



## Research Articles

# Being the Infidelity Partner: Narratives of Lived Experiences in an Online Support Group

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## Abstract

Taking into account the secretive nature of infidelity experiences and their adverse impact on the involved partners, the aim of the present qualitative study was to examine how individuals—who have been engaged in extradyadic relationships, as “affair partners”—narrate their experiences in an online support group. The study analyzed 60 posts, published over a period of 6 months in an online support community. Three main themes emerged through the thematic analysis conducted. The first theme involved conflicting dimensions of affair partner experience, in which the following sub-themes were identified: 1) living in the shadow of loss, and 2) the prevalence of ambivalence: when opposite impulses coexist. The second theme refers to the centripetal aspects of the relationship and within this section the following sub-themes are defined: 1) the relationship as a supportive environment and 2) between plenitude and dearth: the desire for exclusivity. Finally, the third theme refers to the lessons learned by the affair partners and their generalizing conclusions such experiences. The present study underlines how group participants reconstruct their experiences of extradyadic relationships and how they create new ways of meaning making about them. The findings involve reflexive conclusions about intimate relationships capturing elements of broader cultural narratives, representations and dilemmas of self and relationships, as presented in written transactions in online support groups.

**Keywords:** infidelity, affair partner, extradyadic relationships, qualitative, online support group

Interpersona, 2021, Vol. 15(2), 197–211, <https://doi.org/10.5964/ijpr.4423>

Received: 2020-09-17. Accepted: 2021-06-12. Published (VoR): 2021-12-14.

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Building and maintaining relationships entail various challenges. Conflicts, betrayals, hurtful messages and other kinds of relational transgressions are inevitably found in close relationships (Niehuis et al., 2019; Pederson & McLaren, 2017). Among them, the experience of infidelity highly attracts social and scientific attention. As far as the definition of infidelity is concerned, there is currently no single, widely accepted definition. Hertlein et al. (2005) state that “what is especially complex about the broad definition of infidelity is that two different people in the same relationship might have different ideas about what represents infidelity or constitutes an affair” (p. 6). Infidelity is often judged on the basis of subjective criteria and depends to a large extent on direct and indirect rules formed in a relationship (Adam, 2019). Taking into consideration the existing heterogeneous context, it is worth noting that while traditionally infidelity referred to sexual intercourse outside of marriage (Thompson, 1983), modern definitions go beyond extramarital sexual intercourse to include emotional, combined sexual and

emotional infidelity and internet infidelity (Guitar et al., 2017; Hertlein et al., 2005), covering a wide range of descriptions.

At the heart of all existing definitions of infidelity is the behavioral violation of an explicit or implicit relationship between two people. The term infidelity refers to manifestations of extradyadic sexual experiences or relationships that often affect the primary relationship and induce adverse effects at an intrapersonal and interpersonal level (Hargrave, 2008). Fife et al. (2008) define infidelity as "a betrayal of this implied or stated commitment regarding intimate exclusivity." As they point out, "emotional and/or sexual intimacy is shared with someone outside of the primary relationship without the consent of the other partner" (p. 316).

Infidelity—also described as extradyadic engagement—can act as a disruption of the relationship's continuity, leading the couple to divorce, or to seek professional help for support (Timm & Blow, 2018; Yuan & Weiser, 2019). More specifically, infidelity can create a sense of relational betrayal, which may have detrimental effects on trust, affection, intimacy and emotional attachment (Leeker & Carozzi, 2014). Observed reactions also include feelings of shame, loss, avoidance and emotional exhaustion (Gordon et al., 2005; Warach & Josephs, 2021). In addition to the emotional processes that emerge, depressive, anxiety symptoms or other psychosomatic reactions are often observed (Shrout & Weigel, 2018), highlighting the severity of the effects one may experience mentally. Although the experience of a *wounded partner* can be very painful, the *cheaters* do not experience a turbulence-free period (Wilkinson & Dunlop, 2021). Initially, the cheaters experience a period of mourning, suffering from high levels of depressive symptomatology, and mainly feelings of guilt (Walters & Burger, 2013).

