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Original Article

Individual Challenges and Adjustment Problems in People with Unconventional Sexual Preferences: A Narrative Analysis

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Abstract

Background and Aim: Individuals with unconventional sexual preferences often experience difficulties and inconsistencies across various personal and social domains. The present study aimed to explore the individual challenges and adjustment problems experienced by individuals with unconventional sexual preferences.
Materials and Methods: This qualitative study employed a narrative analysis approach and was conducted during the last six months of 2023 and the first six months of 2024. The study population consisted of adolescents and young adults with unconventional sexual preferences in Alborz Province, Iran. Based on the principle of theoretical saturation, 16 participants were purposively selected. Data were collected through individual, face-to-face interviews using a semi-structured and in-depth format. The interviews were then analyzed using narrative analysis.
Results: The findings revealed several individual challenges and adjustment problems among individuals with unconventional sexual preferences. Narrative analysis identified three main themes and twelve subthemes. The main themes included: 1-problems and challenges related to personal choices and preferences, 2-problems and challenges related to school and academic functioning, and 3-factors contributing to maladjustment.
Conclusion: The narratives of individuals with unconventional sexual preferences may provide valuable insights for therapists and clinical professionals. Understanding these narratives can help clinicians develop more effective therapeutic interventions for individuals experiencing adjustment difficulties.

Keywords: Individual challenges; Adjustment problems; Unconventional sexual preferences; Narrative analysis

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Introduction

Sexual preferences and behaviors play an important role in shaping individuals' romantic and sexual attractions (1). These preferences are influenced by a complex interaction of multiple factors, including environmental, cultural, psychological, hormonal, and biological influences (2). Accordingly, a variety of determinants may contribute to the development of sexual preferences, and these factors can vary considerably across individuals (3). For many people, awareness of sexual preferences begins to emerge during adolescence and early adulthood (4).

Sexual preferences that differ from dominant social norms are often described as unconventional or non-traditional. These preferences may include diverse sexual orientations and gender identities, such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender identities (5, 6). According to current diagnostic classifications of mental disorders, including the most recent editions of major psychiatric diagnostic systems, diverse sexual orientations—such as homosexuality or bisexuality—are not considered mental disorders or indicators of psychological pathology (7). It is also important to recognize that the development of sexual identity can be a gradual process. Individuals may experience various forms of attraction during adolescence preferences. Some studies suggest that sexual identity may emerge later in young adulthood (8).

Researchers have proposed different perspectives regarding the factors associated with unconventional sexual preferences. Some studies suggest that certain early life experiences, including traumatic events such as sexual abuse or psychological exploitation, may influence later sexual development (9). Other scholars emphasize the potential role of learning experiences and reinforcement processes in shaping certain patterns of sexual behavior (10). More recent perspectives highlight the importance of broader social and contextual influences, including exposure to multiple stressors, the presence of protective and supportive social networks, and the complexity of relationship structures among sexual minority populations. Such perspectives support the development of more comprehensive and tailored support interventions (11).

Furthermore, individuals who identify as members of sexual minority groups and who simultaneously belong to other marginalized groups—such as racial, ethnic, religious, disability, or economically disadvantaged communities—may experience the compounded effects of multiple forms of minority stress. This intersection of identities can increase vulnerability to psychological distress and mental health challenges compared with individuals who experience only one form of minority status (12).

Understanding individuals' sexual preferences is important for assessing their levels of psychological and social adjustment (13). Research indicates that mental health problems such as depression, self-harm, substance abuse, and suicidal ideation are reported more frequently among LGBT individuals compared with the general population (14). For example, some reports indicate that a considerable proportion of LGBT individuals aged 18 to 24 have attempted suicide due to psychological distress and adjustment difficulties (15).

