

Behind Closed Doors: The Emergence of Wife Swapping and Its Effects on Zimbabwean Marriages

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Abstract—This study examines the emergence and implications of wife swapping as a form of consensual non-monogamy in selected urban communities in Zimbabwe. Traditionally, marriage in Zimbabwe has emphasized monogamy, fidelity, and family cohesion, grounded in cultural and religious values. However, globalization, urbanization, and shifting notions of intimacy are influencing changing marital expectations. Guided by interpretivism and informed by Social Exchange Theory, the Transformation of Intimacy Theory, and Modernization Theory, the research adopted a qualitative phenomenological design to explore participants' lived experiences. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with married individuals, counselors, and religious and community leaders. Findings reveal that wife swapping occurs discreetly among socially connected urban couples and is mainly motivated by curiosity, intimacy enhancement, and negotiated relational satisfaction. Although some participants reported improved communication and trust, the practice remains highly stigmatized within dominant cultural and religious frameworks. The study concludes that while not widespread, wife swapping signals subtle transformations in urban marital autonomy and relationship negotiation in contemporary Zimbabwe.

Keywords— Wife swapping, Consensual non-monogamy, Marital stability, Sexual liberalisation. Cultural norms and values, Intimacy and trust dynamics.

I. INTRODUCTION

Marriage in Zimbabwe has long been regarded as a sacred institution, deeply rooted in cultural traditions, religious teachings, and communal values. For generations, it has symbolized commitment, fidelity, and the merging of families rather than merely individuals. However, as globalization, digital connectivity, and evolving social norms reshape intimate relationships across the world, new forms of marital expression are quietly emerging even in societies traditionally viewed as conservative.

One such phenomenon is wife swapping, also referred to as partner swapping, a consensual practice in which married couples exchange partners for sexual experiences. Though often associated with Western societies, anecdotal reports and growing online discussions suggest that the practice may be gaining visibility in certain urban circles in Zimbabwe. While still largely conducted in secrecy, its presence raises important questions about shifting moral boundaries, marital satisfaction, gender dynamics, and the stability of the family unit.

This study seeks to explore the emergence of wife swapping in Zimbabwe and examine its perceived and actual effects on marriages. By investigating the motivations behind

participation, societal reactions, and the implications for trust, intimacy, and commitment, the research aims to provide a balanced and evidence-based understanding of a sensitive yet increasingly discussed issue.

Background to the Study

Marriage in Zimbabwe has historically been embedded within a broader kinship and communal framework that extends beyond the union of two individuals. Anthropological and sociological studies of African family systems emphasize that marriage traditionally serves social, economic, and lineage functions, reinforcing communal solidarity and continuity (Goody, 1973; Mbiti, 1969). In Zimbabwe, practices such as *lobola* (bride price), extended family negotiations, and religious rites—both Christian and indigenous—have institutionalized expectations of fidelity, stability, and clearly defined gender roles. Scholars of African marriage systems argue that such structures reinforce social control over sexuality and reproduction, thereby safeguarding family honor and lineage legitimacy (Bourdillon, 1997; Gelfand, 1981).

However, family scholars have long noted that marriage is not a static institution; it adapts in response to broader socio-economic and cultural transformations. Modernization and urbanization theories suggest that as societies industrialize and urbanize, intimate relationships become increasingly privatized and individualized (Parsons, 1955; Goode, 1963). In Zimbabwe, rapid urban growth, labor migration, and economic restructuring have altered traditional household patterns and reduced the direct oversight of extended kin. These structural shifts have coincided with changing gender dynamics, including increased female participation in education and formal employment, which challenge historically rigid marital roles (Cherlin, 2004).

Globalization and digital connectivity further complicate these dynamics. Anthony Giddens' (1992) concept of the "transformation of intimacy" argues that modern relationships are increasingly grounded in negotiation, emotional fulfillment, and personal autonomy rather than obligation alone. Similarly, Bauman (2003) describes contemporary relationships as "liquid," characterized by flexibility and evolving boundaries. The proliferation of online platforms and transnational media content has exposed couples in diverse cultural settings to alternative relational models, including consensual non-monogamy and partner swapping. Research in Western contexts indicates that consensual non-monogamous

relationships, including swinging, are often framed by participants as strategies for enhancing intimacy, trust, or sexual satisfaction (Conley et al., 2013; Sheff, 2014). While these studies are largely situated outside Africa, they provide theoretical insight into how such practices may emerge within modernizing societies.

Within the Zimbabwean context, most existing scholarship on marriage and sexuality has concentrated on issues such as extramarital affairs, HIV/AIDS, gender-based violence, and marital conflict (Gregson et al., 2002; Chitando & Chirongoma, 2008). These studies highlight tensions between traditional moral frameworks and evolving sexual behaviors, yet they rarely address consensual non-monogamous arrangements. Consequently, discussions of wife swapping remain largely anecdotal, stigmatized, or confined to informal discourse rather than systematic academic investigation.

The absence of empirical research on consensual partner swapping in Zimbabwe reveals a significant gap in family and sexuality studies. Without scholarly inquiry, it is difficult to determine whether reported cases represent isolated deviations, emerging subcultures, or broader shifts in marital expectations influenced by urbanization and globalization. Drawing on sociological theories of family change, intimacy, and social exchange (Homans, 1958; Blau, 1964), this study positions wife swapping as a phenomenon that warrants critical, evidence-based examination.

