

## Privacy, Trust, and Digital Boundaries: A Study of WhatsApp-Mediated Romantic Relationships Among Emerging Adults

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### ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine how early adult adolescents manage communication privacy in romantic relationships through WhatsApp features, emphasizing the symbolic, emotional, and relational meanings formed in digital interactions. Based on the theory of Communication Privacy Management (CPM), this study analyzes how individuals negotiate privacy boundaries, interpret digital cues, and experience relational tensions mediated by platform affordance such as last seen, message punctuation, profile photo, and status. This study uses a qualitative approach with an in-depth interview method with early adults who are or have been in romantic relationships. The results show that WhatsApp features not only function as a technical communication tool, but also as a relational artifact that shapes perceptions of intimacy, trust, and emotional availability. This research also reveals a paradox between transparency and personal autonomy in digital relationships. Although openness is often associated with trust, excessive accessibility demands have the potential to turn into a practice of relational control.

## INTRODUCTION

The development of information and communication technology has undergone significant changes along with the development of modern humans. The internet supports almost all human activities to get the latest information quickly and accurately which is a means of human interaction and communication from a distance. According to a *Pew Research Center* survey titled "*8 charts on technology use around the world*" about technology use around the world by 2024, most of the countries surveyed are about nine out of ten adults or more using the internet. In this context, the internet has a close relationship with communication privacy management. Ease of access to information encourages individuals to be more open about a variety of personal data, whether consciously or unconsciously. This creates new challenges in privacy management, especially regarding *control* over the information shared.

Every individual needs information as a support in their life and needs. The ease and speed of access offered by the internet can allow individuals to share information, communicate, and interact with other individuals in various parts of the world in *real-time* without location restrictions (Ashikuzzaman, 2023). Thus, it is inevitable that the existence of the internet provides many benefits or convenience for its users. But on the other hand, the internet can also pose challenges in managing privacy, especially in social media and communication applications. The internet can also be accessed anytime, anywhere, and by anyone. Various information access is also offered and can be searched using the internet. In addition, the emergence of various social media has changed the way individuals interact and exchange experiences allowing their users to build a vast social network. This not only accelerates the dissemination of information but also facilitates collaboration and exchange of ideas between individuals and communities. In this digital era, individuals are faced with a dilemma between openness and privacy. Thus, privacy management strategies are becoming increasingly crucial to maintain a balance between the need to share information and protect personal data.

The way individuals communicate is changing as the internet has evolved. One of the innovations that can be seen is the emergence of instant messaging applications. In today's digital era, there are a wide variety of instant messaging applications such as *WhatsApp*, *Telegram*, *Messenger*, and *Line*. However, *WhatsApp* has become one of the most popular communication tools in the world. Based on statistical data until June 2023, there are 2.78 billion *WhatsApp* users worldwide even in 2024 with a projected increase of 3.03 billion users (Turner, 2024). *WhatsApp* as an instant messaging service that they use regularly is the same as *email* and *web browsing*, *WhatsApp* no longer uses costs such as sending SMS but internet network. *WhatsApp* is not only a medium of daily communication, but also manages and stores users' personal data, making it the first choice between individuals to communicate quickly and efficiently thanks to the advanced features and updates available.

*WhatsApp* as one of the most popular instant messaging applications provides a wide range of features that support effective and transparent communication. Some of the features available are *the Last Seen*, *Blue Tick*, *Profile*

Photo, and Status features. These features stand out for their ability to provide *real-time* information about user activity. This feature gives you an indication of a person's *online* activity, last active time and the status of the message that has been read. A profile picture can represent a user's identity and status allows users to share updates in the form of images, videos, or texts to their contacts who last for 24 hours (Tempo, 2024).

These *WhatsApp* features have a big impact on communication privacy management. Some users consider it a tool to show openness, but it is possible that some others feel uncomfortable or anxious about privacy. For example, changes to profile photos can trigger questions from your partner or other people, and status features are often a tool to indirectly observe someone's activities (Titterington, 2024). Thus, the use of this feature in digital interaction is not just a technical preference, but is also closely related to the management of privacy as well as the social and emotional dynamics between individuals.