Several studies have examined the challenges faced by sexual minority populations. Research conducted among members of the LGBT community has shown that these individuals often experience prejudice, social judgment, and communication barriers in their daily interactions (16). In addition, studies focusing on transgender individuals have reported limitations in self-management strategies related to mental health (17). Other research exploring the lived experiences of transgender individuals indicates that they frequently encounter a range of psychological and social challenges (18).

Qualitative investigations have also highlighted a variety of concerns among LGBTQ individuals, including feelings of threat, the pathologization and medicalization of their sexual identities, and experiences of trauma (19). Similarly, studies have documented challenges faced by LGBT adolescents in educational environments and in broader social participation (20). Research conducted among Portuguese gay men revealed difficulties related to social adjustment, insufficient social support, and feelings of loneliness (21). In academic contexts, LGBT students have also been found to report lower levels of social adjustment, academic self-efficacy, and overall well-being compared with their non-LGBT peers (22).

Other qualitative studies have emphasized the role of

stigma, judgment regarding gender identity, and limited social support as significant challenges experienced by transgender individuals during the process of gender transition (23). Similarly, research conducted in Zambia found that LGBT individuals often face social discrimination, rejection, and lack of family support (24). Furthermore, some studies indicate that sexual minority individuals may encounter difficulties in regulating social and interpersonal behaviors due to persistent social pressures and minority stress (25).

Qualitative research methods are particularly valuable for investigating issues related to mental health and well-being because they allow researchers to capture the depth and complexity of individuals' lived experiences (26). Since the present study seeks to explore the narratives and personal experiences of individuals with unconventional sexual preferences, a qualitative approach is considered the most appropriate methodological choice. Quantitative studies often focus on examining correlational or causal relationships between psychological variables; however, they may not fully capture the complexity of individuals' lived experiences and personal narratives. Within the Iranian cultural context, issues related to unconventional sexual preferences are often sensitive and remain underexplored in academic research. Despite the growing need for a deeper understanding of the experiences of individuals with diverse sexual preferences, there is still a lack of qualitative studies in Iran that comprehensively examine their personal challenges and adjustment experiences. This gap in the literature highlights the importance of conducting in-depth qualitative investigations in this area. Therefore, the present study aims to explore the individual challenges and adjustment problems experienced by individuals with unconventional sexual preferences through a qualitative narrative analysis approach.

Methods

The present study employed a qualitative research design using a narrative analysis approach. The study was conducted during the last six months of 2023 and the first six months of 2024. The study population consisted of adolescents and young adults with unconventional sexual preferences in Alborz Province, Iran. Potential participants were initially identified by clinical psychologists working in counseling centers through clinical interviews and the review of client records.

In qualitative research, sample size is typically determined based on the principle of theoretical saturation, which refers to the point at which no new themes or insights emerge from the data (27). Nevertheless, some scholars suggest that larger samples may contribute to greater analytical depth in qualitative studies (28). In the present study, the principal investigator contacted several counseling centers in Karaj (located in Alborz Province), explained the objectives of the research, and requested referrals of individuals with diverse sexual preferences who might be willing to participate. Interested individuals were then invited to the Mehafzaie Zendegi Psychological Institute for further screening.

Initially, 32 individuals expressed interest in participating in the study. Following the preliminary screening process and based on the principle of theoretical saturation, 16 participants were purposively selected for inclusion in the study.

The inclusion criteria were as follows: (a) having at least one unconventional sexual preference identified by a clinical psychologist, (b) being between 15 and 25 years of age, having no history of serious physical illness or psycho-cognitive disorders based on an initial clinical interview, review of client records, and self-report, and (d) willingness to participate in the study and the ability to communicate effectively, share personal experiences, and narrate life stories. The only exclusion criterion was the participant's unwillingness to continue participation during the research process.

