



New Trends
in Psychology

When Betrayal Goes Digital: Women's Experiences of Online Infidelity and Attachment Injury

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Abstract: Objectives: The current study explores how Romanian women experience, interpret, and cope with the discovery of their spouses' online sexual infidelity, conceptualized as an attachment injury. **Prior Work:** While online sexual infidelity has been increasingly examined in Western societies, little is known about its emotional and relational impact in traditional, religious Eastern European contexts such as Romania. **Approach:** Using a qualitative design, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 19 Romanian women (aged 37–59) who experienced their husbands' online sexual infidelity and were undergoing divorce counselling. Data were analyzed through reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). **Results:** Four primary themes emerged: (1) sexual interactions – activation of attachment needs, sexual inadequacy, and sexual withdrawal; (2) emotional effects – trauma symptoms, emotional disengagement or hyper-attachment, and negative affect toward self and spouse; (3) cognitive impacts – distorted self-perceptions, rumination, and intrusive imagery related to betrayal; (4) behavioral consequences – surveillance behaviors, avoidance, and verbal or emotional retaliation. Participants reported profound emotional pain, loss of self-worth, and disrupted attachment patterns consistent with post-traumatic responses. **Implications:** Online sexual infidelity constitutes a severe form of attachment-related trauma with emotional, cognitive, and behavioral consequences. Findings highlight the role of Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT) in addressing culturally shaped responses to betrayal. **Value:** This study contributes to the understanding of digital intimacy and attachment trauma in a non-Western context, informing culturally sensitive interventions.

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1. Introduction

The digitalization of interpersonal communication has transformed the way romantic partners engage, maintain intimacy, and experience betrayal (Geeng et al., 2025). While the internet offers opportunities for connection, it also facilitates new forms of emotional and sexual infidelity, often referred to as *cyber- or online infidelity* (Hertlein et al., 2022; Vossler & Moller, 2024). Online sexual exchanges - through messaging, explicit photographs, or virtual relationships - blur the boundaries of monogamy and emotional exclusivity, provoking psychological reactions similar to those following in-person sexual betrayal (Simion, 2024).

From an attachment perspective, infidelity represents a serious violation of the expectation that one's partner will be emotionally available, trustworthy, and responsive at moments of vulnerability (Johnson, 2019). Such violations can produce what Johnson et al. (2001) termed *attachment injuries* - deep relational traumas that challenge an individual's sense of safety, self-worth, and ability to trust. Betrayal triggers attachment-related responses such as hypervigilance, withdrawal, anger, or desperate attempts at re-engagement (Bowlby, 1982; Farina & Schimmenti, 2025; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). These reactions mirror the distress observed following traumatic separations or loss and may manifest as intrusive thoughts, emotional dysregulation, or avoidant coping (Ford et al., 2013; Warach & Josephs, 2021).

Recent studies (e.g., Birta et al., 2024; Maftei et al., 2022; Oliullah & Murtuza, 2025) suggest that the impact of online infidelity is particularly complex in societies where religiosity, gender norms, and social expectations reinforce the sanctity of marriage. In Romania, where Orthodox Christian values continue to frame moral attitudes toward fidelity and female virtue (Ciurea, 2021; Șerban et al., 2022), online sexual betrayal may elicit intensified shame, self-blame, and social stigma. Yet, despite the growing global literature on cyber-infidelity, the relational and intrapersonal processes through which such betrayals are experienced as *attachment injuries* in traditional, post-communist societies remain insufficiently explored.

Theoretically, integrating *attachment theory* with research on *online infidelity* advances understanding of how digital betrayals activate the same attachment system that underlies proximity-seeking, fear of abandonment, and emotional regulation in

intimate relationships (Parsakia & Rostami, 2023). The attachment framework provides a lens to interpret why individuals respond to online infidelity with trauma-like symptoms, cognitive distortions, and behavioral strategies aimed at re-establishing connection or self-protection (Brubacher & Johnson, 2017; Purnell, 2018). This integration highlights the psychological continuity between offline and online experiences of betrayal: both disrupt the secure base essential for emotional safety and intimacy.

Despite the relevance of this theoretical connection, empirical research has rarely examined the *lived experience* of online infidelity through an attachment lens, particularly among women in Eastern European contexts. Existing Romanian scholarship focuses largely on moral or social dimensions (Apostu, 2016; Lăzărescu & Vintilă, 2021), leaving unaddressed how such experiences are internalized psychologically as attachment-related trauma.

To address this gap, the present qualitative study explores how Romanian women experience, interpret, and cope with their husbands' online sexual infidelity. Specifically, it seeks to understand how this digital betrayal functions as an *attachment injury* that disrupts emotional, cognitive, and behavioral processes. The guiding research question is:

How do Romanian women experience and make sense of their husbands' online sexual infidelity as an attachment-related trauma?

By exploring this question, the study contributes to the international literature on digital intimacy and attachment trauma and offers culturally sensitive insights relevant for therapeutic practice, particularly within Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT) frameworks.

