"Let's Talk About ~~Sex~~ Privacy": Privacy Negotiation in Intimate Partnerships

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Abstract

Privacy in intimate relationships is grounded in openness and trust, yet personal technologies introduce tensions around boundaries, surveillance, and access. Prior work describes partners' avoidance of privacy conversations as *privacy silence*, yet its role across relationship stages remains underexplored. We report findings from interviews with partners (n=8), including paired and individual interviews, using the card game *OpenWhen* for scenario-based discussion. We found that privacy silence is stage-dependent. In established relationships, participants often preferred non-verbal strategies to preserve harmony, whereas in early-stage relationships, they were more willing to negotiate privacy expectations. We argue for a temporal understanding of privacy that accounts for shifting communication practices: supporting privacy silence in established relationships, while encouraging proactive privacy dialogue early in intimacy. We illustrate this through a design implication for dating applications that foregrounds privacy reflection before trust is assumed, helping mitigate risks of intimate partner surveillance.

CCS Concepts

• **Security and privacy → Social aspects of security and privacy**.

Keywords

Intimate Relationships; Privacy Negotiation; Privacy Silence; Intimate Partner Surveillance

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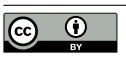

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1 Introduction

In the 1990s, Salt-N-Pepa's "Let's Talk About Sex" called for open dialogue about a taboo topic. Today, intimate relationships face a similarly sensitive challenge: negotiating privacy in the context of pervasive personal technologies [16]. In intimate relationships, privacy is often intertwined with openness and trust. Yet, personal technologies such as mobile phones complicate this dynamic by enabling new forms of access, monitoring, and boundary-crossing [12, 16]. Although partners frequently encounter privacy-relevant situations (e.g., requests for device access, passwords, or location sharing), many avoid explicit conversations about privacy because such discussions can feel uncomfortable, confrontational, or threatening to relationship harmony [6, 16]. Withholding access may be interpreted as a lack of trust and can require justification [17]. In this work, we investigate *privacy silence* in intimate relationships, focusing on how privacy dialogue (or its absence) varies across relationship stages [5, 6]. We report preliminary findings from six interview sessions with eight participants (n=8), including paired and individual interviews. To facilitate scenario-based reflection, we used a card game tool called *OpenWhen*. The cards elicited implicit privacy norms and moments of silence that may not surface through direct questioning.

Our findings highlight that privacy silence is stage-dependent. In established relationships characterized by trust, participants often preferred indirect or non-verbal strategies over direct discussions of privacy. In contrast, in early-stage relationships where trust had not yet been established, participants were more willing to explicitly negotiate privacy expectations. These results highlight privacy negotiation as a temporal and relational process rather than a uniform practice. Guided by this framing, we ask: *How can design facilitate privacy dialogue early in relationships while respecting privacy silence later on?* We argue for a dual design orientation: supporting privacy silence as a meaningful strategy in established relationships, while encouraging proactive privacy dialogue in early stages of intimacy. To illustrate this opportunity, we introduce a speculative dating app concept that foregrounds privacy reflection before trust is assumed.

2 Related Work

Personal technologies—e.g., mobile phones play an increasingly central role in the negotiation of intimacy, trust, and disclosure [15].