Data collection began with individual, face-to-face interviews conducted in a semi-structured and unstructured manner. Data analysis was performed in a semi-structured way. Initially, all interviews were transcribed into a Word document. For each interview transcript, an interpretive summary was created to extract the underlying meanings. Data analysis commenced simultaneously with the first interview and involved qualitative narrative analysis, focusing on the description and interpretation of narrative experiences. The principal investigator carefully read through the texts, either line by line or paragraph by paragraph,

coding each segment of data that represented a concept, event, feeling, or action. In the next step, the numerous open codes were grouped and compared to develop broader concepts and subcategories. Finally, the main categories from the earlier stages were refined and organized until coherent themes emerged. In this context, the accuracy and validity of the study's findings were approached through several key strategies.

Emphasizing the importance of active and ongoing participation, the research involved close and frequent interactions with participants, allowing them to contribute to the interpretation of the data. A collaborative team approach was utilized, drawing on the collective insights of the research team. Additionally, participants were revisited, and feedback was sought from knowledgeable individuals outside the study who were familiar with the phenomenon being investigated. To enhance the credibility of the data, the researchers engaged with the topic over an extended period, dedicating ample time to data collection.

The sampling process extended beyond five months, which allowed the researchers to immerse themselves in the data for at least nine months. This prolonged engagement facilitated a thorough and nuanced analysis of the findings. Furthermore, the research team reviewed the results, and in some instances, the outcomes were shared with five participants, who confirmed that the themes derived from the interviews accurately represented their intended meanings.

Results

The sample for this study consisted of 16 clients with unconventional sexual preferences, whose education levels ranged from high school to master's degree. Most participants had been diagnosed with unconventional sexual preferences and preferences during adolescence and were receiving treatment and counseling. The majority of the clients were female, with most of their unconventional sexual behavior being homosexual. Their demographic characteristics are presented in Table 1. The data collection began through individual and face-to-face interviews.

As shown in Table 1, the participants in this study ranged in age from 16 to 27 years. The duration of the interviews varied, with the longest lasting 120 minutes and the shortest lasting 95 minutes. Table 2 outlines the main themes and subthemes derived from the narrative analysis of the individual challenges and adjustment problems in people with unconventional sexual preferences. The results indicated the factors that influence individual challenges and adjustment problems through narrative analysis. This study identifies three main themes:

1- Problems and challenges related to choices and personal preferences,

2- Problems and challenges related to school and academic affairs,

3- Factors contributing to maladjustment. Additionally, there are 12 subthemes associated with these main themes.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the participants in the study

Codes	Gender	Age	Academic Status	Job	Interview by the minute
1	Female	23	Bachelor	Self-employment	120
2	Male	24	Bachelor	Digital marketer	100
3	Female	23	Bachelor	Digital marketer	110
4	Female	22	Bachelor	Self-employment	98
5	Female	20	Undergraduate student	Student	100
6	Male	21	Diploma	Self-employment	117
7	Female	24	Master	Self-employment	98
8	Female	17	High school student	Student	100
9	Male	18	Diploma	Student	120
10	Female	18	Diploma	Student	98
11	Female	20	Diploma	University Student	97
12	Male	18	Diploma	Student	110
13	Female	19	Diploma	Clothing designer	100
14	Female	20	undergraduate student	Accountant	98
15	Male	27	Bachelor	Designer	95
16	Female	16	High school student	Student	95

Table 2. Main themes and subthemes derived from the narrative analysis of individual challenges and adjustment problems in people with unconventional sexual preferences

Main themes	Subthemes
Problems and challenges related to choices and personal preferences	The challenge of selecting clothing that aligns with one's physical gender. Difficulties with physical characteristics and appearance that are consistent with one's physical gender. The challenge of choosing a different lifestyle. The challenge of adopting behaviors typically associated with the opposite sex. The challenge of gender adjustment and change.
Problems and challenges related to school and academic affairs	Expulsion from the school. Difficulties with classmates and the school atmosphere.
Factors contributing to maladjustment	Childhood conditions and playmate interactions. Challenges in relationships with others. Restrictions imposed by others. Harm caused by family dynamics. Difficulties in making friends.