By situating the topic within established scholarly debates on modernization, intimacy, and African marriage systems, the study seeks to move beyond moral speculation and contribute to a nuanced understanding of how contemporary Zimbabwean couples navigate the intersection of tradition, autonomy, and evolving sexual norms

Statement of the problem

Marriage in Zimbabwe has traditionally been constructed as a monogamous, culturally regulated, and socially monitored institution grounded in communal values and religious principles. However, emerging anecdotal reports and informal discourse suggest the presence of consensual partner swapping—commonly referred to as wife swapping—within certain urban and private social circles. While global scholarship has examined consensual non-monogamy in Western contexts (Conley et al., 2013; Sheff, 2014), there is a conspicuous absence of empirical research investigating whether similar practices exist in Zimbabwe, how they are structured, and what implications they may have for marital relationships and family stability.

Existing studies in Zimbabwe largely focus on infidelity, HIV/AIDS, gender-based violence, and marital conflict, often framing non-monogamous behavior as clandestine and morally deviant rather than consensual and negotiated. Consequently, there is limited scholarly understanding of consensual partner swapping as a distinct relational arrangement. The lack of systematic research creates a knowledge gap regarding its prevalence, motivations, psychosocial dynamics, and potential effects on trust, intimacy, gender relations, and marital stability.

Without empirical inquiry, public discourse remains speculative, moralistic, and uninformed by evidence. Therefore, the central problem this study seeks to address is the absence of context-specific, scholarly research on the emergence and implications of wife swapping within Zimbabwean marriages.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to critically examine the emergence of wife swapping in Zimbabwe and explore its social, psychological, and relational implications for marriage. Specifically, the study aims to generate empirical data that will contribute to academic discourse on changing marital norms, intimacy, and family structures within the Zimbabwean socio-cultural context.

The study seeks to move beyond moral judgment by situating the phenomenon within broader theories of family transformation, modernization, and negotiated intimacy, thereby providing an evidence-based understanding of how couples interpret and manage such arrangements.

Research Objectives

The study will be guided by the following objectives:

1. To investigate the extent to which wife swapping exists within selected communities in Zimbabwe.
2. To explore the motivations and factors influencing couples to engage in partner swapping.
3. To examine how wife swapping affects marital dynamics, including trust, communication, intimacy, and power relations.
4. To assess the perceived social, cultural, and religious implications of the practice.
5. To analyze whether wife swapping represents isolated behavior or signals broader shifts in marital norms.

Research Questions

The study will seek to answer the following questions:

1. Does wife swapping occur among married couples in Zimbabwe, and in what contexts?
2. What factors motivate couples to participate in partner swapping?
3. How do participants perceive the impact of wife swapping on marital satisfaction and stability?
4. How does the practice interact with prevailing cultural, religious, and social expectations about marriage?
5. What broader implications does wife swapping have for the understanding of marriage and family in contemporary Zimbabwe?

Significance of the Study

This study is significant in several ways:

Academic Contribution:

It addresses a notable gap in Zimbabwean family and sexuality studies by providing empirical data on consensual non-monogamy within a local context. The findings will contribute to sociological and anthropological scholarship on marriage transformation in African societies.

Policy and Social Relevance:

Understanding emerging marital practices may inform policymakers, counselors, religious leaders, and social workers in designing interventions or guidance that reflect contemporary relational realities rather than assumptions.

Theoretical Advancement:

By applying theories of modernization, social exchange, and the transformation of intimacy within a Zimbabwean setting, the study expands the applicability of these frameworks beyond Western contexts.

Social Dialogue

The research may foster informed and balanced public discourse by replacing speculation and stigma with evidence-based analysis, thereby promoting critical engagement with evolving marital norms.

Overall, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how globalization, urbanization, and shifting gender relations may be reshaping intimate partnerships in Zimbabwe.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored in an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that draws primarily from Social Exchange Theory, The Transformation of Intimacy Theory, and elements of Modernization Theory. These frameworks provide complementary lenses for understanding the emergence of wife swapping within the Zimbabwean marital context.

Social Exchange Theory

Social Exchange Theory, advanced by scholars such as Homans (1958) and Blau (1964), posits that social relationships are formed and maintained based on individuals' evaluations of costs, benefits, and rewards. In intimate relationships, partners continuously assess satisfaction, alternatives, and investments within the marriage. Applied to this study, Social Exchange Theory helps explain why some couples might consensually engage in partner swapping. Participation may be perceived as a strategy to enhance sexual satisfaction, a means of revitalizing intimacy, a negotiated arrangement to prevent clandestine infidelity and a way to maintain the marriage while fulfilling unmet needs. Rather than interpreting wife swapping purely as deviance, this theory frames it as a rational, negotiated decision within the relational cost-benefit structure of marriage. It allows the study to explore how couples justify participation and how they perceive its impact on marital stability.

Justification:

This theory is appropriate because it focuses on decision-making processes within relationships and provides a structured way to analyze motivations, perceived rewards, emotional risks, and relational outcomes.

The Transformation of Intimacy Theory

Anthony Giddens' (1992) theory of the "transformation of intimacy" argues that modern relationships are increasingly based on emotional communication, negotiation, and personal fulfillment rather than tradition alone. He introduces the concept of the "pure relationship," sustained only as long as both partners derive satisfaction from it.

Within rapidly urbanizing and globalizing societies, marriage shifts from a duty-bound institution to a negotiated partnership centered on mutual fulfillment. In this context, boundaries around fidelity, sexuality, and exclusivity may be redefined through dialogue and consent.

