Jurnal Representamen Vol. 12 No. 2 Oktober 2026
Hal. 307-324
DOI:10.30996/representamen.v12i2.134030

Managing Communication Privacy in Post-Infidelity Relationships: Negotiating Digital Access Openness

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Abstract

Infidelity not only undermines trust but also reshapes how couples manage communication privacy in romantic relationships. This study examines how couples renegotiate communication privacy boundaries through digital access openness following infidelity. A qualitative phenomenological approach was employed to explore participants lived experiences of privacy and trust reconstruction. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with five participants selected purposively based on their experience of infidelity, decision to maintain the relationship, and continued involvement in the relationship at the time of the study. Interviews were conducted during May with participants' informed consent, and their identities were anonymized to maintain confidentiality. Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis based on Braun and Clarke, with Communication Privacy Management (CPM) serving as the theoretical framework. The findings show that infidelity disrupts previously established privacy boundaries and leads couples to renegotiate access to particular forms of digital information. Digital access openness helps reduce uncertainty and supports trust reconstruction, but does not automatically create co-ownership of all information on a device or fully restore trust. Instead, trust develops through negotiated access, honest communication, and consistent behavior. The study highlights privacy management as an ongoing process in which couples reconstruct and renegotiate privacy boundaries following a breach of trust.

Keywords: *communication privacy management; digital access openness; infidelity; privacy boundary negotiation; trust reconstruction*

Abstrak

Perselingkuhan tidak hanya merusak kepercayaan, tetapi juga mengubah cara pasangan memahami dan mengelola privasi komunikasi dalam hubungan romantis. Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis bagaimana pasangan menegosiasikan kembali batas privasi komunikasi melalui keterbukaan akses digital setelah perselingkuhan. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain fenomenologi untuk memahami pengalaman partisipan dalam mengelola privasi dan membangun kembali kepercayaan. Data diperoleh melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur terhadap lima partisipan yang dipilih secara purposif berdasarkan pengalaman perselingkuhan, keputusan untuk mempertahankan hubungan, dan status hubungan yang masih berlangsung saat penelitian dilakukan. Wawancara dilaksanakan selama bulan Mei dengan persetujuan partisipan, sementara identitas partisipan dianonimkan untuk menjaga kerahasiaan. Data dianalisis menggunakan reflexive thematic analysis berdasarkan Braun dan Clarke dengan Communication Privacy Management (CPM) sebagai kerangka teoritis. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa perselingkuhan mengganggu batas privasi yang sebelumnya telah terbentuk dan mendorong pasangan menegosiasikan kembali akses terhadap bentuk informasi digital tertentu. Keterbukaan akses digital membantu mengurangi ketidakpastian dan mendukung pembangunan kembali kepercayaan, tetapi tidak secara otomatis menjadikan seluruh informasi dalam perangkat sebagai milik bersama atau memulihkan kepercayaan sepenuhnya. Kepercayaan dibangun secara bertahap melalui akses yang dinegosiasikan, komunikasi yang jujur, dan konsistensi perilaku. Penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa manajemen privasi merupakan proses berkelanjutan dalam membangun kembali dan menegosiasikan batas privasi setelah terjadinya pelanggaran.kepercayaan.

Kata kunci: manajemen privasi komunikasi; keterbukaan akses digital; perselingkuhan; negosiasi batas privasi; pembangunan kembali kepercayaan

INTRODUCTION

Infidelity remains one of the major causes of disruption in romantic relationships, both in dating and marriage. When infidelity is revealed, the betrayed partner commonly experiences emotional responses such as anger, disappointment, loss of trust, and trauma. Mitchell et al. (2026) explain that partners who experience infidelity generally face declining relationship quality, emotional trauma, and a dilemma between ending or maintaining the relationship. However, although infidelity is one of the major causes of divorce, some couples still choose to stay together and undergo a gradual process of relationship recovery that involves various forms of adjustment (Fife et al., 2026). Thus, post-infidelity recovery is not only concerned with resolving conflict but also with how couples rebuild trust that has been damaged. Research on romantic relationships has also shown that trust issues and emotional insecurity can shape how partners experience and communicate within their relationships (Adilah et al., 2023).