2. Online Infidelity and Its Detrimental Effects

Online infidelity, particularly online sexual infidelity, is one of the most significant traumatic events, and literature in the field identified several major traumatic events: sexual betrayal, criticism, active nonparticipation (i.e., denial of emotion or withdrawal of love and commitment), passive nonparticipation (ignoring the partner or keeping him/her out of programs), and deception (lying, breaking promises, and losing trust) (Mousavi et al., 2018; Purnell, 2018). Furthermore, according to Leary (2001), one of the six main causes of injury is infidelity. Active nonparticipation (open rejection, desertion, or exclusion) and passive nonparticipation (hidden

rejection, like ignorance) are among these six categories. Criticism, betrayal, ridicule, and a lack of emotional appreciation are also included.

Couples that are confronted with online infidelity may find themselves steadfastly trapped in a rigid cycle of interaction (e.g., attack – defend, pursue – distance). This experience leads to a deeper level of alienation when the infidel partner does not adequately reassure and comfort. It has been shown that these injuries are typically accompanied by intense feelings, similar to post-traumatic stress disorder flashbacks. Moreover, people who have experienced attachment-related trauma may display key traits of posttraumatic stress disorder.

According to Rodrigues et al. (2017), marital infidelity is generally divided into two categories: 1) sexual infidelity and 2) emotional infidelity. According to empirical research, people react to both situations nearly identically, and both groups are equally harmful (Lishner et al., 2008). According to literature in the field, women typically betray men through emotional relationships with another partner, but men typically betray women through sexual bonds. In general, research indicates that men are more likely than women to be romantically involved in an extramarital online affair (McAlister et al., 2005). Although online infidelity can affect both men and women, women are more affected than men because they are more perceptive of the symptoms and are able to identify them more quickly and accurately (Ein-Dor et al., 2015). Women are more prone to go through depressive episodes after their partners cheat on them, but men are more likely to become angry and act aggressively or hit them in retaliation.

In their 2008 definition, Whitty and Quigley define sexual infidelity as having sex with someone who is not the person's legal spouse. Typically, it may involve caressing, cuddling, kissing, hugging, and sexual activity. In summary, infidelity-related behaviors can range from flirting to sexual activity and can be divided into three major categories: (a) obscure behaviors, like hugging someone else or talking on the Internet; (b) explicit behaviors, like oral sex or sexual activity; and (c) deceptive behaviors, like lying or withholding information from the partner (Wilson et al., 2011). Specific behaviors are seen as the strongest indicator of betrayal, while deceptive actions are regarded as the intermediate indicator. The lowest indicator of treachery is characterized as undefined behaviors. Even while erotic elements are often present in explicit sexual betrayal, there is little emotional exchange (Burdwood & Simons, 2015). According to the Romanian perspective, sexual infidelity is a very inappropriate behavior and a serious sin that brings consequences

both here on Earth and in the afterlife because the Orthodox Church places a high value on preserving family unity.

Several scholars looked at the association between attachment style and how people react to emotional and sexual online infidelity (Levy & Kelly, 2010). There is a considerable correlation between these components, and researchers examined the association between attachment type and reacting to sexual betrayal as opposed to the emotional one. While men and women with secure, anxious, and ambivalent attachment styles experienced more emotional infidelity, men and women with detached attachment styles reacted to their spouse's sexual infidelity by becoming depressed. Compared to women with secure and anxious attachment styles, women with avoidant attachment styles are more likely to find their spouse's sexual infidelity to be a distressing experience (Levy & Kelly, 2010).

According to Johnson and Sims (2001), the related attachment injury and sense of betrayal sends couples into a vicious cycle of avoidance and sorrow. The spouses can be split up if this cycle is not broken. This destroys the institution of the family and makes it impossible for the relationship to survive. Couples that experience online infidelity in their marriages find it difficult to connect with one another as they formerly did, and frequently, one or both of them become more desirous of getting a divorce (Previti & Amato, 2004).

Numerous findings support the idea that divorce and online infidelity are interrelated phenomena, and the results of many studies confirm this aspect (Sweeney & Horwitz, 2001). In order to respond to the question, "What are the individual dynamics of women injured by the sexual online infidelity of their spouses?", the current study solely looks at the attachment injury brought on by male sexual infidelity. In addition to offering helpful information on the effects of attachment injury resulting from sexual infidelity on women, particularly in Romanian culture, this study may represent a significant step toward future research in this area. Additionally, this study helps family experts create educational and therapy programs for women who have been affected by their spouses' sexual infidelity by educating them on the elements influencing their behavioral, cognitive, emotional, and sexual functioning. The material that is currently available on the attachment injuries of betrayed women - a topic that appears to be significant but is often overlooked - may be expanded by the current study. Future studies in this field as well as the expansion and improvement of viewpoints to assist individuals impacted will be sped up by this information.

3. Method

The interviews were originally conducted as part of a doctoral training exercise in qualitative research at The Doctoral School of Psychology and Educational Sciences, “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University, Iași. Participants provided informed consent for voluntary participation and the use of anonymized excerpts for educational and research purposes. No identifying data were recorded, and confidentiality was strictly maintained. Since the data were collected within an educational framework and analyzed retrospectively for publication, formal institutional ethical approval was not required according to the regulations of the doctoral school. The study adheres to the ethical principles of the Declaration of Helsinki (2013) and the APA Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct (2017).