In relation to this study, the theory helps examine whether wife swapping represents a negotiated redefinition of marital boundaries, how intimacy is constructed and maintained in such arrangements and the role of autonomy and mutual consent in sustaining unconventional practices

Justification:

Zimbabwean marriages are increasingly influenced by global cultural flows, digital media, and urban lifestyles. Giddens' framework provides a conceptual lens for understanding how traditional marital norms may be renegotiated in contemporary settings.

Modernization Theory

Modernization theorists such as Goode (1963) argue that as societies urbanize and industrialize, family structures shift from extended, community-regulated systems to more nuclear and privatized arrangements. This transformation often results in greater individual autonomy and reduced communal control over intimate behavior.

In Zimbabwe, urban migration, economic restructuring, and technological expansion have reshaped family life. Reduced extended-family oversight and increased privacy may create social conditions where alternative marital arrangements can develop discreetly.

Justification:

Modernization Theory contextualizes wife swapping within broader socio-structural changes rather than treating it as an isolated moral anomaly. It situates the phenomenon within macro-level transformations affecting marriage and family systems.

Integrated Theoretical Model

Together, these theories provide a multi-level analytical framework in that the modernization theory explains the structural conditions enabling new relational forms whilst the transformation of intimacy theory explains changing expectations within marriage with the social exchange theory explaining individual and couple-level decision-making processes.

By integrating structural, relational, and individual perspectives, the framework allows for a comprehensive analysis of wife swapping as a potentially negotiated marital practice emerging within a transforming socio-cultural environment.

Relevance to the Study

This theoretical framework is justified because firstly, it moves the discussion beyond moral judgment to sociological analysis. Secondly, it allows exploration of both macro-level (societal change) and micro-level (marital interaction) factors. Thirdly, it provides testable conceptual categories such as satisfaction, negotiation, autonomy, costs, and benefits. Lastly,

it supports empirical investigation into how couples interpret and rationalize their participation.

In sum, the selected theoretical framework positions wife swapping not merely as deviance, but as a phenomenon that can be critically examined within broader transformations of intimacy, marriage, and social structure in contemporary Zimbabwe.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review is organized in line with the study's research objectives and questions. It draws from global scholarship on marriage, consensual non-monogamy (CNM), family transformation, and African marital systems to situate the phenomenon of wife swapping within broader academic discourse. Given the limited empirical work on consensual partner swapping in Zimbabwe, the review integrates international scholarship with African family studies to establish conceptual and analytical foundations.

The Institution of Marriage in African and Zimbabwean Contexts

Marriage in African societies has historically functioned as a socio-cultural, economic, and reproductive institution embedded within kinship systems (Goody, 1973; Mbiti, 1969). In Zimbabwe, customary practices such as *lobola* negotiations and extended family involvement reinforce collective responsibility and marital permanence (Bourdillon, 1997; Gelfand, 1981). Fidelity and gender complementarity are commonly emphasized within both customary and Christian marital frameworks.

Scholars argue that African marriages traditionally prioritize lineage continuity, social cohesion, and regulated sexuality (Fortes, 1978). Even in contemporary Zimbabwe, religious institutions play a central role in shaping marital expectations, promoting monogamy and moral discipline (Chitando & Chirongoma, 2008). These frameworks provide a normative backdrop against which any form of consensual non-monogamy may be perceived as deviant.

However, studies also indicate that marital practices in Africa have never been entirely static. Polygyny, for example, historically institutionalized certain forms of non-exclusive sexuality within socially sanctioned boundaries (Goody, 1973). This historical complexity suggests that marital exclusivity has taken multiple forms across time and context.

Modernization, Urbanization, and Changing Marital Norms

Modernization theorists argue that industrialization and urbanization fundamentally transform family systems, shifting them from extended kin-regulated structures to privatized nuclear units (Goode, 1963; Parsons, 1955). In Zimbabwe, urban migration and economic restructuring have altered household dynamics and weakened traditional kinship surveillance.

Anthony Giddens' (1992) theory of the "transformation of intimacy" posits that late modern relationships are increasingly based on negotiation, emotional satisfaction, and personal autonomy rather than obligation alone. Similarly,

Bauman (2003) describes contemporary intimacy as "liquid," characterized by flexible and evolving relational boundaries.

Empirical studies in sub-Saharan Africa indicate that economic instability, migration, and changing gender roles have redefined expectations within marriage (Cherlin, 2004). Increased female education and employment participation have altered traditional power hierarchies, influencing how couples negotiate intimacy and authority. These structural changes create conditions under which alternative relational arrangements may emerge.

Consensual Non-Monogamy (CNM) and Partner Swapping

The third research objective concerns the motivations and relational dynamics associated with wife swapping. Globally, consensual non-monogamy (CNM) has been the subject of increasing scholarly attention. CNM encompasses swinging, open marriages, and polyamory—arrangements characterized by informed consent among partners (Conley et al., 2013).

Research suggests that individuals in CNM relationships report levels of relationship satisfaction, trust, and psychological well-being comparable to those in monogamous unions (Conley et al., 2017). Sheff (2014), in her ethnographic study of polyamorous families, argues that negotiated non-monogamy can involve high levels of communication and rule-setting. Studies on swinging communities indicate that participants often frame partner swapping as a shared recreational activity intended to enhance intimacy rather than undermine it (Jenks, 1998; Bergstrand & Williams, 2000). Motivations identified in existing literature include the desire for sexual variety, relationship enhancement, curiosity and novelty, prevention of secret infidelity and strengthening communication.

However, scholars also document potential risks, including jealousy, emotional attachment complications, and social stigma (Rubin, 2011). These mixed findings underscore the need for contextual research to determine whether similar dynamics apply within Zimbabwean marriages.

