

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

Zahra. Bahmani¹, Yaser. Madani^{2*}, Keyvan. Salehi³, Seyyed Mohammad. Alavi⁴, Zohreh. Azizi⁵

¹ PhD Student, Department of Counseling, Aras International Campus, University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran

² Assistant Professor, Department of Counseling, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran

³ Associate Professor, Department of Educational and Curriculum Planning and Methods, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran

⁴ Professor, Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures, University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran

⁵ PhD, Department of Psychology, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran

* Corresponding author email address: yasermadani@ut.ac.ir

E d i t o r	R e v i e w e r s
Valiollah Farzad  Professor, Department of Psychology and Counseling, KMAN Research Institute, Richmond Hill, Ontario, Canada v.farzad@kmanresce.ca	Reviewer 1: Behnam Makvandi  Department of Psychology, Ahvaz Branch, Islamic Azad University, Ahvaz, Ira. Email: b.makvandi@iauhvaz.ac.ir Reviewer 2: Alireza Aghayousefi  Associate Professor, Department of Psychology, Payame Noor University, Tehran, Iran. Email: aghayousefi@pnu.ac.ir

1. Round 1

1.1. Reviewer 1

Reviewer:

The sentence “Given the procedural nature of the meta-synthesis method, its stages are not repeated in the methodology section” should be reconsidered. Core methodological procedures should not be transferred almost entirely to the Findings section because readers need to know, before interpreting the results, exactly how the evidence was identified, screened, appraised, coded, and synthesized. I recommend retaining a concise but complete procedural description under Methods, including database searching, eligibility assessment, quality appraisal, extraction, coding, synthesis, and reliability procedures, while reserving numerical outcomes of those procedures for the Results section.

In the Findings paragraph beginning “In this study, the meta-synthesis process was conducted according to the seven-stage model of Sandelowski and Barroso (2007),” the search strategy is insufficiently reproducible. The manuscript lists databases and several keywords, but does not provide complete Boolean search strings, field restrictions, language filters, date of the final search, use of quotation marks/truncation, or database-specific adaptations. A systematic synthesis should permit replication. Please provide at least one full search strategy for an international database and one Iranian database, specify the exact last-search date, and indicate whether backward citation searching, forward citation searching, hand-searching, or gray-literature searching was undertaken.

The same paragraph reports that Iranian studies were searched for “between 2016 and 2026” and international studies between “2015 and 2026,” but no conceptual justification is provided for using different temporal windows. Please explain why the Iranian literature begins one year later than the international literature and whether this difference was determined a priori. If the original Iranian search period was based on Solar Hijri years 1395–1405, the conversion to Gregorian years should be applied carefully because Solar Hijri years do not correspond exactly to January–December Gregorian years; therefore, the manuscript should report either exact search dates or the precise Gregorian interval corresponding to the original eligibility criterion.

Table 1 requires revision because the eligibility criterion “Studies employing qualitative or mixed methods” appears inconsistent with the final evidence base, which includes quantitative studies, machine-learning research, systematic reviews, narrative reviews, and mixed-methods studies. For example, Table 2 includes Vowels et al. (2022), Hackathorn et al. (2021), and Denes et al. (2018), all of which are quantitative, as well as multiple review articles. Either Table 1 should be corrected to reflect the actual eligible designs or the included studies should be reconsidered. This inconsistency currently raises a serious concern regarding whether eligibility criteria were specified a priori or modified after study selection.

The operational definition of “online infidelity” needs to be specified before presenting the synthesis. The manuscript currently integrates cyber infidelity, general marital infidelity, pornography consumption, media overuse, online extradyadic relationship seeking, parasocial behaviors, and conventional extramarital relationships. For example, the text states that the review included studies addressing “infidelity and online infidelity,” while Table 3 attributes findings from conventional infidelity studies to the online-infidelity framework. The authors should establish an explicit conceptual boundary defining what behaviors qualified as online infidelity and explain how evidence from general infidelity research was judged transferable. Without such a definition, conceptual heterogeneity may undermine construct validity.