These *WhatsApp* features often affect relationship dynamics, especially when it comes to trust and expectations. When one partner does not immediately reply to a message despite being seen *online* or chooses to turn off the feature, this can lead to suspicion, disrespect, or even conflict (Tempo, 2024). This phenomenon is widely experienced by early adult individuals who are at a stage of life where romantic relationships play an important role in shaping identity and early emotional maturity. This challenge shows how technology can magnify the sensitivity of a couple's behavior. This phenomenon is also often highlighted in social media posts such as Tiktok. The post often triggers a variety of emotional reactions in romantic relationships with comments that indicate anxiety or pain when a partner is seen *online* but doesn't reply to the message immediately. This proves that this feature is not only related to communication techniques but also emotional dynamics and trust in relationships.

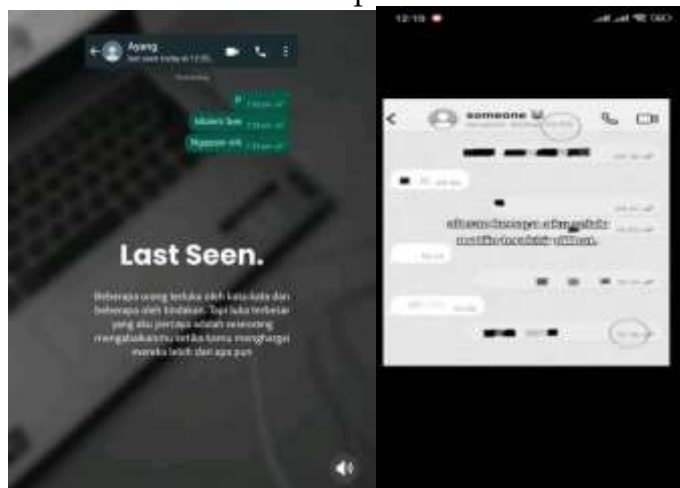


Figure 1. Processed by researchers

In the context of the conversation shown in the image, it is seen how users feel the need to explain their absence in responding to messages. This shows how these features can affect communication dynamics. Users feel the need to provide reasons related to their delay in reading or replying to messages. This feature also

has the potential to cause social pressure, anxiety, and misunderstandings. Some people feel ignored when the status of the latest activity is still not replied to. This situation gives rise to emotional conflicts such as feeling unappreciated or ignored as in the picture. The phrase "the biggest wound is ignored" underscores the emotional impact of unbalanced digital communication. On the other hand, individuals choose to disable the feature for their convenience to avoid the expectation of replying to messages quickly. This suggests that privacy settings in digital communications are used as a strategy to reduce social pressure.

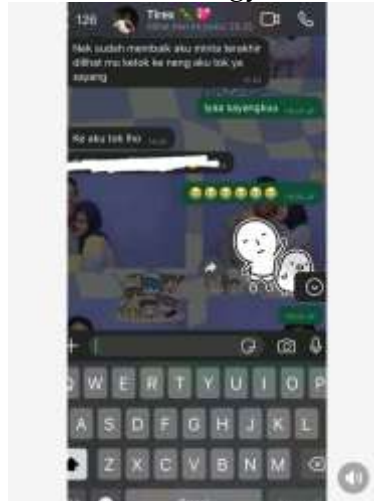


Figure 2. Processed by researchers

A more emotional communication context is a symbol of attention and intimacy in personal relationships. The phrase "I asked for the last time I saw you, tap to neng aku tok ya, baby" shows how this feature is seen as a form of care and connection that has symbolic meaning in relationships. The request for the image indicates a need for a sense of security and trust in the relationship. The conversation illustrates how this feature becomes an important element in the relationship which emphasizes that honest and open communication is essential to avoid misunderstandings. For some couples, turning on *last seen* is a form of openness and trust, while others turn off the feature can reflect the need for personal space. In certain situations, last seen settings can carry deeper meaning than just technological features.

One case example is from the results of an interview written in the research journal "The Impact of Technology and Social Media on Divorce Rates in the Digital Era (Case Study on Millennial Couples)" many couples experience conflicts due to addiction to suspicious couples' online activities. One of the couples feels jealous when their partner is online but does not respond to the message immediately, causing tension in their relationship (Pakarti, 2023). In addition, in the article entitled "Case Study at the Padang Religious Court class 1a" (Eva, 2020), social media is the main trigger for conflicts between couples. An argument occurs because one of the parties feels uncomfortable with the status posted. The article is titled "Afraid of Being Tempted by Her Husband, This Girl Asked Her Friend to Change WA's Profile Photo. Lah Kok Regulates Others" written by Iradat Ungkai in 2019 contains a woman who asks her friend to change her profile photo. This request was based on the fear that her husband would be

tempted to see the profile picture. So there is a debate about the limits of privacy and jealousy in relationships. These cases show how *WhatsApp's* features can affect relationship dynamics and cause conflict if not managed properly.

