

Exploring the effects of infidelity on entrepreneurial success among South African start-up entrepreneurs

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International Journal of Science and Research Archive, 2025, 16(01), 640-648

Publication history: Received on 30 May 2025; revised on 05 July 2025; accepted on 08 July 2025

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30574/ijjsra.2025.16.1.2054>

Abstract

This study investigates the underappreciated relationship between the success of start-up businesses in South Africa and personal relational crises, particularly romantic infidelity. The psychological and emotional experiences that influence entrepreneurial outcomes are frequently overlooked by traditional entrepreneurship research, which places a higher priority on innovation, market strategies, and capital access. This study, which uses a qualitative, multiple case study approach and is based on behavioural entrepreneurship and life-domain conflict theory, involves 20 start-up entrepreneurs from Gauteng, Limpopo, and the Mpumalanga provinces who experienced infidelity either as perpetrators or victims, during pivotal stages of their company's growth. Semi-structured interviews were used to gather data, and thematic analysis was used for analysis.

The results show that infidelity seriously impairs interpersonal decision-making, cognitive function, and emotional equilibrium, which results in decreased business performance, poor strategic focus, and impaired leadership. With differing effects on company productivity, entrepreneurs used a variety of coping strategies, such as emotional detachment, intense concentration on work, or brief resignation from leadership positions. In certain instances, participants used work as a coping mechanism to channel their emotional distress.

The significance of psychological health and emotional resilience in entrepreneurial ecosystems is emphasized by this study. It demands that programs, incubators, and policy frameworks for entrepreneurship development incorporate support for mental wellness. The study adds to the expanding corpus of work supporting a more comprehensive theory of entrepreneurial success that takes into account the entrepreneur's emotional, relational, and personal aspects.

Keywords: Entrepreneurship; Infidelity; Start-Ups; Emotional Resilience; Work-Life Conflict

1. Introduction

Entrepreneurship is frequently hailed as a path characterized by risk-taking, creativity, passion, and perseverance. The strategic, financial, and operational aspects of entrepreneurship have been the subject of much research, but the personal lives of entrepreneurs, in particular, how emotional and relational disruptions affect entrepreneurial outcomes, have received much less attention. Within the field of entrepreneurship studies, romantic infidelity, a type of relational betrayal with well-established psychological and emotional repercussions, remains a largely unexplored variable.

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Founders of startups usually work in high-stress settings characterized by emotional isolation, long work hours, scarce resources, and uncertainty. These circumstances can both increase the likelihood of relationship stress, including infidelity, and its effects. Personal crises like romantic betrayal can lead to burnout, emotional instability, and impaired cognitive functioning, all of which can impair one's ability to lead and make strategic decisions (Uy, Foo, and Song, 2020). Additionally, Nabi, Liñán, Fayolle, Krueger, and Walmsley (2022) contend that personal instability and entrepreneurial stressors frequently coexist, creating feedback loops that jeopardize both individual well-being and company performance.

Understanding the comprehensive experiences of entrepreneurs is essential in the South African context, where entrepreneurship is increasingly seen as a means of addressing poverty, youth unemployment, and local economic development. According to Obschonka (2020), behavioral entrepreneurship has started to take into consideration how personality, mental health, and life experiences influence entrepreneurial behavior. Nevertheless, despite its emotional impact, infidelity has not yet been recognized as a separate factor affecting the success of entrepreneurs.

By investigating the lived experiences of South African start-up entrepreneurs who have come across romantic infidelity in the early phases of their business endeavors, either as perpetrators or victims, this study fills this knowledge gap. It aims to comprehend how these experiences impact their decision-making processes, emotional fortitude, cognitive focus, and general business performance. Beyond traditional economic and strategic indicators, the research provides a nuanced understanding of entrepreneurial success by examining the intersection between personal relational crises and professional responsibilities.

Analyzing the operational and psychological effects of romantic infidelity on startup founders is the study's main goal. More precisely, the research aims to achieve three goals: (1) to comprehend how romantic infidelity affects entrepreneurs' performance and ability to make decisions, (2) to pinpoint the coping strategies they use to deal with these difficulties, and (3) to offer suggestions for incorporating emotional and psychological support into training and development programs for entrepreneurs.

The following inquiries serve as a guide for the study

- What effects does romantic infidelity have on start-up entrepreneurs' performance and ability to make decisions?
- How do business owners deal with infidelity?
- How can mental wellness be incorporated into support systems for entrepreneurship training?