Recruitment was achieved through physical flyers in court institutions and counselling offices, with the concerned therapists' permission. Inclusion criteria required participants to be married women currently in counselling for divorce related to online sexual infidelity. All were White and Romanian women; their ages ranged from 37 to 59, and they were coming from heterosexual couples. One of the main difficulties in recruiting volunteers was the intense concern for secrecy. At first, forty-two women consented to take part. Purposive sampling was used to choose the sample, and in order to prevent bias, the sample was limited to women who had only had divorce counseling and no other medical therapy. Every participant made the decision and tried to get a divorce from their spouse. Their marriage had lasted an average of 5.8 years. Data saturation was reached by the fourteenth interview, with five additional interviews confirming theme stability. Every participant was given a separate appointment time. Participants chose the locations of the interview; two interviews were held in the investigator's office, while three were held at the participants' home. Fifteen women chose not to take part. An informed consent form was given to the participants to fill out.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in Romanian, lasting 60–120 minutes. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and translated into English by bilingual experts. The researcher, a licensed psychologist with prior experience in marital therapy, maintained reflexive notes to monitor potential bias and emotional involvement.

The data were analyzed using coding reliability thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. To enhance analytical rigor, two independent coders reviewed the transcripts and compared interpretations. Coding

disagreements were resolved through discussion until consensus was reached. This approach aligns with a *coding reliability* model of thematic analysis, emphasizing transparency and consistency in theme development. The full interview guide is available in the *Annex*.

4. Procedure

The type of analysis used for this study was Thematic Analysis (TA), a method which has been described as “foundational” and also both rich and flexible (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We decided that a qualitative study and thematic analysis would be appropriate for this research because there has not been much investigation into Romanian women’s perspectives following an online sexual betrayal. Semi-structured interviews were employed to gather data. Furthermore, data was collected through face-to-face interviews which were between 60 and 120 minutes long; interviews were selected as a flexible data collection method that allows the collection of rich narratives (Smith & Osborn, 2008). A particular interview guide that was created before the data was gathered served as the basis for the interviews. The aim of this semi-structured interview was to investigate directly how women’s lives are affected by online infidelity. A digital voice recorder was used to capture each interview, and each one was meticulously transcribed for additional examination (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To make it simple to identify the participants’ answers to the semi-structured interview questions, a coding system was created. The core ideas of the categorization process, which will be explained later, are represented by these codes.

5. Data Analysis

An interactive, step-by-step theme analysis has been conducted to examine the interview transcript. The analysis used the six phases of thematic analysis as Braun and Clarke suggested (2006): (1) *Familiarizing with the data*. To become acquainted with the narratives, we first read through the transcribed interviews. The audio recordings of all interviews were listened to read at least twice; (2) *Generating codes*. The entire dataset was examined systematically, and relevant segments were highlighted and tagged with initial codes. Preliminary open coding was produced and categorized according to shared characteristics.; (3) *Constructing themes*. All initial codes and their associated text were examined. Codes were combined or

clustered together into related patterns, and potential themes and sub-themes were identified. Subsequently, classifications were categorized into themes in this third stage of thematic data analysis. At this point, classifications were integrated into themes that effectively represented the data. Capturing pertinent information that would indicate some patterns and meanings within the data collection was the aim of this step (Braun et al., 2014); (4) *Reviewing potential themes*. In order for each quotation to relate to one of the themes, we separately extracted and grouped them into a fourth step of the current data analysis process. The potential themes identified were reviewed to make certain each represents the important information; (5) *Defining and naming themes*. Definitions were written for each of the themes, and final names were given for themes and sub-themes; (6) *Producing the report*. Further refinements were made to the final analytical report, and quotes from the database were incorporated to illustrate key components of each theme and sub-theme. Two independent behavior analysts took part in the coding process. The author and the two coders worked independently and held frequent meetings to discuss the coding and the interpretation of the data. All disagreements were resolved through discussion. In this way, the quality and rigor of the analysis were considered and enforced in an ongoing manner in keeping with the guidelines for TA (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

6. Results

Four main themes emerged from the analysis, representing the women's multifaceted experiences of online sexual betrayal. Each theme is presented below with subthemes and illustrative details (see Table 1).

Theme 1: Sexual Interactions – Participants described the activation of attachment needs, feelings of sexual inadequacy, and sexual withdrawal following the discovery of betrayal.

Theme 2: Emotional Effects – Women reported trauma-like symptoms, emotional disengagement or hyper-attachment, and pervasive negative affect toward self and partner.

Theme 3: Cognitive Impacts – Participants expressed intrusive imagery, rumination, and self-deprecating thoughts consistent with attachment-related trauma.

Theme 4: Behavioral Consequences – Surveillance, avoidance, and retaliatory behaviors emerged as attempts to restore control or self-worth.