Changes in communication practices in the digital era have made this process increasingly complex. Today, much of couples' communication takes place through digital media, such as WhatsApp, Instagram, or other instant messaging applications. Digital media make it easier for couples to remain connected, but at the same time they can create opportunities for new conflicts to emerge. Conversations with other people, social media activities, and digital traces stored on mobile phones often become sources of suspicion after infidelity occurs. According to McDaniel et al. (2017), engagement in infidelity-related behaviors through social media is associated with lower relationship satisfaction, greater relationship ambivalence, and higher levels of anxiety and avoidance in romantic relationships. These findings indicate that digital media function not only as communication channels but also as part of the conflicts experienced by couples. In digitally mediated romantic interactions, the management of personal information may also involve tensions between openness and privacy. Gunawan and Mony (2023) found that interpersonal deception in dating-app interactions can also be related to efforts to maintain personal privacy.

On the other hand, digital media also play a role in relationship repair. After infidelity is revealed, couples often use digital media to maintain communication. Conversations through WhatsApp, sharing live locations, providing access to mobile phones, and disclosing social media passwords are practices used to demonstrate a genuine commitment to repairing the relationship. Such forms of openness can help reduce suspicion and provide a sense of security for the partner. Open communication can even become an important factor in the healing process after infidelity because it can support the restoration of trust and relationship resilience (Fife et al., 2026).

However, openness to digital access also raises new concerns. Once trust has been damaged, many couples begin to know each other's passwords, check the contents of mobile phones, read conversations, or access their partner's social media accounts. For some couples, these actions are viewed as evidence of openness and commitment.

Others, by contrast, regard them as violations of personal space. This condition shows that the boundary between transparency and privacy has become increasingly blurred in romantic relationships. Privacy threats may even arise more frequently from close others who already have access to devices and personal information than from outsiders (Konopka et al., 2026). When carried out without mutual agreement, such practices can develop into forms of digital surveillance that may instead create new conflicts (Levy & Schneier, 2021).

Research Research on mobile phone use in romantic relationships also shows that there is no universal rule regarding how much access partners should have to each other's devices. Doerfler et al. (2024) found that romantic partners may have access to each other's smartphones, but such access is still shaped by explicit or implicit boundaries concerning how the device should be used. Access may therefore coexist with expectations regarding privacy, trust, and appropriate use. Similarly, Ngcongo (2016) shows that mobile phone privacy in romantic relationships is shaped through negotiated rules concerning openness and concealment. In everyday relationships, these rules may not always be discussed explicitly but can develop through habits, mutual trust, and respect for personal boundaries (Amirkhani et al., 2026). These findings suggest that the important issue is not simply whether partners have access to each other's devices, but how that access is negotiated and understood within the relationship.

This This phenomenon can be explained through Communication Privacy Management (CPM), developed by Sandra Petronio. The theory explains that individuals have the right to manage their private information and establish rules concerning its disclosure and access. Once such information is shared with another person, the recipient becomes involved in its management, creating a need for coordination regarding who can access the information and how it may be used (Petronio, 2002). Therefore, couples need to establish rules concerning what information may be shared, who may access it, and how the information should be used. These rules are not necessarily fixed and may change when a relationship experiences certain events, including after infidelity. Under such circumstances, previously established privacy rules may need to be renegotiated as couples attempt to manage the consequences of a breach of trust (McBride et al., 2020).

Previous research has examined privacy management in romantic and intimate relationships from several perspectives. Ngcongo (2016), for example, examined mobile communication privacy management in romantic relationships and showed how partners negotiate rules concerning the use and privacy of mobile phones. Research on smartphone access has similarly demonstrated that partners may share access to each other's devices while maintaining explicit or implicit expectations about appropriate use (Doerfler et al., 2024). More recent work has further shown that digital privacy in intimate relationships is continuously shaped by negotiation, trust, and practical considerations. Amirkhani et al. (2026), for instance, highlight that partners may implicitly negotiate privacy boundaries and that access to mobile phones can have different meanings depending on the relational context. These studies demonstrate that privacy

management in intimate relationships is not simply a matter of keeping information private or making it available, but involves ongoing negotiation of boundaries and rules.