Gender, power, and negotiation in non-monogamous arrangements

Gender dynamics are central to understanding partner swapping. Feminist scholars argue that even within consensual arrangements, gendered power imbalances may shape participation and negotiation (Jackson & Scott, 2004). Some studies find that men are more likely to initiate swinging arrangements, while women's participation may be influenced by relational pressures (Bergstrand & Williams, 2000).

In African contexts, patriarchal norms often position men as sexual decision-makers (Ratele, 2013). However, shifting gender roles and increasing female autonomy complicate these dynamics. Research on marital negotiation in sub-Saharan Africa suggests that women's economic empowerment can increase bargaining power within marriage (Cherlin, 2004).

This body of literature is relevant to the study's objective of examining how wife swapping affects trust, communication, and power relations. It highlights the importance of assessing whether such practices reinforce or challenge existing gender hierarchies.

Social Perceptions, Morality, and Stigma

The fourth research objective concerns societal perceptions and cultural implications. Studies consistently show that consensual non-monogamy faces significant stigma, often being conflated with promiscuity or moral decline (Conley et al., 2013). In strongly religious societies, deviations from monogamy may attract heightened condemnation.

Zimbabwe's religious landscape, heavily influenced by Christianity, promotes monogamous fidelity as a moral imperative (Chitando & Chirongoma, 2008). Sociological research suggests that stigma may push unconventional practices underground, limiting open discourse and scholarly inquiry.

Erving Goffman's (1963) work on stigma provides insight into how individuals managing socially discredited identities may conceal participation to avoid social sanction. This framework is particularly relevant in contexts where communal reputation and family honor remain significant.

Gaps in Existing Literature

While international scholarship provides insight into consensual non-monogamy, there is a paucity of empirical research examining such arrangements within Zimbabwe or comparable Southern African contexts. Most Zimbabwean marital studies focus on infidelity, HIV transmission, domestic violence, and gender conflict (Gregson et al., 2002). These studies generally frame non-monogamy as clandestine rather than consensual and negotiated.

The absence of localized empirical data limits understanding of the prevalence of wife swapping, participant motivations within Zimbabwe's socio-cultural context, its impact on marital stability and family cohesion and community perceptions and religious responses. This gap justifies the need for systematic research aligned with the study's objectives and questions.

The reviewed literature demonstrates that marriage is a dynamic institution shaped by cultural tradition, modernization, gender relations, and globalization. International research on consensual non-monogamy challenges assumptions that all non-exclusive arrangements are inherently destabilizing, yet African scholarship has not sufficiently examined consensual partner swapping as a negotiated marital practice.

By integrating theories of modernization, transformation of intimacy, social exchange, and stigma, this study builds upon existing scholarship while addressing a significant contextual gap. The literature thus underscores the importance of empirical investigation into whether wife swapping in Zimbabwe represents isolated experimentation or a broader transformation in marital norms.

IV. METHODOLOGY

Philosophical Framework

This study is grounded in the interpretivist paradigm, informed by elements of constructivism. Interpretivism assumes that social reality is not objective and fixed but socially constructed through shared meanings, experiences,

and interactions (Schwandt, 2000). From this perspective, marriage, fidelity, and intimacy are not merely institutional facts but socially negotiated concepts shaped by culture, religion, gender norms, and individual agency.

The phenomenon of wife swapping, particularly within the Zimbabwean context, involves deeply personal experiences, subjective motivations, moral interpretations, and negotiated relational boundaries. An interpretivist framework is therefore appropriate because it prioritizes participants' lived experiences and their own meanings attached to marital practices. Rather than measuring behavior solely in quantitative terms, this study seeks to understand how individuals interpret participation, justify decisions, negotiate consent, and perceive relational outcomes.

Constructivism further strengthens this approach by emphasizing that knowledge is co-created between the researcher and participants (Creswell, 2014). Given the sensitive nature of the topic, meanings are likely to emerge through dialogue rather than detached observation. This philosophical stance allows the research to move beyond moral binaries and instead explore the complexity of intimacy, autonomy, and cultural negotiation within contemporary Zimbabwean marriages.

The interpretivist philosophical stance is justified because the study seeks to explore subjective motivations, personal perceptions, and the intricate relational dynamics that shape marital decision-making. Wife swapping, as a consensual and negotiated practice, cannot be adequately understood through objective measurement alone; it involves deeply personal meanings, emotional experiences, and culturally mediated interpretations of intimacy and fidelity. Participants' understandings of trust, jealousy, autonomy, and commitment are shaped by their social environment, religious influences, and marital histories. An interpretivist approach therefore allows the researcher to capture these layered meanings from the participants' own perspectives.

Furthermore, the phenomenon under investigation is socially sensitive and highly context-dependent. In Zimbabwe, where marriage is strongly embedded in cultural and religious norms, discussions of non-monogamous practices may be stigmatized or concealed. Understanding such a phenomenon requires careful engagement with participants' lived realities and the socio-cultural frameworks within which they operate. Rather than aiming for statistical generalization, the study prioritizes depth of insight, rich description, and contextual interpretation. This orientation enables a nuanced understanding of how individuals negotiate and experience unconventional marital arrangements within a transforming socio-cultural landscape.

Research Approach

The study adopts a qualitative research approach. Qualitative methods are appropriate when exploring under-researched, sensitive, or socially complex phenomena (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Given the limited empirical data on consensual partner swapping in Zimbabwe, qualitative inquiry allows for exploratory depth and contextual richness.