The high number of *WhatsApp* users as the main communication medium in romantic relationships among early adults makes the issue of communication privacy management very relevant to be researched. Features such as blue ticks, last seen, profile photos, and statuses are often a source of conflict when not managed properly (Putriana, 2024). This conflict is often discussed on *TikTok* social media, where users share personal experiences related to this conflict. This viral phenomenon shows that this issue is not a trivial matter, but is part of the reality of communication in romantic relationships. This situation shows how digital communication can affect the dynamics of romantic relationships, especially when expectations between couples regarding openness and privacy are not in line.

Early adult individuals, who are at vulnerable ages around 18 to 25 years old, are a group that is facing an important transition period in life. They are in a phase of psychosocial development that tends to make romantic relationships one of the important aspects in the search for self-identity and have unique needs in regulating privacy (Rizki, 2022). At this stage, they tend to start building more serious romantic relationships while also exploring their identity and independence. In this context, features like *WhatsApp* can have a significant impact because early adult individuals often have a high emotional need for validation, trust, and attention from a partner. During this time, romantic relationships are one of the important arenas to learn to manage emotions, build healthy communication, and understand the boundaries of privacy. Reliance on technological features often creates complex dynamics, where the expectation of staying connected to a partner can trigger anxiety when those expectations are not met.

## **THEORETICAL REVIEW**

### ***Privacy***

Data protection is an individual's fundamental right to control access to their personal data. This includes deciding when, how, and to whom information is disclosed. According to (Altman, 1975) privacy is a dynamic process that is constantly changing depending on social situations, time, and interpersonal relationships. Altman describes privacy as the ability to set "boundaries" between oneself and others in order to create a personal space that is flexible and tailored to individual needs. In his view, privacy is not a static state but an adaptive process in which the boundaries of openness and alienation are adjusted. A person may withdraw when they feel overexposed, but seek contact with others at other times. This shows that privacy is situational and contextual, and takes into account interpersonal, cultural, and environmental factors.

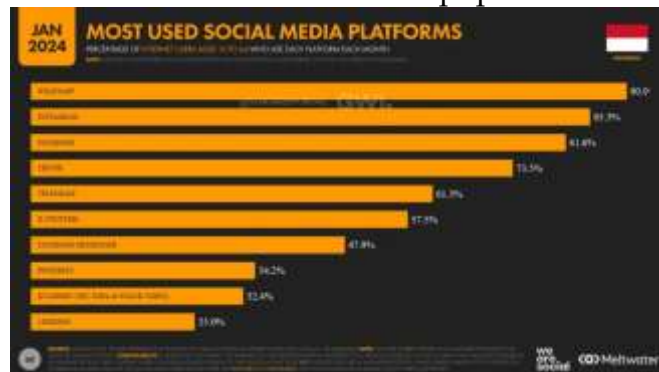
For example, in interpersonal relationships, experiencing openness with family and close friends but hiding similar information from certain people. In digital communications, privacy decisions require specifications such as *Last Seen* features, blue ticks, profile photos, and statuses. Altman's perspective helps

explain how privacy serves as a balancing mechanism between the need to interact with other individuals and the need for personal space.

### **Posted by E**

*WhatsApp* is an instant messaging app for *smartphones* created in 2009 by two former yahoo employees, Brian Acton and Jan Koum. At the time, Koum saw an opportunity to operate through *the Apple App Store* after buying an iPhone in early 2009. At first the app focused on status. Then it undergoes development through his motivation to stop ignoring calls while in the gym. In November 2009 *WhatsApp* 2.0 was launched which included a messaging function which was the main feature of the application which eventually caught the attention of users. On February 19, 2014, *WhatsApp* was acquired by *Facebook*, which is now known as Meta, for \$19 billion, making it one of the largest technology acquisitions in History (Pahwa, 2023).

One of the cross-platform instant messaging applications, *WhatsApp* allows users to communicate via text, voice calls, videos, as well as various media, documents, and Location in *real-time*. Released in 2009, *WhatsApp* has become one of the most popular communication tools with over 2 billion active users worldwide (Stastika,2023). Indonesia itself is one of the largest users in Southeast Asia. Based on the Hootsuite we are social data Indonesia survey in 2024, *WhatsApp users* will be 90.9% of the total population.