Table 1. Main Themes and Subthemes Identified through Coding Thematic Analysis (n = 19)

Main Themes	Subthemes
Sexual Interactions	Activation of attachment needs; Sexual inadequacy; Sexual withdrawal
Emotional Effects	Trauma symptoms; Emotional disengagement or hyper-attachment; Negative affect toward self and partner
Cognitive Impacts	Self-blame; Rumination; Intrusive imagery
Behavioral Consequences	Surveillance behaviors; Avoidance; Retaliation

6.1. Sexual Interactions

a) Activation of attachment needs

The online sexual infidelity of a spouse has activated attachment needs like assurance and closeness in several Romanian female participants, particularly those who have recently been aware of a sexual competitor: “Sexual intercourse means he is still mine and takes away the fear of being alone.”

b) Divorce and sexual conflict

Most injured women experienced coldness and disagreement in their sexual relationships; this was the reason one participant thought that her husband’s body was dirty due to sexual online infidelity, and she was unable to approach him: “Every time I think that he has been with another person, I’m feeling awful...” In several women, this feeling of sexual disgust resulted in a total break in sexual relations: “I cannot even imagine having sex with him again. I feel hurt when he touches me. When I must have sexual intercourse, I spend a few hours in the bathroom because I feel like his dirt has been transferred to me.” This feeling of sexual repulsion caused several women to completely stop having sex with him: “I can’t even imagine having sex with him again.”

c) Desperate and sexual inadequacy

Many of the women who took part blamed the sexual online betrayal on their lack of sexual adequacy, stating that they thought this would not occur if they were more sexually adequate: “They say it’s not your fault ... but I know that if I had a little more attractiveness, it would not happen ...”.

6.2. Emotional Impacts

a) Disorders of emotions

When online sexual infidelity was first identified, several female volunteers reported experiencing “emotional locking” in response to attachment injury. One described: “It felt as if I couldn’t breathe. My heart was racing, and yet there was no mistaking the sense that something had struck me in the head.” After a few days, most of these women reported that their emotions became trapped and then erupted: “I couldn’t stop crying, as if my emotional barrier had been shattered. I felt powerless over myself. I shouted, acted aggressively, and at times laughed inappropriately.”

b) Symptoms of trauma

“Even seeing a man who took a woman’s hand in the street, crippled me badly and I had got severe and sudden nausea,” said one damaged woman, displaying symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. One woman compared her state of mind after learning of her husband’s treachery to “frosting in the summer heat,” after which she is constantly “earshot” by negative things.

c) Self-defeating feelings

Many women’s experiences with injury have prompted self-evaluation and comparison with others: “I never go a day without comparing myself to others, particularly that rival, and feeling depressed.” Many participants felt that they had lost their sense of worth and self-worth because of comparing themselves to others: “It’s really hard to accept that I am a valuable person... I would have preferred to die rather than endure this humiliation as I was tossed out like a paper towel.”

Another typical sense reaction among women hurt by their husbands’ sexual betrayal was the sensation of oppression and victimization: “I’m terribly dissatisfied... Which crime I should be punished for is unknown to me... I’m not worthy of this...”.

d) Emotional disengagement or compliance

Several women stated that they sought trust in their husbands’ interests and expressed an interest in being emotionally with them: “Even though I know he does not like, I am by him continuously... I can’t believe he’ll leave me someday. Without him, I fear...” Unlike the first group, some women preferred emotional distance and had no desire in remaining with their unfaithful husbands: “I should not have relied on him from the start. I would rather be alone...”.

e) Feelings of negativity toward the husband

Many injured women experienced the emotions of someone who was heartbroken by a loved one, and they are now unable to trust anyone: "I didn't think that someone who is trusted and believed in everything would be unfaithful to me. The strongest emotion I feel these days is that no one in the world can be trusted". Many participants reported feeling angry and jealous because of their lack of confidence, and they answered in a sickening way that they felt envious of all the relationships her husband had with strangers and even with women they knew: "I cannot control it... I am really nervous and anxious when I see him chatting to a woman, even my sister, and I act badly in that situation..."

6.3. Cognitive Impacts**a) Damage to both Self and Partner's mental models**

Many participants' negative mental models of themselves and others were activated as a result of feeling worthless in the eyes of their spouse, as well as a lack of access and accountability to them. "I don't deserve love at all, and others don't deserve respect and worth either. I despise them all, including myself."

b) Cognitive disruption

Most of the affected women suffered from a condition that affected their interpretations and cognition, resulting in the loss of several decision-making abilities: "I am unsure of what is good and wrong. I occasionally experience bad luck and have weird notions..."

c) Negative ideas about your relationship, partner, and yourself

Among the main cognitive impacts of attachment injury were rumination and auto-negative thoughts: "I keep wondering about how he was able to deceive me, even for a brief minute. What was he thinking and feeling, and how can I trust him? One common example of online betrayal-related rumination among several participants was their spouse's sex with a competitor: "When I close my eyes, I see scenes of their sex in front of me... as if I've really seen it...". Many participants linked negative ideas to catastrophic thinking, saying things such, "I always think that there is no light for the future of this life."

6.4. The Impact of Behavior

a) Spying on communication

Due to the suspicion of injury, several participants checked and spied on their spouse in various ways. “If there is an opportunity, I check his messages and conversations,” said one participant who employed a range of techniques to manipulate their partner. “I surreptitiously follow him and look for any indication of disloyalty in his pockets...”.

b) Nearness and behavioral disengagement

Several women left their husbands and made every effort to avoid both emotional and physical contact: “I have to stay with him in the house for the children, but even I try not to look in his eyes...” “I wish we weren’t together, not even in the skies.” Despite their negative feelings of betrayal toward their spouses, some participants exhibited more sticking behaviors than those in the preceding group because of the anxiousness brought on by the release or rejection. “He makes an effort to distance himself from me, but I implore him to act in the same manner as before.”

c) Attacking on the spouse’s personality

Many participants’ perception of diminished self-worth has resulted in ongoing accusations; these women attempted to suppress their feelings of disdain by placing the blame on their spouse: “Blame is a little retribution for his enormous mistake... He needs to realize that I was worth more than his desire to disregard me.”