While there is a wealth of research data about the dimensions of infidelity experiences for the *betrayed partner*, research examining the actual experiences of individuals who are the third party to a primary romantic relationship (through whom an individual in a committed relationship is cheating his/her primary partner) is extremely limited due to the secret nature of these relationships and their socially unacceptable nature.

## The Infidelity Partner's Experience

Among the little scientific research that has been carried concerning the experiences of the infidelity partner, the Sociologist Laurel Richardson (1985) collected qualitative data investigating the experiences of women who were aware of entering into a relationship with married men. The results of this study demonstrated that these single women were frequently involved in relationships with married men as an approach to investigate their sexuality, and had some professional and personal benefits (Richardson, 1985, 1988). The vast majority of the women admitted that they felt regret about the affair, but a few of them expressed no remorse. According to the analyzed data, the other women often organize their lives around their partners, they are isolated from the existing support systems, and they feel alone when the relationship fails, while their partner often returns to his wife.

An additional study conducted by Weiser and Weigel (2015) describes infidelity relationships from the perspective of the infidelity partner and explores their personality profiles. According to the findings of this study, most infidelity partners at first don't realize they are taking part in infidelity, however less than half terminate the relationship after realizing their position as the other man or woman. Low agreeableness seems to be the main characteristic to explain why some people are involved in affairs as the affair partner and hide the transgres-

sion. Also, individuals who present an anxious attachment style and a restricted sociosexual orientation seem to be more commonly infidelity partners.

DePompo and Butsuhara (2016) also conducted a study to explore the unique experience of the other partner. According to the findings, all members mentioned an “attachment switch,” which offered hope that their partner could correspond to what they believed they needed. Secondly, the members reported the time they realized that things may not be how they appear. Simultaneously, the members outlined having strong opposing personal values within themselves. This was further emphasized in the fourth theme, which refers to a struggle of “conflicting values.” In response to that, many members described trying to focus on the positive aspects of their relationship, but eventually all of them reported that they struggled with rumination. Hence, members also described that during various phases of their relationship they were avoiding their friends and family and at the same time they had invested heavily in the relationship.

Aspects of women’s experience as the affair partner were also outlined in a study conducted by Utley (2016), challenging disempowering stereotypes about other women by investigating how they negotiate power in unbalanced romantic relationships. In this study, the women participating describe themselves as being better than negative, demeaning and disgraceful generalizing stereotypes. They do not claim that the mistress stereotypes are false; they rather argue that those characteristics belong to someone else. Describing “him,” they describe gaining power by recognizing that their partner could meet unsatisfied emotional and sexual needs. Of course, the other woman’s process of negotiating personal power is not free of pain. Some of the emotions of women involved in a relationship with a man who is in another partnership are feeling silly, empty, abandoned and demolished

Finally, the issue of being engaged in relationship as an affair partner has been examined in the context of so-called *mate poaching* (attempting to steal another person’s partner away), exploring factors associated with these behaviors. In particular, a study conducted by Schmitt and Buss (2001) found that attempts at poaching were relatively common and were related to particular personality traits. The perceived costs and benefits of poaching presented some differences between men and women. Sunderani et al. (2013) also conducted a study demonstrating that 1) male mate poachers had a better appearance and had higher cortisol levels, lower levels of testosterone, and higher levels of self-esteem, cold affect, and criminal tendencies and 2) female mate poachers and targets of mate poachers reported being more physically attractive, as did male targets of mate poachers. In addition, a study conducted by Arnocky et al. (2013) indicated that for both men and women, the number of mate-poaching attempts predicted having more lifetime sex partners, more lifetime casual sex partners, and more lifetime dating partners.

## The Importance of the Present Study

The existing research interest has been focused on people who experience betrayal from their partner’s involvement in an extradyadic affair. However, infidelity is a phenomenon, which affects all the individuals involved. Within this context, there is no research base that examines the real experiences of both women and men on how they experience these relationships, how they make sense of them, what kind of difficulties they encounter, but also what personal needs they satisfy through these relationships.