To date, research on infidelity has focused more heavily on the psychological effects on betrayed partners, relationship satisfaction, infidelity-related behavior on social media, and factors that help couples recover after conflict (Fife et al., 2026; McDaniel et al., 2017). Research on privacy management in romantic relationships, meanwhile, has examined mobile phone access, privacy rules, and digital boundaries in everyday intimate relationships (Amirkhani et al., 2026; Doerfler et al., 2024; Ngcongo, 2016). However, these two bodies of research have rarely been examined together. In particular, limited attention has been given to how couples who choose to remain together after infidelity renegotiate privacy boundaries when digital access becomes part of the process of rebuilding trust. Practices such as sharing passwords, providing access to mobile phones, or sharing locations may become more important after trust has been damaged, but the process through which couples determine the boundaries, rules, and meanings of such access remains insufficiently explained.

Based on this gap, this study aims to analyze how post-infidelity couples renegotiate communication privacy boundaries through digital access openness. Rather than understanding digital access openness solely as a form of transparency or partner surveillance, this study examines it as a negotiated communication practice through which couples redefine access to private digital information following a breach of trust. The study therefore contributes to the application of Communication Privacy Management in the context of post-infidelity romantic relationships by examining how privacy boundaries and access rules are renegotiated as part of the process of rebuilding trust.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach with a descriptive phenomenological design to understand how individuals manage communication privacy after experiencing infidelity. A phenomenological approach was selected because the study focuses on how individuals make sense of their lived experiences, particularly the process of renegotiating communication privacy and rebuilding trust through digital access openness. Through this approach, the researchers sought to explore participants' subjective experiences regarding changes in communication privacy boundaries following a breach of trust in romantic relationships. The phenomenological orientation was maintained by allowing participants to describe their experiences and the meanings they attached to changes in their relationships, rather than determining the meaning of their experiences solely through the theoretical framework.

The research data were obtained from five participants selected through purposive sampling, representing three relationship cases. The first case involved a dating couple in which both partners were interviewed, the second involved a married couple in which both partners were interviewed, and the third involved a married relationship in which only

one partner participated in the study. Thus, both partners were interviewed in two of the three cases. The participants included individuals who had experienced infidelity either as the betrayed partner or the unfaithful partner. Participants were selected based on the following criteria: (1) they had experienced infidelity in a dating or marital relationship, either as the betrayed partner or the unfaithful partner; (2) they chose to maintain the relationship after the infidelity was revealed; and (3) they were still in the relationship at the time of the study. The unit of analysis was the individual participant's experience of renegotiating communication privacy after infidelity, rather than the couple as a single unit. This allowed the study to examine both individual experiences and differences between partners within the same relationship.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted gradually throughout May 2026, with participants interviewed on different weeks. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes. The interview guide covered the process through which the infidelity was discovered, changes in communication patterns after the conflict, forms of access openness involving digital devices and social media, changes in privacy boundaries, and experiences of rebuilding trust within the relationship. In-depth interviewing allowed participants to explain their experiences, perspectives, and reasons behind the decisions they made throughout the relationship recovery process. Before the interviews, participants were informed about the purpose of the study and provided consent to participate. All interviews were recorded with the participants' consent and then transcribed verbatim to facilitate analysis.

Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis following the approach developed by Braun and Clarke. The analysis began with repeated readings of the interview transcripts to develop familiarity with the data and an overall understanding of the participants' experiences. The researchers then generated initial codes from data segments related to communication privacy, digital access openness, changes in privacy boundaries, and trust recovery. The initial coding was conducted primarily inductively, allowing codes to emerge from the participants' accounts rather than being determined entirely by the concepts of Communication Privacy Management (CPM). Codes with related meanings were then grouped into potential themes. The researchers subsequently reviewed, refined, defined, and named the themes to ensure that they adequately represented the patterns found across the participants' experiences.