By providing empirical insights into a very personal but professionally significant aspect of entrepreneurial life, this article adds to the expanding conversation on behavioural entrepreneurship and work-life integration. Additionally, it advocates for a broader definition of entrepreneurial support that incorporates frameworks for mental wellness and training in emotional resilience. This study addresses the growing need for holistic entrepreneurship models that acknowledge the entrepreneur as a business leader and a human being navigating relational and emotional complexities, all while being situated within the dynamic and culturally complex South African entrepreneurial landscape.

2. Literature review

Recent research has broadened the field to include emotional and psychological aspects of entrepreneurship, which has historically been examined through the lenses of opportunity recognition, innovation, strategy, and funding (Shepherd, 2023). The impact of interpersonal relationship crises, especially infidelity, is still a significantly understudied factor, notwithstanding this change. A large portion of the literature currently in publication still portrays entrepreneurs as logical beings, ignoring the significant influence of individual experiences on entrepreneurial judgment and performance (Chatterji and Seamans, 2021).

2.1. The Overlooked Role of Personal Life in Entrepreneurship

Given that entrepreneurs frequently personify their businesses, there is a growing body of research on the relationship between personal life and entrepreneurial performance. In start-up situations, where founders function without formal structures or institutional safeguards, emotional upheavals in the founder's life have the potential to ruin entire business operations (Cardon, Foo, Shepherd, and Wiklund, 2023). Cognitive processes that are essential to business success, such as risk assessment, decision-making, and leadership effectiveness, can be impacted by psychological

distress. Shepherd (2023) contends that rather than being considered a side issue, entrepreneurs' well-being needs to be viewed as essential to their business results.

2.1.1. Infidelity and Its Psychological Consequences

Psychological effects like anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and chronic stress are consistently linked to infidelity, which is defined as a breach of relational trust and exclusivity (Whisman and Baucom, 2020). For entrepreneurs, who are already under a lot of strain and frequently feel alone in their leadership positions, these repercussions are especially harmful. Ahmad, Bakar, Zulkifli, and Rahim (2021) claim that infidelity can also result in behavioral changes like aggression or withdrawal, sleep disturbances, cognitive impairments, and emotional dysregulation. These symptoms not only jeopardize one's personal health but also directly disrupt work-related tasks like pitching to investors, managing employees, and negotiating contracts.

2.2. Work-Life Conflict and Entrepreneurial Stress

Entrepreneurs usually don't have the clear work boundaries and support networks that come with regular jobs. They are therefore especially vulnerable to the blending of the personal and professional spheres. According to Greenhaus and Allen's (2011) life-domain conflict theory, performance in one area can be severely hampered by emotional strain in another. For example, romantic infidelity can drain mental and emotional energy, which can hinder entrepreneurs' ability to function in high-stakes situations like client negotiations or funding rounds. This theory is supported by empirical research by Chatterji and Seamans (2021), which demonstrates how personal disruptions, from illness in the family to relationship problems, can lead to unpredictable decision-making, a decreased risk tolerance, and increased business instability.

2.3. Gendered Responses to Infidelity Among Entrepreneurs

Entrepreneurs' experiences and reactions to infidelity are complexly influenced by gender. Female entrepreneurs frequently experience increased emotional strain when relational problems arise, and they may be subject to dual pressures from society regarding professionalism and caregiving. On the other hand, because of dominant masculinity norms, male entrepreneurs may repress their emotional distress, which could postpone seeking help or developing healthy coping mechanisms. However, balancing emotional sensitivity with the demands of entrepreneurial leadership is a challenge for both sexes. According to Nabi, Liñán, Fayolle, Krueger, and Walmsley (2022), the psychological impact of relational stressors is frequently overlooked, despite the fact that it has a major impact on resilience and entrepreneurial decision-making.

2.4. Gaps in the Literature

Infidelity is noticeably missing from the majority of entrepreneurship literature, despite increased awareness of work-life conflict and psychological distress among entrepreneurs. The acute and ongoing stress brought on by romantic betrayal is frequently overlooked in favor of studies that concentrate on burnout, general emotional wellness, or family-work balance. Furthermore, the majority of the research that is currently available is based on Western and corporate contexts, providing little understanding of how relational disruptions appear in entrepreneurial settings outside of the West. In the African context, where gender dynamics, cultural norms, and economic pressures uniquely shape both personal relationships and entrepreneurial endeavors, this is especially problematic. Context-specific studies that look at how personal crises like infidelity affect start-up dynamics in emerging economies are therefore desperately needed.