Due to the sensitive, forbidden and secretive nature of such experiences, affair partners may be afraid of sharing their stories and seeking support. This process can be facilitated through the online “social environ-

ment," which has gained great resonance as a space which can be used for narrating, searching for support and sharing of various experiences (with distressing dimensions) through the Online Support Groups (OSGs). There are some factors that explain the rise in popularity of online support environments, such as convenience, accessibility, control of interaction, social distance and anonymity—the last one being one of the most important features, as it may facilitate disclosure and discussion of personal, embarrassing or stigmatizing topics (Barak et al., 2008). Participation in OSGs has been linked to emotional and psychological benefits; that is, people go online to avoid feeling stigmatized or judged and to avoid appearing incapable of handling their problems (Wright & Muhtaseb, 2011). Moreover, evidence suggests that online peer-to-peer communication can lead to a number of psychosocial benefits including improvements in coping abilities, a sense of empowerment and increased psychological well-being (van Uden-Kraan et al., 2008).

Some people search online communities for some kind of support. The re-interpretations they create in these communities in turn affect the situations they experience offline, and how they react to them. Thus, new technologies are not just a means that transmits one's views unchanged. The particular elements of each electronic platform—defining a communication environment with special characteristics—significantly influence the narratives and the meaning that the participants give to their experiences (see also Baym, 2010, "social shaping").

Taking into consideration the gaps of the existing empirical literature, the present study intends to reinforce existing knowledge about real experiences involvement in extradyadic relationships as infidelity partners. The online framework of self-help communities provides rich empirical material, which will help in the in-depth understanding of the details of the experiences, when the persons involved are struggling to deal with emerging harmful effects. Consequently, these online groups can provide a broad understanding of how these individuals deal with infidelity and how they experience it.

## Method

### Purpose of the Present Study

Based on this framework, the purpose of the present study was to answer the question "how the participants of an OSG describe their experience—as the infidelity partner—through the process of self-presentation and self-disclosure of sensitive aspects of their experiences?." In order to achieve the aim of this study and taking into account a constructivist approach, two basic pre-assumptions were taken into consideration: 1) the fact that the perception and the meaning of infidelity is socially constructed and fluid, and 2) the fact that members re-construct what it means to have an extradyadic relationship through participation in OSGs.

### Procedure

LoveAffairs online support community was used as a source of research data (a pseudonym of the forum is used, based on ethical concerns). The purpose of LoveAffairs is to support a global network of peer users who discuss personal dilemmas about experiencing sexual relationships. The structure of the forum includes some topics, such as family relationships, love affairs, separation, and other relevant issues. Users choose what they think is most relevant to their needs and they can narrate their experience, seek help or read other similar stories. While someone needs to register in order to become a member and be able to post, anyone has

access to them as they are presented in a public domain, something which is declared to members through a relevant statement on the site.

Members post their stories under a pseudonym. The present article chose to minimize the risk of identifiable information through the use of new pseudonyms and the use of another name of the original online forum. Taking into account these issues, the lack of consent by members does not seem to adversely affect individuals' well-being (Beaulieu & Estalella, 2012; Roberts, 2015).

## Data Collection & Analysis

The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of Ethics Committee of the Department of Communication and Media Studies of National and Kapodistrian University of Athens. Non-random, purposive sampling was conducted to collect data ( $N = 60$ ), which were 60 posts published by different individuals requesting some kind of answer or support. The posts had been published over a period of 6 months- from February 1, 2017 to July 31, 2017- by members who had some experience—as the affair partner. The posts specify the sender, the date and time of the post and are followed by the post text.

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006; Clarke et al., 2015) was selected for data processing and analysis, providing an in-depth and detailed understanding of the main meaning units used for members' self-presentation. In addition, it focuses on an inductive approach—which means it is data driven—as this approach offers a way to capture the essence of communication as it freely emerges within the online community.

Data were analyzed using posts that are narratives of the experience as the infidelity partner, presented as requests through which the participants of the group are looking some kind of help. Concerning the process of conducting the thematic analysis, a number of methodical steps were implemented in order to identify, analyze and report patterns within the data. After inserting the data into the MAXQDA qualitative data analysis software, thematic-analysis process was conducted following six steps (as described by Braun & Clarke, 2006): 1) systematic familiarization with the text (which in the present study was achieved through multiple readings of the texts, comparison between them and triangulation among individuals of the research team), 2) creation of codes and sub-codes, 3) searching for themes, 4) reviewing themes, 5) defining themes and 6) writing up exemplars. The credibility of the present study was reinforced by the participation of two trained analysts. The coders began the process of coding in four sets, each consisting of 25% of the data set. Across the entire data set, an inter-coder reliability test contained 85% agreement on the segmentation.