**Figure 3. Graph of whatsapp user 1**

*WhatsApp* is also a medium to share all kinds of user activities through the status feature freely without any distance or time limit with their contacts. The app offers a variety of relevant features in communication and privacy settings. Some of the features available and the explanation based on *WhatsApp* FAQ on WhatsApp include:

#### **1. Last Seen**

This feature allows users to maintain their privacy by choosing who can see the status of their last activity. Additionally, *WhatsApp* 's latest development provides deeper flexibility for users to set or hide *Last Seen* from certain contacts. This setting is often used to avoid social pressure or conflict in responding to messages.

#### **2. Blue tick**

This feature provides flexibility for users to manage the privacy of their communications, especially in situations where they don't want to respond to or

read messages quickly. However, when this blue tick is deactivated, users still see signs that their messages were sent (tick one) and received (tick two).

### **3. Status**

Users can choose to share their status with all contacts, only to certain contacts, or exclude specific contacts. This feature provides a space for users to express themselves, share moments, or provide information without leaving a permanent trace. In addition, status updates can be a more visual communication tool that enriches the way users interact, for example by commenting so that two-way communication is formed.

### **4. End-to-end encryption**

Features that make messages inaccessible to third parties, including *WhatsApp* itself, thus providing user security in communicating. This technology is automatically active for all user conversations. In addition, in the conversation screen view, *WhatsApp* provides an encryption indicator display for transparency to users that their communication is completely secure.

### **5. Control grub**

This feature gives users more control to prevent their entry into the grub without consent. Users can choose options such as status feature settings to limit who can add them to the grub. In addition, grub admins have the right to regulate member access such as who can send or change grub information thereby reducing the potential for *spam* in the grub.

### **6. Temporary message mode**

Users can set the duration of the deletion of the otamatic message with options such as the message will disappear in 24 hours, 7 days, or 90 days according to the need. This feature works for sensitive conversations or to keep the chat room clean without having to manually delete messages.

Communication Privacy Management can be explained through the theory of *Communication Privacy Management (CPM)* developed by (Petronio, 2002) which states that individuals actively set the limits of their personal information in communication with others. In the context of *WhatsApp*, the *Last Seen* feature and the blue tick are one of the tools used to manage privacy. Studies show that *WhatsApp* users tend to adjust privacy settings based on their interpersonal relationships such as family, friends, or partners to prevent conflicts or maintain a balance of privacy (Fox & McEwan, 2017).

Research by (Masur, 2021) reveals that privacy settings on *WhatsApp* can be an important mechanism in interpersonal relationships because it triggers tension. For example, users who turn off the blue tick are often perceived as unresponsive or evasive which can affect the perception of trust in relationships. In addition, research by (Tang, 2022) found that communication privacy controls on *WhatsApp* serve as a strategy to limit excessive communication expectations, such as avoiding pressure to respond to messages instantly, especially in relationships that have unequal power dynamics.

Privacy management Communication on *WhatsApp* not only serves to protect personal information, but it is also a way to navigate the dynamics of social relationships. Users utilize the features of this app to build flexible and

adaptive Boundaries according to their needs which ultimately contributes to the balance between intimacy and privacy in digital life.

### ***Romantic relationships in early adulthood***

Romantic relationships in early adulthood are greatly influenced by Communication Privacy Management, especially in the context of the use of technology in digital communication. In the Communication *Privacy Management (CPM)* Theory developed by Petronio (2002), privacy management becomes dynamic, where individuals determine the limits of personal information shared with their partners. In romantic relationships, openness is considered important to build trust. Openness can lead to conflict without proper privacy management, especially if one partner feels that privacy boundaries are being violated. Recent research shows that *Last Seen settings*, statuses, and activity in instant messaging are often a source of tension in romantic relationships due to differences in perceptions of privacy (Frampton & Fox, 2019).