3. Theoretical framework

In order to understand how romantic infidelity, as a type of personal crisis, affects entrepreneurial behavior and business performance, this study is based on two complementary theoretical perspectives: behavioral entrepreneurship theory and life-domain conflict theory.

3.1. Life-Domain Conflict Theory

According to Greenhaus and Allen (2011), the Life-Domain Conflict Theory describes how psychological and emotional stress in one area of life, like family or close relationships, can affect how well one functions in another area, like the workplace. Emotional exhaustion, cognitive overload, and the lack of psychological resources are the main mechanisms supporting this theory. To manage uncertainty, lead teams, and make crucial decisions, entrepreneurs, particularly those in the start-up stage, rely significantly on sustained focus, resilience, and self-efficacy. These psychological resources are undermined by infidelity, which is marked by emotional turmoil and betrayal. It causes stress reactions, emotional exhaustion, and a decline in self-esteem, all of which can impede productive leadership, decision-making, and

interpersonal interactions at work. In the highly competitive world of entrepreneurship, where individual identity is frequently entangled with. In the high-demand entrepreneurial environment, where personal identity is often intertwined with the business itself, this emotional turbulence can have magnified consequences.

3.2. Behavioural Entrepreneurship Theory

A significant alternative to conventional rationalist perspectives on entrepreneurs is provided by behavioral entrepreneurship theory. Entrepreneurs are influenced by their emotional states, cognitive biases, and interpersonal experiences in addition to strategic thinking and market analysis, claims Obschonka (2020). According to this theory, entrepreneurs' perceptions of risks, pursuit of opportunities, and interactions with teams, clients, and investors are influenced by their emotions and life experiences. A variety of behavioral reactions can result from infidelity, which serves as a "trigger event." Some entrepreneurs may become risk-averse, disengaged, or indecisive, while others may turn to unhealthy coping mechanisms like overworking or emotionally separating from their personal and professional obligations. Short-term productivity gains could result from these reactions, but they frequently come at the expense of long-term strategic focus, creativity, and workplace cohesiveness.

When combined, these two theories provide a comprehensive framework for analyzing the relationship between the breakdown of personal relationships and entrepreneurial outcomes. While behavioral entrepreneurship theory explains the variation in behavioral responses based on the entrepreneur's characteristics, emotional resilience, and contextual coping mechanisms, life-domain conflict theory explains the spillover effect, which is how emotional strain disrupts the functional resources needed for business engagement. This integrated framework is particularly pertinent in high-pressure entrepreneurial environments, such as those present in South Africa's startup ecosystem, where interpersonal leadership, emotional control, and decision-making agility are not only desirable but necessary for the long-term viability of a business.

4. Methodology

In order to investigate the lived experiences of South African start-up founders who came across romantic infidelity in the early phases of their business endeavors, this study used a qualitative, multiple case study design. Given the delicate and intensely personal nature of the subject, which calls for rich, nuanced, and sympathetic data collection and analysis, a qualitative approach was judged to be the most suitable (Creswell and Poth, 2021).

4.1. Sampling Strategy

Purposive and snowball sampling were used in the selection process to guarantee that only those who fulfilled the following requirements were included: they had to be the founders or co-founders of a start-up that operated in South Africa, they had to have been the victim of romantic infidelity during the business formation phase, either as the betrayed partner or the unfaithful one, and they had to be willing to talk candidly about the experience within the framework of their entrepreneurial journey. Twelve men and eight women, ages 27 to 45, made up the twenty participants that were enlisted. Their businesses were in a variety of industries, such as technology, agriculture, and small and medium-sized service-based businesses (SMEs). The participants were spread out geographically throughout the provinces of Mpumalanga, Limpopo, and Gauteng.

4.2. Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data between March and May of 2025. Depending on participant location and preference, interviews, which lasted 60 to 90 minutes, were conducted either in-person or virtually. The interview guide's main objectives were to examine the type of infidelity that was experienced, the emotional and behavioral reactions, the perceived effects on leadership and business performance, and the coping mechanisms used. With permission, all interviews were audio recorded, and the verbatim transcriptions were made. Data validity was improved by using follow-up questions and prompts to elucidate emerging themes and gain a deeper understanding.