## Findings

The analysis of the data offer a thorough description of experiences of members identified in the forum as the other man/the other woman. The analysis of the posts' content used in the present research led to the identification of three main themes and also led to a number of emergent sub-themes, contributing to a better organized analysis of the data. Table 1 offers a description of the themes and sub-themes that emerged.

**Table 1***Description of the Themes and Sub-themes*

Theme	Sub-theme	Description of the content
Conflicting dimensions of the affair-partner experience	Living in the shadow of loss.	It refers to situations or emotional states that the infidelity partner come up with and create inner conflicts. It refers to the feelings of frustration caused when the relationship is terminated or the partner stays at a distance.
	The prevalence of ambivalence: when opposite impulses coexist.	It refers to the dilemmas and the difficulties met in making decisions about the course of the relationship.
Centripetal aspects of the relationship	The relationship as a supportive environment.	It refers to elements that attract the individuals to stay in a relationship as the infidelity partner. It refers to the descriptions of the support and security provided by the affair.
	The desire for exclusivity.	It refers to the desire of the affair partner for the continuation of their relationships.
Lessons learned and generalizing conclusions		It refers to the conclusions about the overall course of the relationship and to related representations.

## Conflicting Dimensions of the Affair-Partner Experience

### Living in the Shadow of Loss

Initially, the members of this group narrate about expectations they had formed, their plans for the future, and the needs that they expected to be satisfied within the relationship. However, these imaginaries meet a moment of abrupt frustration, when their partner decides to terminate the relationship or stay at a distance through their absence, provoking reactions of mental distress to them. The generating wound is based on two acts of betrayal: rejection by the partner who at the same time is seeking another person (in this case probably the partner of the primary relationship). This is indicatively depicted in the following quotes:

*We were crazy in love and planning a future together. Suddenly he started going cold. (...)  
How do you go from over the moon in love, leaving your wife for someone, to just dumping them in cold blood? I'm in shock and the pain is so cutting. (Catherine)*

*It's been 8 months since I last saw him and I feel even more lost and lonely than ever (...).  
I know in my head that this is the best way, but it's taking so long to feel whole again and move on. I seem to be stuck. (Barbara)*

When individuals enter a relationship and experience it as a passionate affair, they expect some of their needs to be met, but at the same time they may be confronted with the darker aspects of this relationship, finding that the relationship does not evolve as expected (Cupach & Spitzberg, 2010). Based on members' reports, it seems that termination of these relationships may lead the subject to a biographical state where the individual experiences adverse conditions that trigger feelings of loss, frustration, rejection, as depicted in phrases, such as those used by Catherine, who writes: "I felt utterly rejected and like a sack of potatoes," or Helen, who points out: "I felt like an empty shell." Particularly after separation, feelings of personal failure may emerge. Under these conditions, it seems that the reactions of individuals contain and express pain, as at the moment

of abandonment, they feel overwhelmed by memories that gave them an identity- as a partner of a specific person-, something that they may feel is lost when the relationship ends. So, loss seems to be the main and essential basis of such experiences.

### **The Prevalence of Ambivalence: When Opposite Impulses Coexist**

The second sub-theme contains descriptions of members' dilemmas and difficulties in making decisions. The secret nature of these relationships, the awareness that the partner has another formal relationship and the uncertainty about the future course of the relationships place the individuals in a position where they are constantly drawn by opposite forces. George's description is indicative, claiming: "I didn't fully engage in what was happening as both my morality and sense of reality was totally adrift with the surreal series of events that I was part of" or Mary who writes: "I am in a really bad place. I love this man so much and have done my whole stupid life. I feel awful for his long term partner, the guilt is horrid, but the pure self-interest is killing me."