7. Discussion

Investigating the attachment-based intrapersonal dynamics of Romanian women who have been sexually cheated on was the aim of this study. The results showed that sexual dynamics, emotional dynamics, cognitive dynamics, and behavioral dynamics were the four primary themes. Figure 1 displays the model that has been created using the results of the current investigation. Our theoretical model illustrates how online sexual infidelity triggers a chain of intrapersonal reactions from the emotional core towards behavioral and relational consequences. It shows that betrayal is not only interpersonal, but deeply intrapersonal (Kline et al., 2023; Nawaz & Haroon, 2025). The findings of this study are in line with those of numerous other studies (Asanjarani et al., 2017; Campbell et al., 2005; Davis et al., 2004; Fitness,

2001; Heiman, 2007; Heller & LaPierre, 2012; Johnson et al., 2001; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

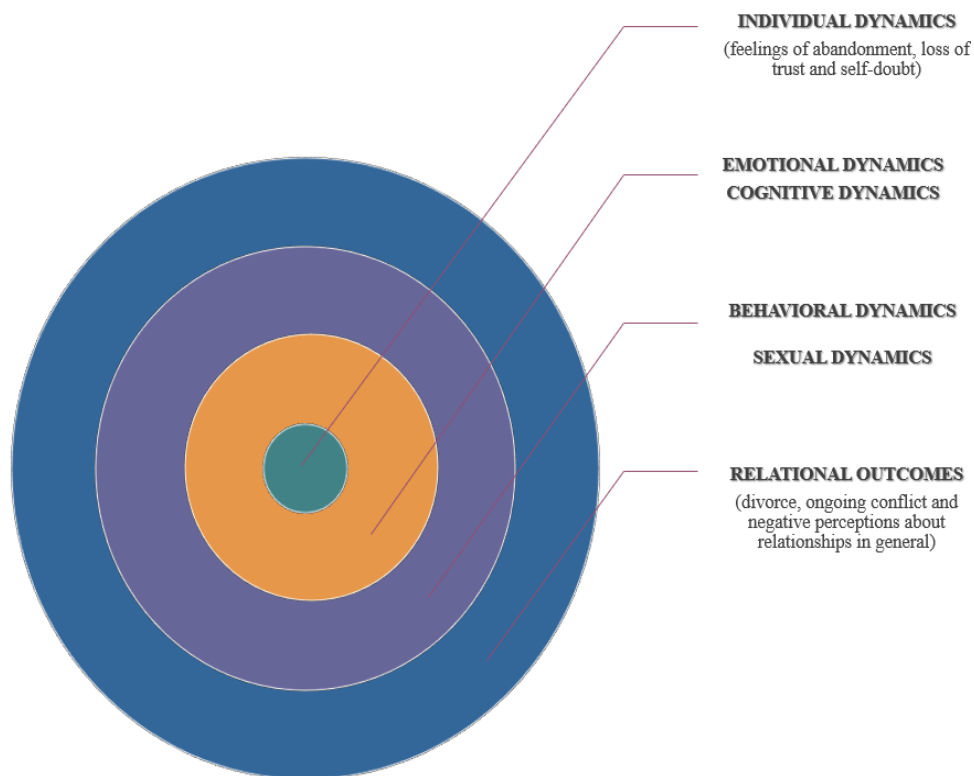


Figure 1. Model of Intrapersonal Dynamics Associated with Attachment Injuries due to Sexual Online Infidelity in a Romanian Women Sample

One of the main dynamics of women affected by online sexual infidelity is the sexual dynamics, as illustrated in Figure 1. This includes sexual conflict and divorce, feelings of sexual inadequacy and frustration, and the activation of sexual relationships to satisfy attachment needs (nearness and assurance). According to Bowlby (1982), attachment behaviors including the demand for closeness and confirmation can be triggered by attachment injuries. Furthermore, the sexual connection system can function as an attachment system, and only sexual actions can serve the needs of attachment, such as emotional intimacy, confidence, boosting self-esteem, lowering stress, protecting, or receiving care (Davis et al., 2004; Pandey & Gupta, 2025). Additionally, Heiman's (2007) perspective states that sexual disturbance will result from a persistent failure to address attachment needs. Since

they felt threatened in their relationship, the women in this study attempted to use sexual activities to satisfy their attachment needs (i.e., the need for closeness and security). They did, however, report experiencing significant levels of anxiety even during sexual activity, which has decreased communication quality and increased sexual dysfunction (Allen et al., 2023; Bodenmann et al., 2010). On the other side, Romanian women frequently encounter several issues and disputes in their marriage after learning of their husband's sexual online infidelity, and these issues have a direct impact on people's sexual performance and satisfaction, particularly for women. One of the possible outcomes of disagreement was the unethical ban on having sex with their spouse alone (Metz & McCarthy, 2007; Zara et al., 2022). It appears that this unethical ban persists for a long time, causes a sexual divorce from the spouse, and eventually results in issues with sexual arousal and desire (Zeldin, 2023). The notion that women's weakness in sexual relations can be the primary reason for their husbands' online sexual infidelity, when linked to sexual problems in the marriage and the degrading of the female body, eventually led women to develop a sort of fantasy about their "unattractiveness" and "incompetence" (Agbo et al., 2023). Holding onto this notion, they experienced anxiety and hopelessness in their relationship.