4.3. Data Analysis

To find patterns and interpret the data, thematic analysis was employed, adhering to Braun and Clarke's (2019) six-phase model. To guarantee clarity and internal consistency, the procedure included inductive coding, theme development, repeated readings of the transcripts, and refinement. Data management and organization were facilitated by NVivo software. The three main domains of emergent themes were the emotional impact of infidelity, behavioral adaptations and coping strategies, and the effects on leadership effectiveness and business operations.

4.4. Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

Strategies addressing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were used to guarantee the study's rigor and reliability. Preliminary results were shared with chosen participants as part of member checks to confirm interpretations. An audit trail recorded every step of the research process, and thorough, contextual explanations were offered to bolster the findings' transferability. The University Research Ethics Committee gave its approval. Informed consent was given by participants, and pseudonyms were used to protect their anonymity. Participants were also given information about professional counseling services to support their well-being, given the delicate nature of talking about infidelity.

This approach made it possible to gain a thorough, contextual understanding of how romantic infidelity affects business outcomes and entrepreneurial behavior within the complex social and economic context of South Africa's startup ecosystem.

5. Result

Three major themes emerged from the data

5.1. Emotional Disruption and Cognitive Overload

Participants complained of anxiety, sleep issues, and emotional numbness, which led to delayed business decisions and poor focus. "I'd stare at my laptop for hours, unable to decide anything," said one startup entrepreneur. I kept going over what had happened in my head.

5.2. Decline in Leadership and Team Engagement

The founders postponed crucial meetings, neglected client relationships, and distanced themselves from team interactions. Many said they were more irritable with staff members, less empathetic, or emotionally detached.

5.3. Divergent Coping Mechanisms

Some business owners increased their hours and task engagement by using their jobs as a diversion. This hyperfocus, though, was frequently fleeting and unsustainable. Others took long pauses, which resulted in lost opportunities and monetary losses.

Although every participant admitted that infidelity had some impact on their company, the extent of that impact differed based on the entrepreneur's emotional fortitude and the availability of support systems.

6. Discussion

This study sheds new light on the significant but frequently overlooked effects of romantic infidelity on entrepreneurial functioning, especially in the fast-paced, high-pressure setting of South African start-up businesses. The results demonstrate that infidelity seriously impairs the behavioral, emotional, and cognitive abilities necessary for successful entrepreneurship. Participants mentioned problems that directly threatened business viability, such as emotional distress, diminished motivation, poor leadership, and strained stakeholder relationships. These results offer strong evidence in favor of the behavioral entrepreneurship theory and the life-domain conflict theory, highlighting the necessity of acknowledging entrepreneurs as emotionally invested people in addition to economic actors.

6.1. Infidelity as a Life-Domain Conflict

The Life-Domain Conflict Theory developed by Greenhaus and Allen (2011) describes how emotional stress in personal areas, like romantic betrayal, affects one's ability to regulate oneself, focus, and interact with others in the workplace. This spillover effect was repeatedly demonstrated in the participant narratives, wherein infidelity led to weariness, distraction, indecision, and a decline in performance. These results are consistent with those of Park, Kim, and Lee (2021), who observe that entrepreneurs who experience unresolved emotional conflict may experience diminished creativity, tense decision-making, and weakened team dynamics. These disruptions can become existential threats in the context of South African start-ups, where founders frequently lack organizational buffers.

6.2. Behavioural Entrepreneurship and Emotional States

According to the behavioral entrepreneurship perspective (Obschonka, 2020; Cardon et al., 2023), entrepreneurial cognition and behavior are influenced by emotional and psychological states. According to this study, entrepreneurs dealt with infidelity in different ways. Some chose to resign from their positions of leadership, while others overcompensated by working excessively. Both reactions are examples of maladaptive tactics that frequently led to additional instability. Although initially productive, overworking resulted in burnout or tunnel vision, and withdrawal hampered team cohesion and communication. Shepherd's (2023) finding that unresolved emotional crises frequently hinder entrepreneurial adaptability and long-term sustainability is reflected in these patterns.

6.3. The Role of Support Mechanisms

One important moderating factor in how entrepreneurs dealt with the emotional fallout from infidelity was the existence or lack of support networks. Individuals who sought professional counseling or informal support (from friends, mentors, or family) reported less operational disruption and a faster recovery. This bolsters the claim made by Nabi, Liñán, Fayolle, Krueger, and Walmsley (2022) that entrepreneurial ecosystems need to focus on psychological support in addition to capital and skill development. Emotional resilience is an even more important entrepreneurial resource in environments characterized by socioeconomic instability, like South Africa.