Although the coding process was primarily inductive, the interpretation of the themes was informed by Communication Privacy Management (CPM). CPM was therefore positioned as a theoretical interpretive framework rather than a predetermined coding scheme. Concepts such as privacy boundaries, privacy rules, boundary coordination, and boundary turbulence were used to interpret how participants negotiated access to personal information and reconstructed communication privacy following infidelity. The final themes were thus developed from the participants' experiences and subsequently interpreted through CPM. This combination allowed the study to maintain its phenomenological focus on lived experiences while using reflexive thematic

analysis to identify patterns of meaning within the data.

To enhance the credibility of the study, source triangulation was conducted by comparing information obtained from participants who had been betrayed and those who had committed infidelity. The analysis was also conducted iteratively by checking the coding and developing themes against the interview transcripts to ensure that the interpretations remained grounded in the experiences described by the participants. In this way, reflexive thematic analysis served as the analytical procedure for identifying patterns across the participants' accounts, while the phenomenological design provided the orientation for understanding their lived experiences and CPM provided the theoretical lens for interpreting the renegotiation of communication privacy boundaries.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of interviews with the five participants showed that relationship recovery after infidelity is characterized not only by efforts to rebuild trust but also by substantial changes in how couples manage privacy within the relationship. Before the infidelity was revealed, privacy boundaries were generally taken for granted and were embedded in everyday relationship practices. Mobile phones, social media accounts, personal conversations, and other digital information were largely treated as individual domains. After the discovery of infidelity, however, these previously accepted boundaries became uncertain and were subsequently renegotiated. The recovery process therefore involved not only emotional adjustment but also a reorganization of the rules governing access to personal information.

The findings indicate that this process developed gradually. It began with the disruption of established privacy boundaries when digital traces became evidence of infidelity. This disruption was followed by the development of new agreements concerning access to digital devices and information. Over time, such openness was incorporated into everyday communication practices and became one of the ways through which couples attempted to restore a sense of security. However, the findings also show that openness itself did not immediately restore trust. Rather, trust was rebuilt through the repeated experience of openness, consistency, and honest communication. Based on this process, three main themes were identified: (1) changes in privacy boundaries after infidelity, (2) negotiation of privacy boundaries through digital access openness, and (3) digital openness as a strategy for reconstructing trust.

a) Changes in Privacy Boundaries After Infidelity

The interview findings show that infidelity not only results in a loss of trust but also changes how couples perceive privacy within the relationship. Before the infidelity was revealed, mobile phones, social media, and various digital activities were treated as personal spaces that did not need to be accessed by the partner. However, once suspicion emerged, digital devices became a primary source for seeking evidence of infidelity. All participants discovered the infidelity through digital traces left by their partners, although the forms differed. One participant found evidence

through bank transaction records and WhatsApp conversations, another saw direct messages on Instagram, while another found photos and conversations stored on the partner's mobile phone

For example, one participant described how suspicion initially developed because of the partner's behavior toward his phone:

"I was suspicious at first because of the way he seemed very secretive and protective of his phone. I decided to check the transaction history and his WhatsApp conversations, and eventually I found clear evidence that he had booked a hotel room with a coworker." (I3).

Another participant found evidence through photographs stored on the partner's phone:

"My wife found photos of me with another woman in my gallery after she opened my phone without my permission while I was sleeping." (I4)

These accounts show that digital technology occupies a dual position in intimate relationships. The same devices and platforms that previously functioned as ordinary communication tools became sources of evidence when trust was questioned. Digital traces therefore acquired a new meaning after the discovery of infidelity. A conversation, transaction record, photograph, or social media interaction was no longer interpreted merely as information but became potentially relevant to determining whether the partner was being honest. In this sense, the meaning of digital information changed alongside the meaning of the relationship itself.