In addition, communication technologies such as *WhatsApp* often magnify the challenges in romantic relationships. A study by (Choi, 2021) revealed that couples who frequently monitor each other's online activities tend to experience emotional tension, therefore healthy communication privacy management is key to maintaining balance in romantic relationships in early adulthood. The importance of effective communication in resolving privacy conflicts in the digital world is also highlighted in the research (Jiang, 2022). The study found that couples who openly discussed their privacy preferences were more likely to avoid conflict.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study uses a qualitative descriptive method to understand how early adult individuals interpret and manage communication privacy through the features of Posted by E in a romantic relationship. This approach was chosen because of its focus on exploring participants' subjective experiences, which allows researchers to describe communication dynamics in depth. The qualitative approach intends to understand what phenomena the research subjects experience. Qualitative descriptive research is a method used to describe or describe the object of research based on the data obtained. In this study, the data collected was in the form of words or images so that it did not emphasize numbers. The data collected after analysis is further described, so that it is easy for others to understand (Sugiyono, 2020). This study seeks to observe the impact of the features Posted by E in romantic relationships in early adulthood through communication privacy management theory, so this study provides in-depth insight into how these features shape communication patterns and privacy management in their relationships. There are 10 informants, namely four couples and two supporting informants. Interviews and observations were conducted in this study to obtain in-depth information and in accordance with the focus of the research.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The results of the study show that WhatsApp features such as *last seen*, blue ticks, profile photos, and *status/stories* are no longer interpreted solely as technical communication tools, but have developed into emotional symbols, relationship regulation tools, and a medium for expressing feelings. These findings are in line with the view of Hall (2019) who emphasizes that digital communication technology not only conveys messages, but also forms relational and emotional meanings in interpersonal interactions.

Respondents interpreted these features as indicators of attention, care, and priority in relationships. For example, *last seen* and blue ticks do not only indicate technical activity, but are interpreted as a sign of the emotional presence of the partner. When a partner is seen online but doesn't reply to messages, it's often interpreted as a form of abandonment, which then triggers anxiety, disappointment, and even conflict.

Male informants with the initials Y and F who have been in a romantic relationship with the opposite sex revealed that this feature means priority in communication with their partner. This technical activity is a symbol of attention and care that must be done when communicating using WhatsApp. This is a form of trust by monitoring the state of the couple to always care about their relationship so that they prioritize messages from their partner by turning on the blue tick symbol. In contrast to female informants with the initials T and L, she said that the symbol is only important to be monitored when it is at a distance that is considered far away. These two female informants stated that their blue tick feature was not so noticed that they often turned off the feature.

This gives an idea that *the last seen* and blue tick are not just symbols in the WhatsApp feature but more than a meaning that determines the sustainability of a relationship because it affirms priorities in a relationship of the opposite sex. Men consider this to be an important symbol, but not with women in the informants of this study.

Respondents revealed that changes to features—such as hiding *last seen*, turning off blue ticks, or privacy *status*—were often interpreted as a sign of hiding something, emotionally distancing, or even being disloyal. In fact, from the perpetrator's point of view, these changes can be made as an effort to protect themselves from pressure, reduce anxiety, or maintain personal space.

In CPM theory, this condition is referred to as *privacy boundary turbulence*, which is a situation when privacy rules are not mutually agreed, thus triggering misunderstandings and tensions. When one party changes the privacy settings without explanation, the other party feels a loss of access, which is then interpreted as a breach of trust. As the informant with the initials F said that the symbol also made him decide to end the relationship with the opposite sex because their closeness did not have a priority that could be maintained.

Profile photos or *the* frequency of status uploads are also interpreted as emotional signals. Respondents attributed these changes to relationship conditions, such as a sign of problems, emotional distance, or changes in feelings. Thus, WhatsApp features become a kind of "symbolic language" that is read and interpreted subjectively.

Three female informants, namely the initials F, T and A, stated that the profile photo was very meaningful by posting photos of their respective couples. When the photo is replaced with their own photo, they agree if there is a change in the meaning of their relationship. This greatly affects their close relationship with the opposite sex. Some other actions are usually supported by making a status within a short time after changing the profile photo to further convince them that something is happening that must be confirmed by the couple for the continuation of their close relationship or if there is no explanation then it means that they are free to decide for themselves.

From the perspective of the CPM (Communication Privacy Management) theory of Petronio (2002), this practice shows that individuals actively manage privacy *boundaries* through digital features. Each user determines the extent to which information about himself or herself can be accessed by the partner. However, these boundaries are contextual, flexible, and depend on the emotional situation and relationship dynamics.

While WhatsApp features can strengthen connectivity, research findings show that they are also often a trigger for conflict and emotional tension. Conflicts usually arise due to differences in expectations, unequal interpretations of digital symbols, and the absence of explicit agreements on privacy boundaries. In addition, this study found a form of passive-aggressive conflict through WhatsApp features, such as satirizing couples through *status* or unilaterally disabling features. This practice shows that the WhatsApp feature is not only a medium of communication, but also a tool for indirect emotional expression. However, this indirect communication often magnifies the risk of misinterpretation.

The findings of the study confirm that the quality of relationships is greatly influenced by the existence or absence of mutual agreement in managing digital privacy. Respondents who are able to discuss and agree on the rules for using WhatsApp features tend to have a more stable relationship.