6.4. Gendered Impacts and Coping Differences

Despite the study's lack of a gender focus, distinct gendered patterns in coping and emotional expression became apparent. Male entrepreneurs frequently suffered as a result of their propensity to internalize distress and maintain emotional stoicism. Female entrepreneurs were more likely to seek support and to publicly acknowledge emotional breakdowns. The significance of creating gender-sensitive support interventions that recognize these various coping norms without perpetuating stereotypes is underscored by these findings, which are consistent with Henry, Foss, and Ahl's (2021) research on gendered emotional labor in entrepreneurship.

6.5. Cultural Context and Normative Expectations

Infidelity was not just a personal issue in South Africa, where reputation and social perceptions are highly valued. According to a number of participants, their credibility and confidence in local networks were impacted by being perceived as the victim or the perpetrator of infidelity. This is consistent with research on the function of social capital in African entrepreneurial ecosystems conducted by Fatoki (2020). How entrepreneurs perceived and handled their crises was influenced by gossip, community narratives, and cultural expectations surrounding faithfulness. This suggests that entrepreneurship in these situations is intricately linked to larger sociocultural norms.

6.6. Implications for Policy and Practice

The results point to useful interventions for the growth of entrepreneurship in South Africa. Government-sponsored start-up programs, incubators, and accelerators ought to think about including elements related to emotional wellness in their programs. Particularly for early-stage founders, relationship counseling, stress management, and mental health resources ought to be provided as standard. Additionally, courses on emotional intelligence, coping mechanisms, and the development of psychological capital ought to be incorporated into academic and professional entrepreneurship programs. Since they bear the entire operational and emotional burden of business challenges, solo entrepreneurs and those without co-founders require these kinds of interventions more than others.

Thus, by establishing a connection between entrepreneurial performance and sustainability and romantic infidelity, a generally private and stigmatized issue, this study adds a fresh and much-needed viewpoint to the literature on entrepreneurship. It makes room for more psychologically informed, gender-aware, and culturally nuanced research that acknowledges the entrepreneur as a complete individual juggling life and business.

7. Conclusion

This study looked into how romantic infidelity affected the professional performance of South African start-up business owners. It found that these kinds of personal crises are not limited to the private realm but can seriously hinder the success of a company. It has been demonstrated that infidelity, which is frequently viewed as a private or taboo subject, directly contributes to emotional distress, cognitive overload, behavioral instability, and decreased leadership efficacy, all of which negatively impact the strategic and operational functioning of start-up businesses. These results support Greenhaus and Allen's (2011) Life-Domain Conflict Theory, which states that emotional stress in one area of life can affect another and deplete psychological resources necessary for productive work.

By emphasizing how entrepreneurs' emotional states affect business outcomes in intricate and occasionally contradictory ways, the study also adds to the expanding body of work in behavioral entrepreneurship. Some participants showed signs of burnout or withdrawal, while others overcompensated by working excessively. This pattern can seem fruitful in the short term, but it frequently results in personal exhaustion or strategic drift. These behavioral reactions show how emotional disturbances influence resilience and entrepreneurial decision-making in complex and dynamic ways.

Crucially, the study discovered that the existence of emotional support networks, whether formal (counselling services) or informal (family, peers), lessened the detrimental effects of adultery. The lack of these resources, on the other hand, increased the emotional toll and had an impact on both individual well-being and the viability of the company. This emphasizes how crucial it is to create entrepreneur support programs that take into account not just technical and financial factors but also relational stability and emotional well-being.

The results highlight the urgent need for policymakers, incubators, and entrepreneurship educators to reconsider the design of start-up support ecosystems. Programs for entrepreneurship development should incorporate relationship management advice, training in emotional resilience, and easily accessible mental health services. These steps are especially important in South Africa, where cultural norms and socioeconomic pressures exacerbate the emotional load borne by entrepreneurs.

Quantitative methods may be used in future studies to investigate relationships between important business performance metrics and psychological well-being. While comparative studies across regions or cultures could examine how various sociocultural environments mediate these experiences, longitudinal studies might shed light on how the effects of relational crises develop over time. In the end, this study urges a paradigm change in the theory and practice of entrepreneurship by acknowledging the entrepreneur as a complete individual whose emotional life is intricately linked to the course of their business.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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