Lack of unconditional admission and the inability to get sexual fulfillment can be caused by anxiety associated with sexual unattractiveness (Khan, 2025; Weeks & Gambescia, 2000). This may eventually affect the standard of sex and overall marital satisfaction (Burdwood & Simons, 2015). Emotional dynamics, which includes emotional disorders (emotional lock/emotional explosion), trauma symptoms, emotional withdrawal/adherence, bad emotions toward the self, and negative emotions toward the partner, was another significant dynamic seen, as seen in Figure 1. Emotional adherence and emotional retreat are two significant emotional patterns seen in women who have experienced sexual online infidelity. These kinds of patterns appear to be linked to the attachment style of women who have been injured. In order to prevent feelings of fear and anxiety brought on by the sensation of being released, Romanian women with anxiety attachment disorder actively monitored their spouse for affordable assessment and accountability. They were particularly concerned about the lack of access and trust toward others, and they saw their spouse's sexual online infidelity as a sign that the relationship was in danger (Bhattacharjee, 2025; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Disabling and suppressing emotions and attachment requirements, avoiding emotional participation, and eventually ending the relationship are the second more avoidant technique to

overcome the absence of secure emotional participation when the hope for responsibility is lost. Suppressing emotions, however, is typically difficult and ineffectual and frequently results in elevated arousal and physiological stress (Gross, 2001; Ningjian, 2025). Like the symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and what Johnson and Thompson (2008) referred to as “trauma,” which includes a physiological sense of increasing risk, restlessness, extreme stress, jumping, and frozen responses, a number of injured women exhibited a propensity to alternate between states of arousal and occasionally excessive stimulation. Other signs that people who have experienced trauma may exhibit include anxiety and a desire for physical contact at the same time, a disruption in the ability to express or avoid emotion, somatoform pain that cannot be medically explained, excessive risk-taking, and a disability in experiencing positive emotion or improvement following an unhealthy condition (Burback et al., 2024; Ford et al., 2013).

According to this perspective, if security assumptions are violated, the trauma experience causes existential distress (Arredondo & Caparrós, 2023; Naaman et al., 2005). Another indication of emotional dynamics in injured women has been identified as emotional disorders. For some participants, it seemed that a spouse’s sexual online infidelity, particularly when the individual first discovers it, is accompanied with a restriction in their capacity to control their emotions. Several women stated that they were hesitant to express their feelings over that incident, or that they might not have felt anything at all.

According to Heller and LaPierre (2012), it is possible that the brain be unable to organize emotions during severe emotional trauma and emotions experienced in the current environment. It appears that something in the brain malfunctions, and while further research is required, it appears that after learning of a spouse’s sexual online infidelity, a person exhibits a lack of emotional expression in the form of physical symptoms, including difficulty breathing, heart rate, blood pressure, digestion, and sleep. Shortly after the emotional lock, observed in several women, emotions were occasionally displayed regardless of the proportion of content. Some participants even experienced severe manifestations of the proper emotions, such as momentary exhilaration with surplus energy. An individual may find this type of emotional reaction unsettling since they may feel “out of control” and occasionally even “empty” for a brief period (Spataro et al., 2025). If this type of emotional instability is significant and unconsciously experienced, it may be the beginning of a nascent personality disorder (Caldwell et al., 2024; Levy et al., 2015). The aggrieved party may experience a betrayal of long-term committed partnerships due to a decline in

communication value. Reduced communication value suggests that the relationship is no longer intimate, significant, or deserving (Leary, 2001). Hatred toward oneself was one of the main negative emotions that most of the participating women experienced. Moreover, according to Heller and Lapier (2012), this internalization of hatred is an internal act in which the person feels that he is deserving of a bad reaction. Women's increased propensity to feel ashamed and hateful of themselves as a result of their husbands' sexual infidelity may be a reflection of societal expectations that women should be able to attract their partner. Therefore, it makes plausible that women would have been taught by society to be held accountable, at least when their spouse neglects them, which might cause embarrassment. The finding of online infidelity is humiliating and makes the damage worse when the spouse's choice for the extramarital connection is someone they know well (Butler, 2025; Fitness, 2001; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2009). However, several women expressed unfavorable feelings toward their husbands rather than themselves. People's primary emotion toward the other was anger, which may be a reflection of the fact that, according to women, sexual online infidelity is more avoidable than emotional infidelity (Green & Sabini, 2006; Rokach & Chan, 2023). They found it unacceptable that their spouse did not make an effort to maintain their commitment to sexual relations. Those who were more devoted to their wives were more likely to be angry.

Another significant negative emotion was the perception of an unreliable spouse. Attachment injury served as a warning sign, informing these women that their husbands were untrustworthy sources of comfort and security (Butler et al., 2022; Johnson, 2019).