These descriptions contain the ambivalence between the severity of the partner's present desire and the awareness that the "rupture" required to continue these relationships, as well as the intimacy that will emerge in the long run, can function as a castration for the desire. The members highlight how desire can be nourished by prohibitions and obstacles, as the teleology of desire is not its satisfaction, but its perpetuation. It is indicative that the next participant recognizes that what he is experiencing here is a "bubble," which exacerbates the underlying ambivalence. Indeed, it is a concept that is frequently encountered and seems to condense a relative representation of "how extradyadic relationships are":

*I know my relationship has been in a bubble and would be different with custody, day to day life (...). Logically it makes no sense to leave but my heart says otherwise. In my head I really feel it would work (but that may be the fog), I just don't know how long to fight through this. (Michael)*

Members' narratives reveal that the affair partner in a relationship faces some conflicting intrapsychic processes, as this relationship is placed within a complex context of intertwining ethical issues and the need for personal satisfaction. Under these conditions, they sway between the desire to claim a more stable commitment and the desire to keep a distance. Thus, the members oscillate between the need for security and the desire for freedom without restriction, and remain in an intermediate condition of commitment.

### **Centripetal Aspects of the Relationship**

#### **The Relationship as a Supportive Environment**

Despite the conflicting implications of engaging in a relationship from the position of the infidelity partner, the analysis of the present posts indicated that those relationships meet some emotional and practical needs that function as a counterbalance against the implying cost. In the members' descriptions of how their relationship was, the element of "support" among the partners within the complex relational context they were experiencing is highlighted, as Kate outlines with her phrase "The emotional support he provided me was stunning. I felt really loved, protected and safe. I felt alive again." Similarly, Anna describes:

*We both actively support one another in every way that we can (...). The support we give to one another comes from that perspective as well (...). I try to create an environment of love, acceptance, praise, and zero pressure for him to do anything for me.*

*This abstract highlights the element of support as a solid basis for the relationship. (Anna)*

Generally, an environment of love, understanding, acceptance, security and care is described, where the need for companionship and protection is fulfilled, without the obligations of a relationship. It seems that in these situations, mutual support, empathetic understanding and keeping the necessary distance play a fundamental role, as expressed by Martha, who admits: "We agreed that we would wait until his unborn child was past his first birthday (...). We discussed that this would have to be mutual separations, adjustment period for all families and then we could freely build our relationship."

As outlined in the above description, these relationships can evolve, creating a desire for exclusivity, but they encounter obstacles, such as some crucial transitional stages of the partner's primary relationship, which act as inhibitors for a transition into a committed relationship. Thus, it is a "stand-by" relationship, following various cycles and stages that are influenced by factors beyond the relationship. The posts of the members in the infidelity partner group demonstrate that these relationships may begin as flexible and transient experiences, but in many cases individuals vigorously seek an exclusive relationship, where they will be able to strike a balance between the security of a stable relationship and the adventure that consents to desire. References of this need constitute the next sub-theme that emerged according to the analysis.

### **The Desire for Exclusivity**

Despite the existing impediments, the desires and visions that the members of the infidelity partner group create for the continuation of their relationships in the future are evident. This is indicatively expressed in the narration of Nicolas outlining: "I have fantasized and pictured a whole wonderful future with her and written my family out sadly enough" and Eve, who mentions: "He suggested me to change home, I insisted on stopping sending messages etc., but it does not work, the emotions were still very strong. Six months later, we planned to leave our partners and live together."

The above excerpts outline that despite the fact that relationships in which one is involved as an affair partner originate in a state of non-exclusivity, the desire exclusivity exists in many cases. Therefore, the members seem to be frustrated when they perceive the difficulty of this process, as described by Brenda:

*So I enjoyed it "for however long it was going to last." He was the first to say he loved me. I said it as well, and within a few months I really meant it. I loved him. I admired him, I was fascinated. I was so sad that I was only going to be a small chapter in his life. (Brenda)*

Thence, many members of the affair partner group seem to express a desire for a committed relationship, as opposed to the short-term character of such relationships. This could be considered as a "flight forward" answering the dilemmas which have been described. Consequently, they express the need for close contact with persons with whom they can develop emotional bonds that provide them with security. But which is the reason they seek love under such circumstances? Some answers to this question are given in narratives identified in the following theme.