Prior work shows that people often disclose sensitive personal information through these technologies to signal closeness and establish trust, yet struggle to manage privacy boundaries across devices and platforms [3, 4, 22]. Studies of online partner-seeking and digitally mediated relationships highlight how mismatches in expectations around disclosure can lead to privacy breaches, emotional exploitation, or feelings of loss of control, particularly when trust is assumed rather than negotiated [8, 22]. Privacy in relationships is a dynamic process of boundary regulation rather than a fixed state. Altman describes it as an ongoing negotiation between openness and closedness, while Communication Privacy Management (CPM) theory frames disclosure as a co-managed process shaped by rules of information ownership [18]. These boundaries evolve over time, with sharing increasing as trust grows, especially early on. Personal technologies can complicate relational boundaries by enabling new forms of access, monitoring, and expectation-setting between partners [7, 13]. While prior work on technology-facilitated intimate partner violence (IPV) shows how these affordances can enable coercion and control [10, 20], it largely focuses on extreme cases, leaving everyday, non-abusive boundary negotiations underexplored [12, 14, 21]. Recent research has begun to examine how partners manage privacy around personal technologies without explicit discussion [6]. The concept of privacy silence captures how couples often rely on unspoken norms, assumptions, or nonverbal strategies to regulate access to devices and data. Rather than being accidental, silence can function as a relational strategy to signal trust, avoid conflict, or maintain intimacy. This aligns with boundary regulation, where disclosure is adjusted to balance closeness and autonomy. Yet existing work has largely treated privacy silence as a general characteristic of intimate relationships, without closely examining how it varies across relationship stages or how it interacts with trust formation over time. All together, prior work suggests that: First, privacy around personal technologies is **relational and negotiated**, not merely individual or technical, but reflects ongoing boundary regulation processes between partners. Second, personal technologies simultaneously **enable intimacy and facilitate surveillance**, blurring boundaries between care, trust, and control. Third, most existing interventions address privacy and abuse **after harm emerges**, rather than supporting early-stage boundary-setting. Fourth, privacy boundaries are often managed through **implicit practices and silence**, yet little is known about when silence is preferred—and when dialogue becomes possible or desirable, particularly across different stages of relational development as suggested by social penetration processes, which explains how self-disclosure deepens gradually as relationships develop. Building on these insights, our work examines privacy silence as a **stage-dependent practice** and explores design opportunities that encourage early-stage privacy dialogue while respecting non-verbal boundary management in established relationships.

3 Method: Research Design, Data Collection, and Data Analysis

This study followed a structured qualitative research design comprising three interconnected phases: *In the first phase*, we developed a semi-structured interview guide to ensure consistent coverage of themes related to privacy practices in intimate relationships. To support engagement and scenario-based reflection, we designed the interactive card-game tool *OpenWhen* inspired by Berkholz et al.'s *Privacy Taboo* [9] (see Table 2). The tool provided a playful yet structured format that enabled participants to reason through hypothetical but relatable situations, eliciting richer responses than direct questioning alone. The card game consisted of three decks representing A) relationship status, B) types of personal data access, and C) motivations for requesting access. The selection of these three dimensions was theoretically motivated and informed by prior work on privacy norms and scenario-based elicitation. Berkholz et al.'s card-based method combines stakeholder, data, and purpose to surface implicit privacy norms [9]; we adapted this structure to the context of intimate relationships. Specifically, relationship status captures the temporal and relational dimension of privacy boundary regulation; data types represent the object of potential boundary crossing; and motivations reflect how intent is interpreted in privacy judgments. These dimensions operationalize privacy negotiation as a relational and context-dependent process, enabling systematic variation of scenarios while maintaining comparability across participants. We deliberately used a constrained set of categories to scaffold reflection and make implicit assumptions discussable. This structured elicitation approach follows prior work showing that combining a small number of controlled dimensions can provoke articulation of otherwise tacit norms. However, this design also introduces a degree of analytical framing, as the resulting patterns are shaped by the predefined categories rather than emerging purely inductively. We account for this in our analysis and reflect on it as a limitation. *In the second phase*, we recruited eight participants among the authors' extended personal networks. We aimed to include a diverse range of relationship statuses. We conducted semi-structured interviews with these participants (4 female, 4 male; aged 28–37) (See Table 1 for details). Interviews were conducted online to reduce logistical barriers and support participant comfort. Four interviews were conducted with paired participants and four individually; paired interviews occurred at participants' request and involved friends who felt comfortable discussing privacy topics together. This combination enabled both comparative discussion in paired sessions and more personal reflection in individual interviews. During each session, the card game tool was shared on-screen (see Figure 1). Participants generated scenarios by selecting one card from each deck, which the moderator revealed in sequence. For each scenario, participants were asked to

Table 1: Participant demographics and relationship context

#P	Gender	Age	Relationship Experience	Interview Type
P1	M	28	Early-stage relationship	Individual
P2	F	31	Co-parenting	Individual
P3	F	29	Married with child	Individual
P4	M	37	Long-term relationship	Individual
P5	F	30	Ex-partner context	Paired
P6	F	30	Casual dating	Paired
P7	F	37	Married	Paired
P8	M	35	Married	Paired

