication, or virtual relationships under partially overlapping conceptual labels. Third, the included evidence was culturally heterogeneous, and although Iranian studies were incorporated, the synthesis also relied on findings from different sociocultural contexts, which may limit direct generalization to all married couples in Iran. Fourth, because the present study used a qualitative meta-synthesis approach, it was not designed to estimate the magnitude of associations or determine causal relationships among antecedents and consequences. Finally, rapid technological change means that the specific digital platforms, communication tools, and behavioral forms

represented in the literature may evolve faster than the evidence base.

Future studies should develop clearer and more standardized operational definitions of online infidelity and distinguish among emotional, sexual, communicative, and technologically mediated forms. Longitudinal research is needed to determine the temporal ordering of marital dissatisfaction, digital-media use, online boundary violations, disclosure, and subsequent psychological or relational outcomes. Quantitative studies should test the conceptual framework identified in this meta-synthesis using structural equation modeling and examine possible mediating and moderating mechanisms such as attachment style, self-regulation, religiosity, marital satisfaction, gender, and digital literacy. Cross-cultural comparative research would also help determine which antecedents and consequences are universal and which are culturally specific. Future work should additionally investigate emerging technologies, including encrypted messaging, artificial-intelligence-mediated companionship, virtual reality, and algorithmic dating environments, as these may create new forms of relational ambiguity and opportunity. Research involving both partners rather than only one member of the couple would provide a more complete understanding of dyadic processes before and after online infidelity.

In practice, prevention and intervention programs should address online infidelity at multiple levels rather than focusing exclusively on individual responsibility. Couple therapists and counselors should assess emotional and sexual dissatisfaction, communication deficits, unresolved conflicts, attachment vulnerabilities, digital-media use, and the couple's explicit and implicit rules regarding online interactions. Premarital and marital education programs should include digital-boundary negotiation, media literacy, expectations regarding online privacy, and strategies for managing contact with alternative partners. Following disclosure, interventions should address trauma-like symptoms, rumination, distrust, surveillance behaviors, and maladaptive coping while helping couples clarify whether they wish to repair or terminate the relationship. Family-health policymakers and educational institutions should also promote digital relationship literacy and accessible counseling services. Where relationship repair is sought, structured interventions should support gradual restoration of trust, transparent communication, renegotiation of digital boundaries, and development of adaptive coping skills for both partners.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

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

Transparency of Data

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

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed in this article.

Declaration

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