These changes were followed by significant shifts in the relationships. The betrayed partners described feelings of anger, disappointment, and loss of trust toward their partners. Some temporarily stopped communicating by blocking all of their partners' social media accounts, while married couples limited communication to matters concerning their children through WhatsApp. At the same time, the unfaithful partners recognized that their actions had destroyed the trust that had been built over time.

One participant stated: "My trust disappeared immediately" (I1). Another participant stated: "I know that destroying trust is easy, but rebuilding it is difficult" (I4).

The different responses described by participants indicate that the breakdown of trust also affected their willingness to communicate. Withdrawal, blocking, and restricting communication can be understood as attempts to create distance when previously established expectations of privacy and trust have been disrupted. At the same time, these practices demonstrate that privacy management is closely connected to relational security. When the relationship is perceived as secure, privacy boundaries can remain relatively invisible because they are supported by trust. Once that trust is broken, however, those boundaries become more visible because both partners must reconsider what information can be accessed, what should remain private, and who has the right to obtain it.

These findings show that the effects of infidelity extend beyond emotional conflict. Infidelity also changes the rules that previously governed personal information within the relationship. Before the conflict, mobile phones, social media accounts, and private conversations were understood as part of a personal space respected by each partner. After trust was violated,

however, these boundaries began to be questioned. Information that had previously never been checked became an object of investigation, while digital devices shifted from communication tools to tools for verifying a partner's honesty. This change in the perception of personal information became the starting point for the emergence of new privacy rules within the relationship.

From the perspective of Communication Privacy Management (CPM), this condition can be understood as boundary turbulence, a situation in which previously established privacy management rules are no longer sufficient to sustain the relationship. Infidelity disrupts the balance of these rules, leaving couples uncertain about whom they can trust and how personal information should be managed. The problem is therefore not simply that one partner has hidden information from the other. More fundamentally, the event creates uncertainty regarding the rules that previously governed private information. The couple must determine whether the previous understanding of privacy remains appropriate or whether new boundaries are required.

This interpretation is consistent with the CPM perspective that privacy rules are contextual rather than permanently fixed. When circumstances change, individuals may reconsider how much information they are willing to disclose and under what conditions disclosure should occur. In the context of this study, infidelity functions as a major relational event that prompts such reconsideration. McBride et al. (2020) explain that privacy rule decisions are influenced by contextual factors that encourage individuals to reassess their decisions concerning the disclosure of private information. The present findings demonstrate how a breach of trust can become one such catalyst in romantic relationships.

The findings also suggest that boundary turbulence after infidelity is experienced by both sides, although in different ways. For the betrayed partner, uncertainty emerges because previously trusted information can no longer be taken at face value. For the unfaithful partner, uncertainty concerns what must be disclosed or demonstrated in order to regain credibility. Consequently, both partners face a changed communication environment. The betrayed partner becomes more attentive to information that was previously considered private, while the unfaithful partner becomes more aware that previously private information may now be expected to become accessible.

The findings extend Communication Privacy Management research by showing how a breach of trust can trigger the renegotiation of privacy rules in romantic relationships. The central issue faced by the couples is therefore not simply how to forgive an unfaithful partner, but also how to reconstruct privacy boundaries that have been disrupted. Infidelity can consequently be understood not only as a crisis of trust but also as a disruption of communication privacy management, as couples must redefine who may access particular information and under what circumstances such access can be granted during relationship recovery.

This perspective provides an important distinction between forgiveness and privacy renegotiation. A couple may decide to remain together without immediately restoring the privacy arrangements that existed before the infidelity. Staying in the relationship therefore does not

necessarily mean returning to the previous relational pattern. Instead, remaining together can involve establishing a new set of expectations concerning communication, access, and disclosure. The recovery process is consequently accompanied by a reconstruction of the relational boundaries that had previously been taken for granted.

b) Negotiating Privacy Boundaries through Digital Access Openness

After trust was damaged, all participants described clear changes in how they managed personal information. Before the infidelity, mobile phones, social media accounts, and private conversations were treated as personal spaces. After the conflict, however, new agreements emerged that gave partners broader access to such digital information. The forms of openness varied, ranging from sharing mobile phone passwords and allowing partners to check devices at any time, to no longer locking mobile phones and providing access to social media accounts, photo galleries, email, and real-time location.