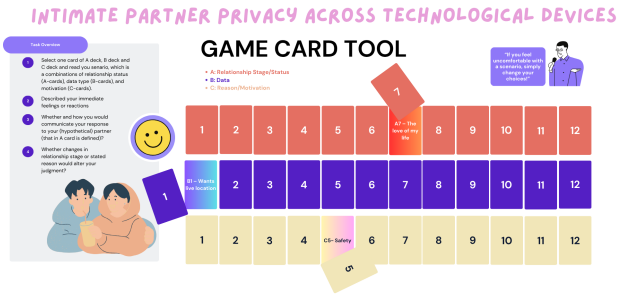

Figure 1: This figure shows the *OpenWhen* card deck used during interviews, including cards representing relationship scenarios, data types, and motivations.

Table 2: *OpenWhen* card game decks used during interview sessions. Each card represents a relationship context, data type, or motivation.

Relationship Status (A)	Data (B)	Reason (C)
A1 long-distance partner	B1 live location	C1 jealousy
A2 long-time partner	B2 social media follow	C2 prevent uncomfortable situations
A3 new partner (honeymoon)	B3 browse my phone	C3 control
A4 separated household partner	B4 access private chats	C4 establish trust
A5 married partner	B5 phone password	C5 safety
A6 just met (dating/one-night stand)	B6 shares access with friends	C6 past relationship issues
A7 love of my life	B7 Netflix password	C7 I betrayed them
A8 ex-partner (again)	B8 calendar access	C8 know me better
A9 married partner with a child	B9 academic results	C9 feel close
A10 first days of partnership	B10 past friends' records	C10 learn about my past
A11 cohabiting for years	B11 photo gallery	C11 involve people around me
A12 co-parenting partner	B12 email password	C12 emergency situations

describe their immediate feelings and reactions, how they would communicate their response to their partner, and whether changes in relationship stage or stated motivation would affect their judgment. Participants discussed at least three scenarios by default, with additional scenarios explored when time permitted—particularly in individual interviews, where participants could reflect more freely. Throughout the sessions, the interviewer intervened when needed to clarify scenarios or prompt further reflection. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent, transcribed, cleaned, and prepared for analysis. *In the final phase*, interview-generated scenarios were visually clustered using a Canva board and evaluated using a traffic-light coding scheme (red: negative, yellow: neutral, green: positive). The coded data were further categorized by platform or data type (e.g., location). This comparative analysis enabled the identification of patterns across relationship stages and motivations, informing both the findings and design implications presented in this paper (See Table **??**, Appendix A). Ethical safeguards included anonymization, flexible participation formats, discreet follow-up communication, and trauma-sensitive interviewing practices [2, 11, 19].

4 Findings: Privacy as a Stage-Dependent Design Opportunity

Across interviews, participants' responses could be interpreted through three recurring decision patterns: *stage-justified accommodation*, *motivation-dependent negotiation*, and *non-negotiable boundaries*. Rather than fixed preferences, privacy decisions were relational judgments shaped by commitment level and perceived intent. These patterns are grounded in recurring scenario–motivation combinations across participants (see Appendix A for extended quotes and mappings). These patterns suggest potential leverage points for design.

Stage-Justified Accommodation: In several scenarios, participants initially expressed discomfort but became willing to accept requests when situated within a committed relationship. The relationship stage functioned as a legitimizing force that could override hesitation. For example, sharing live location was often described as acceptable in long-term partnerships if framed around care or safety, even when participants had not previously enabled it: *"So I haven't done that [sharing location] yet. But if she really wants to, then I would turn it on."* (P4). Similarly, another participant described accepting an otherwise unacceptable request to avoid relational tension: "Although it is not acceptable for me, I would probably accept it to avoid any conflict." (P3). In contrast, similar requests were rejected in early-stage relationships when associated with jealousy : *"I guess people would accept this kind of stupid thing during the honeymoon phase… I might do the same and accept it."* (P8), suggesting that early-stage dynamics can sometimes normalize even problematic requests. Acceptance in these cases was not driven by personal comfort but by relational accommodation. Participants weighed requests against commitment and the desire to maintain harmony. In this pattern, privacy boundaries appear to become more flexible as relational investment increases, often without explicit negotiation.