### **Lessons learned and generalizing conclusions**

It is clear that in many parts of the posts, the participants of the present support group go through a process of explaining the reasons for creating and maintaining the relationships, the factors that contributed to the end of them, while recording conclusions about the overall course and quality of the relationship. Narrating

their experience seems to facilitate the renegotiation and reconstruction of the meaning of their involvement in a relationship as the infidelity partner. In this way members are introduced to an introspection process, give meaning to their experiences and communicate them to other members.

At first, at some points the members clearly attempt to explain the reasons that contributed to the creation of the relationship, as well as to its “ignominious” termination. To this end, they attribute the relationship to factors that are placed beyond attraction issues and are related to pre-existing factors, as shown in Eve’s post:

*Now I feel like the entire thing was designed to boost his ego and see if he could have me. Now he knows he could, he binned me off and probably enjoyed being rude to me. I'm confused. Maybe I have been messing him about so can't expect him to jump when I decide. (Eve)*

As underlined in the above description, the participant attributes the creation of the relationship to her lover's need for “strengthening of his ego” and to his ability to control her. But it seems that after this was fulfilled, then he stopped responding. The participant's conclusion that her partner “kicked her out” affects how she processes and evaluates the quality of the relationship in this condition, leading to a negative final assessment.

In some other descriptions, this attempt to account for the course of the relationship is given even more clearly, giving it a sense of “devaluation” of the self and the relationship as a whole. At these points, participants express remorse for their involvement in the relationship, such as Monica who writes, “Looking back, I was so naive and stupid for involving with him and believing all the lies he told me!! I deeply regret that whole portion of my life so much.” Similarly, Jessica writes:

*I wish I hadn't but I am human and the damage is done. Lesson learnt. I think this was all about finding the path of least resistance in the end. The guilt, the discovery,—he just needed some peace and that's why he remains with his wife, as opposed to taking the risk with me. (Jessica)*

Both excerpts record remorse for the relationship, accompanied by an attempt to rationalize their involvement. In the first case, the participant proceeds to a critical elaboration of her own attitude, as she had not realized the deception on the part of her lover. It seems that the induced loss of trust triggered self-protection motivations, as a result of which she distanced herself from this relationship. The other participant also points out that she “took her lesson,” stressing that she had to resist. At the same time, she mentions as a factor of not maintaining the relationship the great risk that the partner realized that he would take if he continued the relationship with her. Thus, in this case the fear of rejection of the relationship by the social environment seems to have acted as a reason for its termination.

At the same time, some members describe the “lessons they learned” through experiencing these relationships. At this level, their narrative is not only a form of representation of personal experience or personal account, but also a form of interpersonal action, addressed to other members as an indirect way of giving advice on what is expected in these relationships, such as the following descriptions:

*I've learned a lot from the whole experience about myself and other people. I am definitely less judgmental of others. I've learned how important self-care is: not just going to the gym, but putting myself first. Everyone is responsible for their own lives. (John)*

*Things I've learned: 1. Affairs are real relationships. You have two people who are putting time, emotions, investment that's a real relationship (...)*

*4. Not all people place "love, intimacy" into the same priority in their life.*

*5. The reason you feel no one understands you like your affair partner...is because you may be the most honest version of yourself. (Margaret)*

These excerpts typically provide the conclusions reached by the members through their experience. In fact, Margaret lists in an organized way the representations that she has formed through her experience, in the form of instructions addressed to the other members. Thus, the participant initially emphasizes that these are "real" relationships, referring to the emotional elements and mental investments that are made. She also addresses the issue of exclusivity, the individual differences in how the concepts of "love" and "closeness" are perceived, implying that these differences affect the expectations of each relationship. In addition, she points out that the environment of extradyadic relationships works liberatingly in terms of the manifestation of "true" aspects of the self. It is generally a summary of the main conclusions that she formed through the experience of the relationship. Her description, however, is given in a way that indicates a rule that goes beyond the limits of personal experience and takes on an aphoristic, normative and didactic character, indicating the capture of dominant narratives about various aspects of experiencing romantic relationships.