1- Problems and challenges related to choices and personal preferences.

This study focuses on the main theme of problems and challenges related to choices and personal preferences. It includes five subthemes: 1. The challenge of selecting clothing that aligns with one's physical gender. 2. Difficulties with physical characteristics and appearance that are consistent with one's physical gender. 3. The challenge of choosing a different lifestyle. 4. The challenge of adopting behaviors typically associated with the opposite sex. 5. The challenge of gender adjustment and change.

Each of these subthemes is illustrated with quotes from participants, and coded according to Table 1.

1. The challenge of selecting clothing that aligns with one's physical gender.

Many individuals with unconventional sexual preferences, primarily transgender, face significant challenges with their parents regarding clothing choices that align with their gender identity.

Code 1 said: "My mom always said that ever since you were two years old, you chose your own clothes and insisted on wearing whatever you liked. You had a preference for boys' clothing. No matter what I did, your choices didn’t align with the expectations of being a girl."

Code 4 stated: "My mom always tries to choose stylish, girly clothes for me. I often feel annoyed and embarrassed by her choices. We frequently argue about what clothes to select."

Code 6 stated: " I have always wanted to grow my hair long, wear nail polish, use lipstick, and dress in short skirts. However, the people around me constantly reminded me that I was a boy. My father even beat me when I was 17 for choosing to wear women's clothing.

B. Difficulties with physical characteristics and appearance that are consistent with one's physical gender.

People with unconventional sexual preferences narrate that they are dissatisfied with their physical appearance and try to change it in some way or deny their physical characteristics.

Code 3 said, "My father always loved long hair and believed in it. He always said that a girl should have long hair, and I had long hair for a while, but I always tied it up and wore a hat. He complained about me when I cut my hair like a boy."

Code 10 stated: "I didn't dress like a normal girl, like I wanted to wear a lot of makeup or dress in a very girly way."

Code 12 explained: " For almost two years, I tried to go without makeup and live the life of a normal boy. However, it seemed like some internal factor wouldn't allow me. It was very painful."

C. The challenge of choosing a different lifestyle.

Many individuals with unconventional sexual preferences feel compelled to define a specific lifestyle for themselves due to the challenging circumstances

they have faced and could not share. They often experience isolation resulting from stigma and social bias.

Code 7 said: "Although my family didn't understand what was wrong with me, they accepted me as a boy for seven years without question. Because of this, they didn't guard against the issues I faced. Eventually, I grew tired of hiding my true self. I decided to work on separating from them to live my own life."

Code 9 stated: "My style now is the same as it was back then, but during that time, my mom would insist that I wear boys' clothes and cut my hair. I resisted these changes and often cried, but she continued to push me into it. For a while, I dressed this way, despite my love for dolls, which were all I played with. Now, things are different. I've become independent, and I live life on my own terms."

Code 16 stated: "Everyone calls me Mahan. I said this and that the kids should call me that, so that I can get used to it and feel good when they call me that. I started changing my lifestyle with my name."

D. The challenge of adopting behaviors typically associated with the opposite sex.

Many individuals with unconventional sexual preferences recount that they selected behaviors and styles that did not align with their gender, yet these choices seldom led to others criticizing or judging them.

Code 4 stated: "I went to the gym for a long time. I chose martial arts. My family kept telling me that your behavior was boyish, and you went to martial arts to become even more boyish."

Code 7 stated: "My father firmly told me, 'You are a girl,' and insisted that I was nothing more than what he saw sitting in front of him. To relieve the tension at home, I began to play basketball intensely outside and tried to be more of a bully boy."

Code 14 said: "My family is religious, and they believe that I should not change who I am. They say I was born a girl and should stay a girl, and that I need to correct my behavior accordingly. While I present myself in a way that aligns with their expectations, in my heart and mind, I know that I identify as a boy."

E. The challenge with gender adjustment and change.

The individuals with unconventional sexual preferences seem to endure significant fear, and in the calm environment of counseling and therapy, they narrate fears that would be difficult to confront in other circumstances.