Motivation-Dependent Negotiation: Other scenarios were described as negotiable, with decisions hinging on the stated reason for access. Participants distinguished between motivations framed as care (e.g., safety, preventing uncomfortable situations) and those signaling jealousy or control. The same data request—such as calendar access—could shift from acceptable to unacceptable depending on perceived intent. For instance, requests framed as care were sometimes tolerated despite discomfort, while similar requests framed through suspicion or control were more likely to be resisted. This distinction was often explicitly articulated by participants, who evaluated not only what was being requested but why. As one participant noted: *"Imagine my long-term partner asks for access to my calendar for control. Accessing anything for the purpose of control is not acceptable to me; it gives me bad feelings. [...] If the motivation was emergency situations, I could even be happy" (P7).* Importantly, some participants also described convincing themselves to accept uncomfortable requests in established relationships, prioritizing stability over strict boundary enforcement. This highlights that commitment and emotional attachment may reshape privacy evaluations over time.

Non-Negotiable Boundaries: A third category included requests

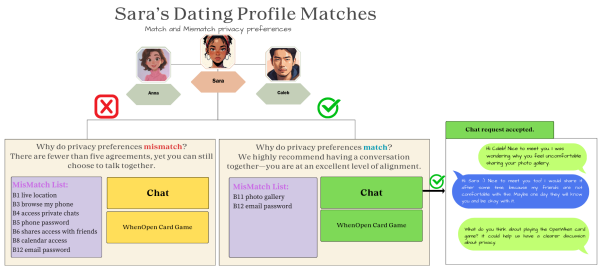

Figure 2: This figure shows an ideation sketch of a dating app interface that allows users to compare privacy preferences, including options for sharing location, messages, and other personal data.

deemed "never acceptable," regardless of stage or motivation. Access to messages, phone content, or passwords was seen as inherently sensitive, especially due to third-party privacy. Participants rejected attempts to justify such access through relational framing: *"There is no correlation between this request [email access], and our co-parenting. Trust has nothing to do with my email." (P2).* Similarly, access to highly sensitive data, such as email or private messages, was generally rejected across stages when framed as establishing trust or control, indicating boundaries that remain stable regardless of relational commitment. Even when participants acknowledged that strong emotional attachment might lead to compliance, they framed such acceptance as problematic: *"Love may blind me… but this is also the privacy of other people." (P7).* However, even here, participants occasionally invoked long-term trust to justify transparency ("nothing to hide"), revealing tension between principled autonomy and relational expectations of openness.

Requests That Lose Meaning Over Time: Finally, some scenarios were considered implausible in mature relationships. Participants described certain access requests as unnecessary once shared knowledge and social integration had developed: *"In a long-term relationship, this wouldn't happen anymore. They already know the people around me."* (P1). Here, the relationship stage did not increase acceptance—it made the request redundant. Privacy expectations were assumed, not negotiated. These patterns show that privacy negotiation is not simply about data sensitivity, but about when in the relationship lifecycle a request occurs and how it is framed. This dynamic creates a window for design intervention before expectations solidify or silence replaces dialogue.

5 Design Sketches: Surfacing Privacy Preferences in Early-Stage Relationships

Building on our finding suggest that privacy negotiation is stage-dependent, we explore how design might support early-stage reflection before implicit expectations of privacy solidify into silence. This design direction is motivated by our finding that early-stage relationships provide a critical window in which privacy expectations can be more openly articulated, before implicit norms and privacy silence become established in later stages. We developed low-fidelity sketches (See fig. 2) within a dating context that integrates privacy preferences as an explicit compatibility layer. After matching on conventional attributes, the system compares users' privacy preferences (B cards in the table 2, e.g., live location). When fewer than 5 of 12 preferences align, the system marks the match as low privacy alignment (yellow for chat and card game buttons). Interaction is not blocked; users may still initiate a chat or play the *OpenWhen* card game. The integration of the card-based interaction builds directly on our study method, which proved effective in eliciting reflection on otherwise tacit privacy norms. In Sara and Anna's case, seven disagreements led to low alignment, and neither chose to proceed. When at least five preferences align, the system marks high privacy alignment (green). In Sara and Caleb's case, only two disagreements emerged (photo gallery and email password). This prompted a clarification chat, revealing that Caleb's stance depended on the relationship stage. They then used the *OpenWhen* card game to explore how different stages and motivations (A–B–C combinations from table 2) could shift acceptance. By making differences in privacy expectations visible and discussable, the system aims to support negotiation before relationships become more established and couples begin to avoid explicit discussions in order to preserve trust and relational harmony. Rather than treating privacy as fixed compatibility criteria, the design supports reflection on how privacy expectations may evolve across relationship stages. By surfacing privacy differences early—without enforcing outcomes—the system creates space for dialogue before silence becomes embedded.