This approach enables the researcher to capture narratives about trust, jealousy, negotiation, communication, and social stigma—dimensions that cannot be adequately understood through structured numerical measures alone.

Research Design

A phenomenological research design will be employed. Phenomenology seeks to understand how individuals experience and make sense of a particular phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). In this case, the focus is on how married individuals interpret and experience wife swapping within their relational and socio-cultural contexts.

Phenomenology is particularly suitable for this study because it seeks to gain an in-depth understanding of participants lived experiences within the context of their marriages. The focus is not merely on whether wife swapping occurs, but on how individuals experience and interpret their involvement in such arrangements. This approach allows the researcher to explore the personal meanings participants attach to their decisions, the processes of negotiation and consent within their relationships, and the emotional and psychological dimensions surrounding the practice.

In addition, phenomenology provides a framework for examining how participants perceive the impact of wife swapping on marital satisfaction, trust, communication, and overall stability. Rather than imposing external assumptions about outcomes, the design centers on participants' own reflections and interpretations. By prioritizing subjective experience and meaning-making, phenomenology enables a nuanced exploration of how unconventional marital practices are understood and managed within specific relational and socio-cultural contexts.

This design allows the researcher to identify common themes across participants' experiences while respecting individual uniqueness.

Study Population

The study targeted married individuals residing in selected urban areas of Zimbabwe. Urban settings are selected due to higher levels of privacy, internet access, and exposure to global relationship discourses, which modernization literature associates with emerging relational practices.

The study population consisted of married individuals who self-identified as having participated in partner swapping, providing firsthand insights into the phenomenon. In addition, marriage counselors and therapists were included to offer professional perspectives and contextual understanding of relational dynamics. Religious and community leaders were also engaged to explore broader societal perceptions, norms, and moral frameworks surrounding the practice. Together, these groups provided a comprehensive view of wife swapping from personal, professional, and community perspectives within the Zimbabwean context.

Sampling Strategy

The study used purposive sampling, specifically criterion-based sampling, to identify participants who meet predefined inclusion criteria (Patton, 2002). Because wife swapping is a

sensitive and potentially stigmatized practice, snowball sampling may also be used to access hidden networks.

The study included participants who were legally or customarily married and aged 18 years and above, ensuring that all respondents had the social and legal capacity to provide informed perspectives on marital experiences. Only individuals who voluntarily consented to participate were included, respecting ethical considerations and personal autonomy. A sample size of approximately 25 participants was used for data collection continuing until saturation was reached.

Justification:

Purposive and snowball sampling are appropriate for hard-to-reach populations and exploratory qualitative studies.

Data Collection Methods

Data was collected through:

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect data, as this method allowed flexibility while maintaining focus on the study's research objectives. An interview guide was used to explore participants' motivations for participation, the negotiation processes within their marriages, the emotional and relational outcomes of involvement, and their perceptions of societal reactions. This format enabled participants to articulate their experiences in their own words, providing rich, detailed, and contextually grounded insights into the phenomenon of wife swapping.

Key Informant Interviews

Interviews with counselors, religious leaders, or social workers provided contextual perspectives on perceived marital trends and social implications.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The process began with familiarization with the collected data, followed by generating initial codes to capture relevant features of participants' responses. These codes were then examined to identify patterns and potential themes, which were subsequently reviewed, refined, and clearly defined. Finally, the themes were named and organized to produce a coherent report of the findings. Thematic analysis was considered appropriate for this study because it allowed for the systematic identification of recurring patterns related to participants' motivations, negotiation processes, power dynamics, relational satisfaction, and experiences of social stigma.

Trustworthiness of the Study

To ensure rigor and reliability, the study applied Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for trustworthiness. Credibility was enhanced through member checking, allowing participants to review and confirm the accuracy of their responses, as well as through prolonged engagement with the data. Transferability was supported by providing thick descriptions of the research context, enabling readers to assess the applicability of findings to other settings. Dependability was maintained through clear documentation of all research procedures, ensuring consistency and transparency in data collection and analysis. Confirmability was achieved by keeping a reflexive journal to

minimize researcher bias and to provide an audit trail demonstrating how interpretations were derived from the data.

Ethical Considerations

Given the sensitive nature of the topic, strict ethical standards were observed throughout the study. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring that they were aware of the study's purpose and their rights. Confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed, with pseudonyms used in all reporting to protect participants' identities. The subjects were made aware of their right to quit the study at any time without consequence. Ethical clearance was sought from a recognized institutional review board before the commencement of the research. Special care was taken to ensure that participation did not expose individuals to social harm, marital conflict, or reputational risk, and all interactions were conducted with respect for participants' privacy and dignity.

Limitations of the Methodology

The study faced several limitations inherent to exploratory qualitative research. The sensitive nature of the topic may have limited participants' openness, potentially affecting the depth and completeness of the data collected. Findings from the sample may not be generalizable to the broader population, given the small and purposively selected group of participants. Additionally, the use of snowball sampling could have introduced network bias, as participants may have referred individuals with similar experiences or perspectives. Despite these limitations, the methodology was appropriate for gaining in-depth insights into the lived experiences and perceptions of individuals involved in wife swapping, and the findings provide meaningful contributions to understanding this under-researched phenomenon in Zimbabwe.

Anchored in interpretivism and constructivism, this qualitative phenomenological study is designed to generate in-depth, contextually grounded understanding of wife swapping within Zimbabwean marriages. By prioritizing lived experience, ethical sensitivity, and rigorous thematic analysis, the methodology aligns closely with the study's research objectives and theoretical framework.