Code 5 stated: "My family always encourages me to act according to my sexual preferences. But if they find out I want to change my gender, they will kill me."

Code 12 stated: "As a trans person, I have a unique fear of gender reassignment. I'm worried that I may struggle to find myself after the procedure and that I could face even greater challenges later on."

Code 16 said: "I want to find myself. I suffer, but I feel out of place in every group. I'm also afraid that if my family discovers my different sexual preferences, they might reject me."

2- Problems and challenges related to school and academic affairs.

In this study, the primary focus is on the problems and challenges related to school and academic affairs, which can be divided into two subthemes: expulsion from the school and difficulties with classmates, and school atmosphere. Each of these subthemes is illustrated with quotes from participants and codes.

A. Expulsion from school

Many students with unconventional sexual preferences often narrate fear of school, expulsion, and dropping out due to social biases and anxiety about being associated with behaviors perceived as contagious.

Code 9 said, "Because I was a little different, then their families objected, and I was a little naughty, and all of that was the reason I was expelled by the education district."

Code 10 said, "I wasn't bad at school, but I was always challenged because of the disciplinary conditions. Then, because of these conditions and all that, they put more pressure on me. Eventually, I was expelled from school."

Code 13 stated: "In our high school, it was a very taboo thing to have a relationship with a girl. I had. Then, they expelled me."

B. Difficulties with classmates and school atmosphere.

Students with unconventional sexual preferences often face judgment and harassment from peers and staff due to their unique characteristics.

Code 5 said: "School is really difficult for me. The other

kids always pick on me with comments like, "Why is your hair like a boy's?" and "Why don't you wear a hijab?" They also ask, "Why do you wear boys' clothes?" I don't wear school pants; I only wear my coat and hoodie. It's really humiliating to be treated this way."

Code 11 said: "The worst experience of my school life was feeling like I didn't have many close friends. I struggled to connect with most of the people I did make friends with. It seemed like they were afraid of me because of my sexual preferences."

Code 14 said: "One of my main problems in high school was that I couldn't fit in and say what I was. I always got into trouble with my classmates."

3- Factors contributing to maladjustment.

In this study, the primary theme of factors contributing to maladjustment encompasses five subthemes: 1. Childhood conditions and playmate interactions, 2. Challenges in relationships with others, 3. Restrictions imposed by others, 4. Harm caused by family dynamics, and 5. Difficulties in making friends. Each of these subthemes is illustrated with quotes from participants and codes.

1. Childhood conditions and playmate interactions.

Most individuals with unconventional sexual preferences narrated that they had limited playtime as children, and most women tended to play in male roles. They often did not have suitable playmates as children.

Code 1 said: "I grew up mostly surrounded by boys, as there were very few girls around me. Many believe that my boyish behavior was influenced by them. Even later in life, this aspect of my personality led me to sometimes pretend to be a boy in front of girls."

Code 5 stated: "I mostly played with my cousin, but I didn't connect with anyone else. We didn't have any games to play together, and when we did play, we often fought about who would be the dad going to work and who would stay home. I usually took on the role of the husband."

Code 16 stated: "My family didn't allow me to play with boys. In our household, it was considered taboo for my sister and me to play with boys. That's why I took on the male role in games."

2. Challenges in relationships with others.

Many people with unconventional sexual preferences reported experiencing numerous communication challenges with their family and friends during childhood and adolescence.

Code 1 said: "I face the biggest challenge with my father. My great uncle influenced him significantly, which has made me miserable. None of them understood me."

Code 4 said: "My biggest challenge is my emotional relationships with others and my family. They don't understand me. They hurt me the most."

Code 10 said: "I'm struggling with my mom and dad. But with my mom, she can't accept that there are other things. My dad also cares about his family, and they all became my problem."