According to Figure 1, the third main intrapersonal dynamics linked to sexual betrayal-induced attachment injury in women were cognitive dynamics, which include damaging one's own and another's mental models, upsetting one's own thoughts, and harboring negative thoughts about oneself, the spouse, and the relationship. Most of Romanian female participants reported a circumstance that might be explained by the attachment theory, according to the qualitative data. According to Mikulincer and Shaver (2007), the mental models include people's expectations and impressions of two broad and connected aspects: 1) Do people deserve love (the mental model of self) and 2) Are attachment faces accessible, dependable, and responsive? Events that jeopardize favorable perceptions of oneself or others are thus regarded as indicative of a security concern. Additionally, it can be thought of as a form of injury that is comparable to physical harm in many ways.

These injuries cause the damaged partners to doubt whether they have lost their fundamental ideas about relationships, other people, and themselves. They also cause them to feel less secure in the world and less valuable (Johnson et al., 2001). Following the experience of attachment injuries, this led to a few women having unsettling and negative thoughts about their husbands, themselves, and their relationship. Several women, for instance, pondered the sexual online infidelity event and embodied pictures of the betrayal. According to Johnson et al. (2001), this is comparable to a phenomenon known as “repetitive shockwave flashback.” Usually, flashbacks cause the victim to drown, and the spouse either makes no attempt to reestablish the relationship or the victim rejects the spouse’s attempt at comfort. Furthermore, these individuals frequently experience intense distrust, fear being abandoned by their spouse for the company of another and believe that their marriage will fail (Campbell et al., 2005; Lonergan et al., 2021). Along with negative thoughts, several women also reported experiencing cognitive impairments at times, which interfered with their ability to make decisions. According to one participant, it was like “emptying the brain.”

Additionally, Scheure (2010) also argues that an individual with an attachment injury can have difficulties in understanding and interpreting the faces and expressions of others or may misinterpret their intentions. They may misread a situation because their interpretation is based on the urge for self-defense. Furthermore, an individual can even be unable of accurately identifying his own circumstances (Monti & Rudolph, 2014; Tan et al., 2022). But as the final category of the main intrapersonal dynamics in these women, the behavioral dynamics included, as illustrated in Figure 1, communication spying, behavioral withdrawal and nearness, and attacks on the spouse’s character. Similar to emotional dynamics, two groups of female participants in the behavioral dynamics of women affected by marital sexual infidelity reported expressing dual conduct, specifically retreat and nearness. It appears that the entire attachment system becomes overactive in the first strategy, which is nearness and is most likely caused by an individual’s attachment anxiety at the moment of realizing the lack of communication. There is an increase in extreme attachment and adherence behaviors, as well as forceful attempts to elicit an explanation from the unfaithful spouse. The rising emotional sensitivity to the indicators of communication may continue even if the unfaithful wife responds, and this reaction may not be entirely trustworthy (Ashford & Miotto, 2025; Davis et al., 2003; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

As previously stated, these women exhibit even greater effort to engage in more sexual activity. A passive approach will be used if nearness search is not taken into consideration. This group, which was more likely to consist of women who avoided closeness, employed “deactivate” techniques to repress the anxiety brought on by attachment and proximity avoidance. These individuals frequently refrained from establishing a relationship with their unfaithful spouse or seeking their assistance during difficult times. Several of these women who took part even stated that, after being betrayed, they were attempting to minimize their husbands’ dignity in public and in front of others by portraying them as incompetent and worthless in order to protect their own reputations and avoid being perceived as guilty by others. Even while additional research is required, it appears that this behavior, in addition to its avoidance aspect, may be the result of rage brought on by the inability to meet attachment demands.

According to Bowlby (1982), anger in intimate relationships is frequently interpreted as an effort to connect with a beloved who seems unreachable. He makes a distinction between a desperate rage that is shameful and required and anger for the hope that awaits a significant response. This kind of rage and behavioral aggression in this case appears to have been motivated by compulsion and disappointment, and the attacker had no expectation of the relationship improving. Spying and spouse-watching were among the most common activities mentioned by women affected by marital sexual infidelity, in addition to hostile actions toward the spouse. They stated that they had kept an eye on their spouse’s conduct to look for indications of an extramarital affair. They have also engaged in observational behaviors, such as closely observing their everyday activities, spying, or analyzing their husband’s affiliations to look for indications of treachery. The current study has a number of shortcomings. The limited sample size is one of the drawbacks, which raises concerns about generalizability. One of the primary drawbacks of this research is that it was conducted in the Romanian cultural setting; hence, it is important to use caution when extrapolating its findings to non-Romanian cultures.

To find out if similar themes appear in samples from various cultures, faiths, and socioeconomic contexts, more research is undoubtedly required. Furthermore, since the current research has concentrated on women, future studies should consider the opinions of spouses in order to gain a deeper knowledge of the dynamics of persons. Sexual infidelity is a two-person (mutual) injury. Based on the results of this study, it is recommended that family and couple therapists provide with special programs for the prevention and treatment of sexual infidelity injuries and focus on the internal

and individual conditions of those who have been affected as the most significant aspects of their quality of life. In addition to seeking the necessary closure for these incidents, many couples usually turn to a trained professional for assistance in resolving their disagreements and gradually enhancing their intimacy. During therapy sessions, these harmful experiences - known as attachment injuries - occur. Emotionally focused therapy (EFT) is primarily responsible for the development of the idea of attachment injury. EFT is regarded as one of the best methods for appropriately resolving relationship conflicts and is an empirically validated approach to couple therapy (Johnson et al., 2001; Spengler et al., 2024).