6 Discussion, Future Work and Conclusion

Our findings highlight that privacy negotiation around personal technologies is stage-dependent. In early-stage relationships, participants were more willing to articulate boundaries and reject intrusive requests, whereas in established relationships, they relied more on accommodation and indirect communication to preserve trust and harmony. Privacy dialogue was therefore more socially acceptable before trust was assumed, but potentially disruptive once relational stability had formed. These findings suggest that design should not treat privacy negotiation as a uniform process across relationship lifecycles. Rather than attempting to correct privacy breakdowns in established partnerships, design may be more effective when supporting reflection and dialogue at earlier stages, when expectations are still forming. At the same time, our findings caution against framing privacy silence as inherently problematic; in committed relationships, silence often functioned as a deliberate relational strategy. We therefore propose a dual design orientation: encouraging proactive privacy dialogue in early-stage relationships, particularly in dating contexts, while respecting indirect boundary management in established partnerships. Building on this orientation, we explore a design intervention that integrates privacy preferences into a speculative dating application as an explicit element of the matching process. By surfacing privacy expectations early, such designs may help prevent tensions caused by mismatched assumptions about access to personal technologies, while also raising awareness of how certain arrangements may enable harmful dynamics, including coercion and intimate partner surveillance. In terms of methodological limitations, our findings should be interpreted in light of the structured elicitation method. The use of predefined card decks (e.g., relationship status, data type,

motivation) enabled systematic exploration but also framed participants' responses. Thus, the identified patterns reflect not only participants' interpretations but also the study design. While consistent with prior card-based approaches [9] that surface tacit norms through controlled variation, this method may limit alternative framings of privacy negotiation. Future work could complement it with more open-ended approaches to capture how privacy boundaries are articulated without predefined structures. Future work will focus on developing and evaluating a prototype to explore the feasibility and implications of this design direction. Rather than prescribing "correct" privacy behavior, our aim is to design tools that acknowledge relational diversity and support reflection at moments when privacy expectations are still negotiable. Moreover, we plan to explore the design of a relationship manager interface that visualizes shared access and unresolved tensions over time, enabling ongoing awareness without requiring constant verbal negotiation. Moreover, in our future work, we would like to explore the design of a relationship manager interface that visualizes shared access and unresolved tensions over time, enabling ongoing awareness without requiring constant verbal negotiation.

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A Appendix: Which stages and motivations correspond to data sharing

Table 3: Relationship stages and motivations in relation to data sharing. Card combinations form the basis for discussion scenarios.

P	Scenario	Quote
P1	A2, B2, C8: Long-term partner requests social media access to get to know you better	"In a long-term relationship, this would not happen anymore. They already know the people around me."
P2	A12, B12, C4: Co-parenting partner asks for email password to establish trust	"There is no correlation between this request and our co-parenting. Trust has nothing to do with my email."
P3	A9, B3, C9: Married partner with a child wants to browse your phone to feel close	"Although it is not acceptable for me, I would probably accept it to avoid any conflict."
P4	A5, B1, C2: Married partner requests live location to prevent uncomfortable situations	"I have not done that yet. But if she really wants to, I would turn it on."
P5	A8, B10, C8: Ex-partner you consider reconnecting with requests past friends' records	"It depends on why we separated. But in general, this is a red flag."
P6	A6, B7, C9: Casual dating partner asks for Netflix password to feel closer	"I would feel a bit awkward. Is it not too soon?"
P7	A7, B4, C1: Life partner requests access to private chats due to jealousy	"Love may blind me. I would accept, but later tell him it makes me feel uncomfortable, because it also concerns other people's privacy."
P8	A3, B1, C1: New partner in honeymoon phase asks for live location due to jealousy	"People might accept this during the honeymoon phase. I might do the same."