3. Restrictions imposed by others.

Most of the restrictions narrated by individuals with unconventional sexual preferences, reflected restrictions on clothing, lifestyle, and behavior. They were often described as difficult and unbearable times.

Code 1 said: "For a period of time, I wasn't allowed to leave the house dressed the way I wanted. Either I would stay home or I had to wear what my family insisted on, which often made me choose to stay in. I spent my days at home, during which I also worked, but all of my work was done from home."

Code 5 said: " These strictures became overwhelming for me at one point. I realized that I could overcome these difficulties. However, my parents' sensitivity was pervasive, and they monitored everything I did."

Code 15 said: "It was hard. But in our home atmosphere, there were strict unwritten rules that made everything even harder. There was a complete dictatorship of the father."

4. Harm caused by family dynamics.

Many of these individuals with unconventional sexual preferences did not have positive memories of their families. They narrated experiences that suggested abuse from family members, and the family dynamic often felt confusing to them. In their stories, there was a noticeable lack of a deep connection with their relatives.

Code 4 said: "Family has always had that painful base. The family has always been very painful for me. I have always been judged a lot by my family."

Code 6 stated: "One of the biggest challenges is always family, one of the biggest ones that limits you.

Especially religious families where everything is taboo, and you don't dare to speak up."
Code 12 said: "My father said if you want to change your gender, I won't kill you. He even beat me in front of everyone."

5. Difficulties in making friends.
Making friends can be challenging for individuals with unconventional sexual preferences for various reasons. Often, they struggle to find the right partner due to fear of judgment, cognitive biases, and societal stereotypes.
Code 2 stated: "Although I consider myself a girl, I struggle to make friends—both with men and with people of my own gender. I find it challenging to form regular friendships, which leaves me feeling like something is missing. It makes me feel quite odd."
Code 3 said: "I always wanted my friends to be boys. However, I never had that opportunity, and now most of my friends are girls, which can be a bit annoying. This is because I often feel I get unfair judgments from them."
Code 14 said: "Rejection often stands out in my mind. Whenever I wanted to take action or express something to someone, I always feared they would respond by saying that I was on a different page or that I meant something else entirely."

Discussion

The present study aimed to explore the individual challenges and adjustment problems experienced by individuals with unconventional sexual preferences using a narrative analysis approach. The findings revealed three main themes and twelve subthemes, including: 1- challenges related to personal choices and preferences, 2- challenges related to school and academic contexts, and 3- factors contributing to maladjustment. These findings are consistent with previous studies conducted by Town et al. (17), Hammack-Aviran et al. (19), Rand et al. (20), Ribeiro-Gonçalves et al. (21), Sotardi et al. (22), Lewis et al. (23), Mulavu et al. (24), and Rosati et al. (25). Collectively, these studies emphasize the role of social stigma, limited social support, and communication barriers as major challenges experienced by LGBT individuals.

However, the present study extends previous research by examining a broader range of personal and contextual factors associated with adjustment difficulties. While many earlier studies have focused primarily on specific aspects such as stigma or discrimination, the current research highlights the complex interplay between personal experiences, social expectations, and environmental pressures that shape individuals' adjustment processes.
The findings also suggest that challenges related to sexual identity and interpersonal relationships cannot be understood solely at the individual level. Instead, these experiences are strongly influenced by broader social and cultural contexts, including prevailing norms, social attitudes, and community expectations (29). From this perspective, individuals' adjustment difficulties should be interpreted within the broader framework of social environments in which they live. Addressing these challenges therefore requires not only individual-level interventions but also broader social awareness and supportive community structures (30).
In more traditional societies, individuals with diverse sexual preferences may experience additional pressures due to the tension between emerging social changes and longstanding cultural expectations. Such tensions may contribute to difficulties in communication, interpersonal relationships, and social adjustment (31). As a result, individuals may encounter increased psychological stress and challenges in navigating their identities within their social environments (32). This dynamic highlights the complexity of negotiating personal identity within cultural contexts where social norms may not fully align with individual experiences (33). Another important implication of the present findings concerns the role of education and awareness in promoting healthier sexual identity development. Comprehensive and evidence-based sexual education can help individuals better understand their sexual identity, develop greater self-awareness, and enhance sexual self-efficacy (34). Increased knowledge about sexual attitudes and preferences may contribute to the development of a healthier sexual identity, which in turn is associated with improved psychological well-being and more satisfying interpersonal relationships (35). Promoting accurate information and open dialogue about sexuality may therefore play an important role in supporting individuals' adjustment

and overall well-being.