Both family and couple therapists must pay particular attention to creating such programs, particularly in the cultural context of Romania, in order to create a secure environment where individuals in training and counseling can talk about their sexual online infidelity and spouse without feeling embarrassed. However, recent studies have demonstrated that attachment injury brought on by a husband's sexual online infidelity can have a wide range of effects on sexual interactions, cognitive function, emotional state, and behavior, leading to numerous personal and societal damages, including the spread of divorce. It appears that the degree of damage to couples' quality and the sustainability of marriage in general will be reduced if potential issues and injuries, like sexual infidelity, are considered prior to marriage and plans are created to teach couples how to prevent this injury and to widely implement them at the community level.

Addressing online sexual infidelity injuries requires combining prophylactic measures, targeted therapeutic approaches, and effective communication techniques. In order to help couples heal and improve their quality of life, emotionally focused therapy is essential for improving emotional understanding, handling conflict, and creating a supportive environment. Couples can manage the challenges of online infidelity and improve their relationship by using this multidimensional strategy. In this regard, we propose below Table 2 that depicts several clinical implications and considerations.

Table 2. Clinical Implications and Considerations

Clinical Focus	Key Considerations	Therapeutic Applications
Prevention of Online Infidelity	Education and communication about ethical online behavior	Psychoeducation, boundary-setting workshops

Assessment and Impact	Understanding emotional and relational consequences	Clinical interviews; trauma-informed evaluation
Rebuilding Trust	Promoting accountability and transparency	EFT sessions focusing on emotional responsiveness

However, in Romanian society, it is considered that female online sexual infidelity is considerably more morally harmful than male sexual infidelity due to the cultural context, which, like most other traditional contexts, emphasizes the purity of women (Maftai et al., 2022; Simion, 2024). Furthermore, male infidelity can also play a significant role in the dissolution of marriages and the serious harm that it does to women's attachment (Birta et al., 2024; Ciurea, 2021). Despite being viewed as the worst religious law, divorce is unwanted, repugnant, and distasteful in Romanian religious beliefs (Dohotariu, 2012; Nadolu et al., 2007; Șandor & Popescu, 2008). Finally, like other nations, Romania has seen a rise in divorce rates in recent years (Nadolu et al., 2020; Romișan, 2021).

8. Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the small and homogeneous sample size ($n = 19$) restricts the transferability of the findings. The participants were all heterosexual Romanian women engaged in divorce counselling, which limits the diversity of perspectives represented. Future research should include men, same-sex couples, and individuals from varied socio-economic and educational backgrounds to capture broader relational and cultural dynamics.

Second, the findings are embedded within the specific cultural and religious context of Romania, where Orthodox Christian traditions and patriarchal social expectations continue to shape views on marriage, fidelity, and female virtue. These contextual factors may have intensified the participants' experiences of guilt, shame, and moral conflict following online infidelity. Consequently, the results may not be directly applicable to more secular or egalitarian societies.

Third, while a coding reliability thematic analysis was employed to enhance rigor, the interpretation of data remains influenced by researcher subjectivity and the cultural framework in which the study was conducted. Meaning-making processes are inherently situated and may differ from those in other cultural or relational settings.

Finally, religiosity - both personal and societal - likely influenced participants' interpretations of betrayal, coping, and healing. Future cross-cultural research should investigate how different levels of religiosity interact with attachment dynamics and digital intimacy in shaping responses to online infidelity.

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Annex

Semi-structured interview

Major starting question: How would you describe the impact of your partner's online sexual infidelity has had on you?

During the interview, some questions will be asked to gain further insight.

For instance, the following table lists a few of these:

Point: The event in all questions refers to the online sexual infidelity of the spouse.

How and when did you discover that your partner was unfaithful online? After you have a better understanding of the topic, describe your initial feelings.

After that, what did you anticipate your husband to do? Did your expectations become fulfilled?

What feelings did you experience after that?

Do you and your spouse have fulfilling sex after this event? Describe the reasons.

What impact has that event had on your relationship now?

After that event, how do you feel about your spouse?

What comes to your mind when you think of that event?

What feelings do you still have regarding that first day of the event?

After that event, have you ever felt bad about your sexual relationships?

Which issue was the most challenging to resolve following that event?

Which aspect of adjusting to this situation was the most difficult, and why? What was the duration?

What was your mental and emotional state prior to this event? Express your cognitive and emotional changes after the event.

How did you feel about that event? How did you feel immediately after the event?

How did you feel about it a few days later?

After the event, what steps did you take to get better?

Did you try to get closer to your spouse or did you try to keep your distance from him after this?

To strengthen your marriage, what adjustments do you believe should be done to your connection with your spouse?

After that, how did you feel about yourself?

Is there anything more I should have asked you regarding your spouse's online infidelity?