## Discussion

Overall, the members of the present group go through a reflexive process of attributions about the outcomes of the relationships, the factors that contributed to their termination, while recording the conclusions that summarize the overall course and quality of their relationship. Their introduction into a process of condensed narration of their experience seems to facilitate the renegotiation and reconstruction of the meaning of their experience the infidelity partner.

The participants seek relief through a group of co-sufferers who would be able to understand their pain and offer a supportive environment. It is a transfer of an interpersonal "friendly" conversation to another medium, where group discussion on relationship issues is governed by certain rules—both rhetorical and socio-emotional. Based on these rules, participants construct a personal identity, which in turn rely on representations (or repertoires) of love, desire, companionship, relationships, rules, ethics, and betrayal, through which they try to give meaning and stand against the personal experiences of the relationship difficulties they face.

In summary, the members of the group defined as the other woman / man experience these relationships through processes similar to those of exclusive engagement. However, the loss within these relationships seems to be the main and essential basis of the relationship. At many points, participants emphasize how difficult it is for them to understand and embrace what is happening to them; while they themselves oscillate between their desire to continue the relationship and their need to keep some distance (see also DePompo & Butsuhara, 2016). This hesitation is related both to the "forbidden" nature of the relationship and to their own need for a relationship condition where they will feel free. Elsewhere, participants are driven by a desire to meet needs support, security, protection, care, and a desire for commitment.

However, what seems to differentiate these relationships is the perceived lack of social acceptance, the uncontrolled course of the relationship, as well as the lack of commitment: things that create a complex relationship

context. Under these conditions, the individuals experience a “stand-by relationship,” forming doubtful expectations for its future continuation within a framework of exclusivity. But when that does not seem to be going well, they go through a process of reviewing the relationship and themselves within it via an “inner self-talk,” which seems to take the function of a voice that will point out the negative aspects of the relationship and will prevent the re-engagement in similar experiences. At some points, in fact, the descriptions of the members echo both dominant narratives about these relationships and more personal meanings that are attributed to the complex and psychologically risky state of involvement in extradyadic affairs.

Hence, the members identified as the infidelity partner convey strongly emotional narratives, highlighting a sense of loss of the relationship, from which a sense of loss of self may emerge, as well as ambiguity of how one can stand within these relationships. Experiencing this loss signifies a state of rupture and asymmetry, with the infidelity partner feeling the “big loser” of the triangle and experiencing it painfully, something similarly outlined by the study of Utley (2016), where women described how they negotiate power in imbalanced romantic relationships. At the same time, participants in the present group describe experiencing shame about their involvement in a relationship that is still unacceptable by dominant norms. The infidelity partner seeks and achieves the pleasure arising from the excitement that accompanies the transient and forbidden nature of the relationship. However, many participants confess their desire for secure exclusive commitment to this relationship, although they encounter the constraints and obstacles associated with an existing primary relationship or marriage.

Public acknowledgment of the emotions that participants feel constitutes an act with a moral dimension, in the sense that this self-disclosure is recruited with a restorative function. Such confessional rituals indicate a latent belief that public confession of our error or pain may restore our inclusion in a moral group. In this way, the stories of the members highlight how some aspects of our personal lives are captured when they are publicly articulated in a collective text. In this sense, the OSG is a unique cultural forum, which puts the emotional wounds and pain of the participants at the center of the agenda for discussion. Why do I suffer and how could I better cope with my pain? These questions concern the group members. It is remarkable that the “emotional ethics” cultivated by the dominant emotional discussion is not based on the narcissistic needs and desires of the individual, but it is rather a discussion of the importance of close relationships and the ambiguity of the norms that need to establish these relationships (Illouz, 1999).

In order to understand the whole range of aspects of these lived experiences, the interpretation of these phenomena presupposes that psychological phenomena cannot be interpreted without taking into account the intersubjective context in which they occur. Thus, we resort to an approach in which the “intrapyschic determinism gives way to an unremitting intersubjective contextualism” (Stolorow, 2002, p. 330), based on a relational constitution of the person through his/ her personal history of object relations across the course of biographical time, and the matrix of relationships (Roseneil, 2009).