The fifth-stage analysis paragraph beginning “all factors extracted from the studies were initially treated as codes” requires a more transparent description of the coding and synthesis procedure. Please report how many initial codes were generated, whether coding was inductive, deductive, or hybrid, how duplicate or synonymous codes were merged, what criteria distinguished a code from a subcategory and a main category, and whether negative or contradictory cases were retained. It would also strengthen rigor to provide an audit trail or supplementary coding example showing the transformation of one or more original study findings into initial codes, subcategories, and final higher-order categories.

Authors revised and uploaded the document.

1.2. Reviewer 2

Reviewer:

The manuscript contains a major numerical inconsistency in the paragraph stating, “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,” while the same paragraph subsequently concludes that 29 studies were retained from 321 initial records. If 100 studies underwent detailed appraisal and 29 were excluded at that point, 71 should remain unless additional exclusions occurred. Moreover, Figure 1 states that “29 articles were selected as the final sources” immediately after initial screening, before the quality-appraisal stage. The authors should reconstruct the entire study-selection flow and provide mutually consistent counts at identification, deduplication, title/abstract screening, full-text assessment, quality appraisal, exclusion, and final inclusion.

Figure 1 should be revised to conform more closely to PRISMA reporting logic. The current sequence states that 29 studies were selected for in-depth analysis at Stage 2, then indicates that 100 articles were assessed at Stage 3, which is logically impossible if only 29 had remained. Additionally, the side box “29 articles met the eligibility criteria and were included in the data analysis and synthesis” duplicates information rather than documenting exclusions. Please report the number of duplicate records removed, records screened, reports sought/retrieved, full texts assessed, full-text exclusions with reasons, quality-related exclusions, and studies included in the final synthesis. If PRISMA 2020 was followed, the terminology should also match PRISMA 2020 conventions.

The statement “each source was qualitatively appraised using a critical appraisal skills framework” is too vague and should identify the exact instrument and its scoring procedure. Later, the manuscript refers to the “Critical Appraisal Skills Programme checklist,” but CASP contains different checklists for qualitative studies, systematic reviews, cohort studies, and other designs. Because the evidence base contains heterogeneous research designs, please explain which CASP form was used for each study type, how items were scored, whether an overall threshold was used to exclude studies, how disagreements were handled, and whether quality influenced synthesis weighting. Applying a single qualitative checklist to quantitative and review studies would not be methodologically appropriate.

Table 2 mixes primary qualitative research, quantitative studies, systematic reviews, narrative reviews, mixed-methods studies, institutional or academic outputs, and potentially overlapping evidence syntheses within one meta-synthesis. This creates a risk of double-counting because findings from primary studies may enter the synthesis directly and then again through systematic reviews that include those same studies. For instance, review articles such as Belu et al. (2024), Kaya et al. (2023), Vossler (2016), and Sharifi Sa’ei (2022) may incorporate evidence from primary sources also included in Table 2. The authors should justify this mixed evidence architecture and either conduct sensitivity analyses excluding secondary studies or explicitly map overlapping primary evidence to prevent duplication.

The manuscript should critically reconsider the inclusion criterion concerning the “Iranian cultural context.” The Methods paragraph states that relevance to “online infidelity, marital relationships, and the Iranian cultural context” formed part of the eligibility criteria, yet a substantial proportion of included studies were conducted outside Iran and did not specifically investigate Iranian couples. Please clarify whether “Iranian cultural context” was an actual inclusion criterion, an interpretive objective, or merely one component of the evidence base. If international studies were deliberately included to construct a broader framework subsequently interpreted for Iran, this should be stated explicitly and supported with a rationale for cross-cultural transferability.

Authors revised and uploaded the document.

2. Revised

Editor’s decision after revisions: Accepted.

Editor in Chief’s decision: Accepted.