V. RESEARCH FINDINGS

The extent to which wife swapping exists within selected communities in Zimbabwe

Participants reported that wife swapping is not a widespread practice, but it does exist discreetly among specific urban social circles, particularly among couples who are socially and economically connected. Among married individuals who self-identified as having participated, one participant stated, "It is not something people openly talk about here, but among close friends, I know of couples who have tried it. It is kept private because the community would judge harshly." Another participant added, "In my circle, only a few couples have engaged in swapping, mostly those who trust each other and have strong marriages. It's rare, but it is happening." These responses indicate that participation is selective, often limited to couples with established trust and

strong communication, and is largely conducted in private to avoid social scrutiny.

Marriage counselors and therapists also confirmed that the phenomenon exists, though they emphasized its discreet and hidden nature. One counselor explained, "Although some couples say they tried partner switching in therapy sessions, they did so with caution. It is mostly urban couples who feel secure in their relationship and have the means to maintain privacy." Another noted, "While not common, it is real. The couples who do it often come from social networks where trust and consent are explicitly negotiated, so it doesn't lead to the marital breakdown we usually associate with infidelity." These professional perspectives underscore that wife swapping, though rare, is recognized in clinical and counseling settings and tends to occur in a controlled, negotiated context.

Religious and community leaders, while not participants in the practice, were aware of its presence and expressed that it exists discreetly among certain urban populations. One religious leader observed, "Rumors exist, notably in the city, even though it is not widely discussed in the community. Most people would condemn it if they knew, which is why it stays hidden." A community leader added, "From what I have seen, only a small number of couples attempt it. They are careful and private, and it does not seem to be a widespread trend. The larger community would never accept it openly." These responses indicate that while wife swapping is recognized at a societal level, it remains marginal, covert, and subject to moral scrutiny.

Overall, the findings suggest that wife swapping in Zimbabwe is a discreet practice confined primarily to urban, socially connected, and economically stable couples. Participation appears selective and occurs in private, largely to avoid community judgment and to protect marital and social reputations. The perspectives of participants, professionals, and community figures together provide a nuanced understanding of the limited but existing prevalence of the practice.

The motivations and factors influencing couples to engage in partner swapping

Participants described a variety of motivations for engaging in wife swapping, which were primarily relational, psychological, and influenced by exposure to global ideas. Among married individuals who self-identified as participants, one stated, "We wanted to try something different together; it brought excitement without hurting our relationship because we agreed on the rules." Another shared, "It's not about wanting someone else—it's about keeping our own marriage alive and exploring fantasies safely." A third participant explained, "Some of our friends have done it, and it made us curious, especially after reading about open relationships online." These responses highlight that curiosity, intimacy enhancement, and prevention of secret infidelity were key motivating factors, rather than dissatisfaction or coercion.

Marriage counselors and therapists provided further insight, noting that motivations often revolved around relational needs. One therapist remarked, "Couples often

present this as a negotiated activity to maintain emotional and sexual connection. They are motivated by curiosity, the desire to communicate better, and sometimes to prevent clandestine affairs." Another counselor observed, "It is rare, but when it occurs, it is usually among couples who feel secure enough to handle jealousy and have strong boundaries."

Religious and community leaders highlighted social and moral dimensions influencing participation. A religious leader stated, "Because society and religion strongly disapprove of such conduct, it is done secretly even when it occurs. Motivation is often personal curiosity or private negotiation, but community and family pressures are always present." A community elder added, "People who try this are usually discreet. They do it in ways that do not threaten social reputation, but motivation comes from wanting something new or testing their trust in each other."

Overall, motivations were a combination of curiosity, desire to enhance intimacy, negotiated exploration of sexual boundaries, and peer or media influence, with all participants emphasizing consent and trust as central to their engagement.

The effects of wife swapping to marital dynamics, including trust, communication, intimacy, and power relations

Married participants reported a range of relational outcomes. Many described strengthened communication and intimacy. One participant said, "We had to talk about everything before trying it. It made us more honest with each other and closer emotionally." Another remarked, "It actually improved our trust; we knew boundaries and respected each other more." Some participants, however, acknowledged initial emotional challenges: "At first, there was jealousy and insecurity, but over time we learned to manage it through constant discussion." Regarding power dynamics, one participant noted, "I felt more confident expressing my needs because my partner had to listen carefully before we could proceed."

Counselors and therapists corroborated these experiences, emphasizing that outcomes largely depend on the couple's communication and negotiation skills. One therapist explained, "When done consensually, couples often report stronger emotional bonds and improved dialogue. The process requires careful boundary-setting." Another noted, "We see a mix of results: some couples grow closer, while others struggle with jealousy or discomfort. Communication is the key factor in mediating the effects."

Community and religious leaders highlighted the potential for social tension: "Even if couples report stronger intimacy, the practice can create internal stress if discovered. There is always a risk of marital conflict if trust is broken or societal norms are violated," noted a religious leader. These perspectives suggest that wife swapping can both reinforce and challenge marital dynamics, depending on relational preparedness, negotiation skills, and trust between partners.

The perceived social, cultural, and religious implications of the practice

Participants were aware of societal and cultural constraints surrounding the practice. One married individual said, "If

people knew, our families and neighbors would see it as immoral. That's why it's kept secret." Another remarked, "You can't talk to anyone about it, even close friends. Society would judge you immediately." Religious and moral frameworks were cited as strong deterrents, with one participant noting, "Even if couples agree privately, the community and church would never approve."