In the context of this repository of experiences, the construction of the discourse on emotions and sexuality is related to the construction of the self. It is a self that is forged through relationships and when they are torn apart, the individual suffers. Thus, the self is presented in a new world of negotiation of intimate relationships, where new obligations and anxiety emerge. The relationship now aims to serve two purposes: on the one hand, the security of commitment and on the other hand, a state of self-determined engagement, a condition where we are free and together at the same time (Bauman, 2003; Hobbs et al., 2017).

Participants' confessions reflect fundamental issues related to the transformation of modern relationships. The infidelity partner is introduced into a relationship where the other is both close and distant, and the relationship exists in the present, but future projections are inhibited. These are traits that highlight a condition of conflict between a short-lived pleasure and a more permanent and love-giving commitment. It seems, however, that the path the participants take is tedious, full of contradictions, ruptures and frustrations that trap them. This new relationship with time not only provokes a new relationship with others, but it also reshapes our relationship with ourselves.

In particular, the new way of experiencing time is revealed both by the narratives about experiencing romantic relationships and by the way in which members of the OSG structure and communicate their narratives. The participants emphasize their need for pleasure that will be satisfied immediately, responding to the "here and now" needs. Furthermore, their own membership in the online forum appears as "urgent": they enter an environment that can give them answers directly without delay, looking for a quick -and possibly superficial- solutions. These characteristics refer to the hypermodern society (Aubert, 2010), which presents a constant sense of urgency, instantaneity, and restriction to the present.

Overall, both the narratives of the extradyadic affairs and the search for support in an online environment are based on a common psychological need of the individuals: the constant struggle to satisfy their need to be surrounded by others and, at the same time, maintain their individuality. In other words, stories of affairs reveal that the third will appear as a point of balance between two conflicting inner forces, at one end of which is the desire for individual life and at the other end, the need for dependence that is inherent in each individual. Respectively, the search for support in a digitally mediated space indicates the search for a digital third party, which is as close and as far as we can handle. The need to belong raises important questions and strong emotions of conflicting quality, which reflect the ambiguity of contemporary relationships, that is, the deep desire for autonomy and at the same time, the need for dependence. The third, whether he/she appears as another person in a relationship or as a digital third party at a close distance and in remote proximity, embodies the painful oscillation of the individual between the need to belong and the threat of the narcissistic autonomy.

## **Limitations and Contribution of the Present Study**

The present study provides an empirical ground that describes how experiences of extradyadic relationships are (re)constructed in OSGs. However, it does contain some limitations. With regard to the methodological choice of thematic analysis of the posts, it is a choice dictated by the research question and did not focus on structural and linguistic elements of the interaction. Besides, some issues directly related to the online narrative environment create further limitations in the present research. For example, due to anonymity, gender and sexual orientation issues cannot always be reliably identified and therefore have not been recorded. An issue which also needs to be considered is the fact that the analyzed data were gathered from an online group, where the infidelity partners need some kind of help or support. Nevertheless, we did not access the experiences of the other women/men who do not have such requests or during "non-crisis" phases.

However, despite the above limitations, the present study constitutes the first research effort to examine the lived experiences of the infidelity partner, as they are freely presented by themselves, something which fills a significant research gap. Such experiences are examined through the discussions presented in an OSG, as they are freely expressed by the members. The use of the methodological tool of data collection from an

international online support forum is an innovative approach to the study of experiences of infidelity partners, but also of interpersonal relationships in general, as it offers data about personal experiences, the process of meaning, negotiation and representations about how such relationships work.

Finally, the findings of this research entail reflexive conclusions about intimate relationships and capture contradictory elements of broader cultural narratives, representations, schemata and dilemmas of self and relationships, as presented in the written transactions of participants in OSGs. Thus, we can outline how the self is constructed within the fluidity of relationships and the digitally mediated environment.

## Funding

The study is part of a PhD dissertation (Ntali, 2019) funded as a scholarship by Onassis Foundation.

## Competing Interests

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

## Acknowledgments

The authors have no additional (i.e., non-financial) support to report.

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