According to CPM theory, this process is called *privacy rule coordination*, which is a joint effort to determine what can be shared, when, and to whom. This agreement includes, for example, whether *last seen* should always be active, whether blue ticks can be turned off, or how to use *status* in conflict situations. Some informants realize that disabling the feature does not mean dishonesty, but as a form of self-protection from emotional distress. However, without open communication, this action is often mistaken for a sign of hiding something. Some respondents chose full transparency as the basis of trust, while others emphasized the importance of personal space. This variation suggests that there is no one ideal privacy model, but rather that it should be negotiated according to the needs and values of each partner.

The informant with the initials S said that he had been accused by his partner of turning off one of the features so that he was treated by being unilaterally disconnected. This was also revealed by the Ft informant who had received unilateral treatment because he felt that he was not invited to discuss turning off one of the Whatsapp features. These two male informants showed that negotiations carried out in shutting down one of the features that are considered

important are urgently needed. They feel that in a permanent relationship, each individual has their own limitations that their partner must also understand.

The study also shows that the use of overly controlling WhatsApp features—such as the requirement to always reply quickly or constantly monitor your partner's activities—can create psychological distress. In this context, digital features change from a communication tool to a relational control tool. It is evident that of the 10 informants in this study, four of them felt that this feature could determine the continuation of the relationship because they felt that they did not get priority by their partner. Meanwhile, four other informants felt that they had sufficient limitations in their close relationship with their partner through the use of features in WhatsApp.

Early adult romances show a dialectic between the need for privacy and the demand for transparency. Privacy allows individuals to maintain personal identity and space, while transparency is often associated with trust and openness. According to CPM theory, privacy is not just hiding information, but a continuous negotiation process between opening and closing oneself. Research findings show that when transparency is excessive, individuals feel watched and lose freedom. Conversely, when privacy is too strict, couples feel distrusted. The WhatsApp feature complicates this dialectic because it provides continuous indicators of digital presence, such as *online status*, *last seen*, and message punctuation. This indicator creates an expectation of a prompt and consistent response, which can ultimately weigh on individuals emotionally. Respondents described that in certain conditions, such as a couple traveling long distances, these features become important as markers of safety and attention. However, in everyday life, excessive use actually triggers anxiety and conflict.

WhatsApp's features are shaping a new experience of closeness and control in relationships. Respondents said that at first these features were interpreted as a form of affection. However, as the intensity of surveillance increases, the meaning shifts to control. Digital control arises when couples feel obligated to always be available, have to reply quickly, and keep in touch. In the context of CPM theory, this reflects a violation of privacy boundaries and creates *boundary turbulence*. Some respondents chose to turn off the feature as a self-protection strategy, not as a sign of staying away. However, without communication, this action actually creates new conflicts. These findings confirm that digital features are never neutral; The meaning is always constructed relationally. Two supporting informants in this study revealed that the WhatsApp feature in its use is indeed very easy but the meaning is not simple because it is in the relationship of a male and female couple that they have understood. So in deciding to use these features is not easy and requires consideration due to the effect of being able to simultaneously end the relationship itself. However, if a balanced discussion can be carried out, it does not need to happen.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research shows that WhatsApp's privacy features do not function solely as a technical communication tool, but as *relational artifacts* that are full of emotional, symbolic, and social meaning in early adult romantic relationships.

Indicators such as *last seen*, blue ticks, profile photos, and *status* become digital signs that are continuously read, interpreted, and negotiated by couples to assess attention, emotional presence, and commitment levels. Thus, technology not only mediates communication, but also shapes the way individuals understand love, trust, and closeness.

Based on the *Communication Privacy Management* (CPM) framework, these findings reveal that privacy management in digital relationships is dynamic, contextual, and full of tension. Disagreements over privacy boundaries trigger *privacy boundary turbulence* that manifests in conflict, jealousy, anxiety, and insecurity. In contrast, couples who are able to establish coordination of privacy rules through open communication tend to have more stable and adaptive relationships. This confirms that privacy in a romantic relationship is not just about closing or revealing information, but about the process of negotiating a continuous meaning.

### FURTHER STUDY

Furthermore, this study reveals a paradox between transparency and personal autonomy. While openness is often associated with trust, the demands of excessive transparency have the potential to turn into psychologically distressing surveillance practices. In this context, WhatsApp features can shift from a means of proximity to an instrument of relational control. These findings confirm that digital intimacy is not always synonymous with emotional closeness, but rather can generate ambivalence, tension, and vulnerability.

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