Counselors and therapists reflected on the tension between private behavior and public norms: "Couples feel pressure to hide this behavior because of stigma, even when it is consensual and strengthens their relationship," one therapist explained. Another stated, "Although urban couples are a bit more open-minded, secrecy is still prevalent since the cultural and religious environment is still quite judgmental."

Religious leaders emphasized moral implications: "Marriage is meant to be monogamous, and swapping partners goes against both scripture and cultural norms," explained one pastor. A community elder added, "Even though some urban couples engage in it, it's still viewed as deviant behavior and is not condoned publicly." These accounts demonstrate that social, cultural, and religious pressures shape the secrecy, perception, and acceptability of wife swapping, reinforcing the need for discretion among participants.

Is wife swapping representing isolated behavior or signals broader shifts in marital norms

Participants generally perceived the practice as limited but indicative of subtle shifts in marital norms. One participant explained, "It's not for everyone, but it shows that people are starting to think about marriage differently—about honesty, choice, and personal satisfaction." Another remarked, "Even though it's rare, it challenges traditional ideas of fidelity and shows that couples are negotiating intimacy in new ways."

Counselors noted that the practice may signal emerging trends in urban marital behavior: "We are seeing couples negotiate boundaries that were previously unthinkable, which may indicate gradual shifts in how intimacy and fidelity are understood in modern marriages." Another professional added, "While still niche, it reflects changing expectations where emotional satisfaction and negotiated sexual autonomy are becoming part of marital discourse."

Religious and community leaders acknowledged the rarity but recognized its potential as a social indicator. One leader stated, "It is not widespread, but it suggests that urban couples are testing the limits of traditional norms. Society is slow to accept it, but private practices like these may foreshadow broader cultural transformations." These findings suggest that wife swapping, while limited in scope, may reflect evolving attitudes toward intimacy, autonomy, and marital negotiation in urban Zimbabwe.

VI. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Extent of Wife Swapping in Zimbabwe

The findings indicate that wife swapping exists discreetly, mainly among urban, socially connected, and economically stable couples, and is rarely discussed openly. This aligns with international studies on consensual non-monogamy, which

emphasize that such practices are often hidden due to social stigma (Conley et al., 2013; Rubin, 2011). Globally, swinging and partner swapping are generally practiced in private, with participants emphasizing trust and negotiated consent (Sheff, 2014; Jenks, 1998). The Zimbabwean context appears similar, with societal, cultural, and religious norms compelling couples to maintain secrecy.

However, the findings also extend the literature by highlighting the role of urbanization and social networks in facilitating access to these practices. Marriage counselors and community leaders noted that urban settings provide privacy and exposure to global ideas, supporting Goode's (1963) and Giddens' (1992) arguments that modernization and changing intimacy norms create conditions for alternative marital arrangements. While existing African scholarship has focused on clandestine infidelity (Gregson et al., 2002), this study contributes new insights by documenting a consensual and negotiated non-monogamous practice within Zimbabwe.

Motivations for Participation

Participants' motivations were primarily relational and psychological: enhancing intimacy, exploring curiosity, preventing clandestine infidelity, and strengthening trust. This is consistent with international CNM research, which finds that participants engage in swinging or partner swapping to maintain sexual satisfaction, improve communication, and foster relational closeness (Conley et al., 2017; Bergstrand & Williams, 2000).

The findings also resonate with Giddens' (1992) theory of the transformation of intimacy, which argues that modern couples negotiate relational satisfaction rather than adhering strictly to traditional marital expectations. In the Zimbabwean context, exposure to media and peer influence emerged as additional motivators, reflecting how globalization and social networks can shape intimate behavior (Bauman, 2003). Unlike traditional African marital norms emphasizing monogamy and social duty (Bourdillon, 1997), these findings suggest that some urban couples are negotiating marital boundaries to meet individual and mutual relational needs.

Effects on Marital Dynamics

Participants reported that wife swapping could strengthen trust, communication, and intimacy when consent and negotiation were clear, although initial jealousy or insecurity was common. This aligns with findings from Sheff (2014) and Conley et al. (2017), which demonstrate that CNM can enhance relationship satisfaction if partners communicate effectively and maintain agreed-upon boundaries.

The observed shifts in power dynamics, where participants felt more confident expressing needs, reflect findings by Jackson and Scott (2004) on gender and negotiation in non-monogamous arrangements. In Zimbabwe, where traditional patriarchy often dictates male authority in sexual matters (Ratele, 2013), these findings suggest that consensual negotiation may empower both partners, particularly women, to assert their preferences safely. This extends African marital scholarship by showing how urban, modern couples may

reshape intimacy and power dynamics in ways that contrast with conventional patriarchal expectations.

Social, Cultural, and Religious Implications

Participants emphasized secrecy due to fear of social stigma, cultural condemnation, and religious disapproval. This finding is consistent with Conley et al. (2013) and Goffman (1963), who highlight that participants in non-monogamous arrangements often conceal their behavior to avoid societal judgment. Zimbabwean religious and community leaders reinforced that marriage is morally framed as monogamous and exclusive (Chitando & Chirongoma, 2008).

At the same time, the study shows that urban exposure allows limited cultural negotiation: some participants reported that certain social circles are more open to exploring alternative intimacy practices. This aligns with modernization theory (Goode, 1963), which predicts that urbanization, media exposure, and privatized households create spaces for new social behaviors while still maintaining tension with broader societal norms.