Negative social attitudes toward unconventional sexual preferences may become internalized by affected individuals. As a result, some individuals may perceive their desires as inappropriate or problematic, which can contribute to feelings of guilt, shame, and reduced self-esteem, and in severe cases may be associated with suicidal ideation. During adolescence and early adulthood, when identity formation is still developing, individuals may experience uncertainty regarding their sexual identity and may attempt to suppress or conceal their feelings. Such internal conflicts can interfere with the healthy process of identity development (36).

In addition, persistent anxiety related to the disclosure of sexual identity or sexual behaviors may lead to social withdrawal, isolation, and avoidance of interpersonal interactions. Disclosure of one's sexual identity may sometimes result in rejection by close family members, which can represent a significant psychosocial stressor. Family rejection has been associated with a range of adverse outcomes, including emotional distress, disruption of educational pathways, and the loss of stable support systems (37). Consequently, the presence of supportive social networks plays an important role in mitigating the negative consequences of stigma and rejection and may contribute to greater resilience among individuals with diverse sexual preferences (38).

Another important factor highlighted in previous research is the role of intersectionality. Individuals with unconventional sexual preferences who also belong to other minority groups—such as those defined by race, ethnicity, religion, disability, or socioeconomic status—may experience multiple and overlapping forms of social disadvantage. This intersection of identities can intensify exposure to stressors and increase vulnerability to mental health difficulties compared with individuals who experience only one minority status (12). Understanding these intersecting social positions is therefore important for developing more inclusive and effective mental health interventions and support systems.

Despite its contributions, the present study has several limitations. First, participants were recruited exclusively from counseling centers in Alborz Province, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to individuals who do not seek psychological services. Second, some participants demonstrated hesitation in sharing personal experiences, likely due to the sensitive nature of the topic and concerns regarding disclosure of sexual preferences. Third, the study relied primarily on subjective and judgment-based assessments derived from narrative interviews. Finally, the purposive sampling strategy limited the inclusion of a wider range of sexual orientations, which may have restricted the diversity of perspectives represented in the findings. Future research may benefit from including more diverse samples and employing additional qualitative or mixed-method approaches to provide a broader understanding of these experiences.

Conclusion

The present study aimed to examine the individual challenges and adjustment problems experienced by individuals with unconventional sexual preferences using a narrative analysis approach. The findings revealed three main themes and twelve subthemes, including challenges related to personal choices and preferences, challenges associated with school and academic contexts, and factors underlying maladjustment.

The findings of this study may provide useful insights for the development of psychological and social interventions designed to support individuals with diverse sexual preferences. Such interventions may focus on promoting self-acceptance, strengthening self-esteem, and enhancing resilience in the face of discrimination and minority stress. In addition, addressing internalized conflicts and negative self-perceptions may help individuals better manage psychological distress and improve their overall adjustment.

By targeting these areas, supportive interventions may contribute to improved psychological well-being and more effective social functioning, enabling individuals to navigate their social environments with greater confidence and adaptability.

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Ethical considerations

This research has been approved by the Ethics Committee of Islamic Azad University, Tonekabon Branch, ID: IR.IAU.LIAU.REC.1403.003. To maintain ethical principles in this research, an attempt was made to collect data after obtaining the participants' consent. Participants were also assured of confidentiality and the presentation of results without providing names or ID details.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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