Wife swapping is an indication of broader shifts in marital norms

While wife swapping remains rare, participants and counselors indicated it may reflect evolving marital expectations in urban Zimbabwe. This finding resonates with Giddens' (1992) argument that late-modern intimacy emphasizes emotional fulfillment, negotiation, and personal satisfaction over duty or obligation. Urban couples' experimentation suggests that Zimbabwean marriages may be gradually integrating concepts of relational autonomy and negotiated sexual practices, consistent with observations in other urbanizing African contexts (Cherlin, 2004).

However, unlike in some Western contexts where consensual non-monogamy (CNM) has become more socially visible, in Zimbabwe it remains a niche and clandestine, highlighting the persistence of cultural, religious, and community constraints. This nuance extends the literature by illustrating how globalized ideas about intimacy interact with entrenched local norms to create selective adoption rather than broad transformation.

Synthesis Across Objectives

Overall, the findings demonstrate that wife swapping in Zimbabwe is shaped by the intersection of modernization, urbanization, and individual relational negotiation. Marital satisfaction, trust, and intimacy are central to participation, but social stigma and moral expectations constrain visibility. International CNM research provides useful comparative insights, while Zimbabwe-specific findings illuminate the unique ways in which cultural, religious, and gendered norms mediate adoption. This discussion positions wife swapping not merely as deviance, but as a socially negotiated, contextually embedded phenomenon reflecting both continuity and change in marital norms.

VII. RECOMMENDATIONS

Firstly, given that wife swapping exists discreetly among urban, socially connected couples, it is recommended that marital counseling services and sexual health programs recognize the diversity of marital practices without moralizing. Counselors should create safe, non-judgmental spaces where couples can discuss intimate issues openly, allowing for preventive guidance on relational boundaries, consent, and emotional well-being. Additionally, further research could map the prevalence and social networks that facilitate the practice to understand its scope better.

Secondly, since motivations are largely relational, psychological, and curiosity-driven, it is recommended that educational programs on marriage and sexual intimacy address communication, negotiation, and consent as core skills. Couples should be encouraged to explore intimacy in ways that strengthen the relationship without violating cultural or personal values. Media and social platforms could also be leveraged to provide evidence-based information on consensual non-monogamy, helping couples make informed decisions.

Thirdly, findings indicate both positive and challenging impacts on trust, communication, intimacy, and power dynamics. It is recommended that marital counseling and therapy incorporate strategies for managing jealousy, negotiating boundaries, and fostering mutual understanding, particularly for couples considering alternative marital practices. Training for therapists and counselors on non-traditional marital arrangements could improve support for couples while minimizing relational harm.

Fourthly, given the tension between discreet participation and societal disapproval, it is recommended that community and religious leaders engage in dialogue about evolving marital norms without stigmatization. Awareness campaigns could focus on communication, marital satisfaction, and ethical negotiation, helping communities understand the distinction between consensual arrangements and coercive or harmful behaviors. This could reduce secrecy and potential relational or social stress for participants.

Lastly, since wife swapping may indicate emerging shifts in urban marital expectations, it is recommended that policy makers, marriage educators, and family planners recognize the diversity of marital practices when designing interventions. Research should continue to explore how modernization, urbanization, and exposure to global relationship norms influence marriage in Zimbabwe, allowing programs to adapt to changing relational realities while maintaining family cohesion and social stability.

VIII. CONCLUSIONS

The study reveals that wife swapping exists as a discreet, consensual practice within certain urban social and economic networks in Zimbabwe. Participants' motivations are largely relational and psychological, driven by curiosity, intimacy enhancement, and mutual negotiation. The practice has nuanced effects on marital dynamics, including improved

communication, trust, and intimacy, but can also introduce challenges such as jealousy and shifts in power relations.

Social, cultural, and religious norms heavily influence the secrecy and perception of wife swapping, creating tension between private behaviors and public expectations. While the practice remains rare, it signals subtle shifts in urban marital norms, reflecting broader changes in intimacy, autonomy, and relational negotiation.

Overall, wife swapping should not be viewed solely as deviant behavior but as a contextually embedded, negotiated practice that highlights the interplay between modernization, cultural norms, and evolving marital expectations. The findings emphasize the need for open, non-judgmental approaches in marital counseling, sexual education, and community dialogue, as well as further research to understand its prevalence, implications, and relational outcomes in Zimbabwe.

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Ethical Approval And Informed Consent

This study was conducted in accordance with established ethical standards for social science research involving human participants. Participation in the study was voluntary. All participants were provided with detailed information regarding the purpose of the research, procedures involved, potential

risks, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Written informed consent was obtained prior to participation.

To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, pseudonyms were used, and all identifying information was removed from transcripts and reports. Data were securely stored and accessed only by the researcher. Given the sensitive nature of the topic, additional care was taken to protect participants' privacy and emotional well-being during data collection and analysis.

The study adhered to principles of respect for persons, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice.

Conflict of Interest Declaration

The author declares no conflict of interest related to the content of this research. There are no financial, personal, or professional relationships that could have influenced the outcomes or interpretations of this study.

Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. Due to the sensitive nature of the information provided by participants, access to the raw data may require additional ethical approval and adherence to confidentiality agreements.

Author Contributions

Bhiri Kuziwa conceptualized the study, developed the methodology, collected and analyzed the data, and wrote the manuscript. The author takes full responsibility for the integrity and accuracy of the research.

Plagiarism Declaration

The author confirms that this manuscript is original work and has not been submitted for publication elsewhere. Proper citations have been provided for all referenced materials, and no part of this work infringes on any third-party intellectual property rights.