The variation in these practices suggests that digital openness does not take a single form. It can involve access to a device itself, access to particular accounts, disclosure of passwords, sharing of location information, or greater explanation of everyday activities. What connects these different practices is not that all information on a device becomes jointly owned, but that some previously private information becomes accessible to the partner under newly negotiated relational rules. Thus, digital openness should not be understood merely as the act of handing over a password or allowing someone to check a phone. It represents a broader change in the rules governing information within the relationship.

This openness was not practiced only by the unfaithful partners. The betrayed partners also acknowledged that they checked their partners' digital devices more frequently than they had before the infidelity. One participant stated that their partner's mobile phone had to be placed on the table whenever they met so that it could be checked at any time. Another explained that they already knew their partner's social media password and occasionally checked Instagram direct messages, photo galleries, and email. Meanwhile, the unfaithful partners regarded the loss of privacy regarding their mobile phones as a consequence they had to accept in order to regain their partners' trust.

The experience was described explicitly by one participant: **"**The phone has to be left openly on the table when we meet, and I am free to check it at any time" (I1). Another participant explained: "I know his password and occasionally check his Instagram DMs, gallery, and email" (I5).

The reciprocal nature of these practices is significant. Digital openness was not exclusively a demand made by the betrayed partner; in some cases, it was also actively offered by the unfaithful partner. This distinction matters because it separates negotiated openness from unilateral access. When access is offered or mutually accepted as part of the recovery process, it can be interpreted as a relational practice rather than simply an act of surveillance. The findings therefore suggest that the meaning of digital access depends not only on what information becomes accessible but also on how that access is negotiated and understood by both partners.

Interestingly, digital access openness was not viewed as a form of punishment by most participants. Instead, it was interpreted as a way of demonstrating a genuine commitment to repairing the relationship. Some unfaithful partners consciously left their mobile phones unlocked, shared their location without being asked, or provided more detailed explanations about their daily activities. For them, these actions represented accountability for the breach of trust they had committed. Meanwhile, the betrayed partners no longer evaluated their partners' commitment solely through apologies but also through their willingness to provide access to various forms of digital information. Thus, access openness was not merely a technical matter but developed into a symbol of commitment in the relationship recovery process.

One participant explained the meaning of such openness: "Because text feels cold, I prove my sincerity through actions, for example by sending my location without being asked" (I4).

This finding suggests that the value of digital openness lies partly in its symbolic meaning. An unlocked phone or voluntarily shared location may communicate a willingness to reduce uncertainty and demonstrate that there is less to hide. In this context, access becomes a communicative act. The partner is not merely receiving information but interpreting the act of disclosure as evidence of accountability and willingness to repair the relationship. Digital access therefore becomes embedded in the emotional and relational meaning of recovery.

At the same time, this process demonstrates that privacy boundaries are not simply eliminated after infidelity. Instead, they are reorganized. The findings do not indicate that participants completely abandoned the idea of personal privacy. Rather, they negotiated greater access to specific forms of information because of the circumstances created by the breach of trust. This distinction is important because it shows that increased access does not necessarily mean that privacy ceases to exist. Privacy continues to be managed, but under different rules.

These These findings should, however, be interpreted carefully in relation to the concept of *co-ownership* in CPM. The participants' experiences demonstrate access to devices and, in some cases, access to particular information, but this does not mean that all information stored on a device automatically becomes co-owned. A mobile phone may contain information that has been intentionally disclosed to the partner, but it may also contain private conversations, photographs, or other information belonging to third parties. Therefore, access to a device should be distinguished from disclosure of specific private information and from co-ownership of information that has actually been disclosed.

In this study, *co-ownership* is therefore not used to describe the entire contents of a mobile phone or social media account. Instead, the findings are better understood in terms of negotiated access and boundary coordination. Partners negotiated which information could be accessed, when access could occur, and what purpose the access served. Having access to a partner's phone, for example, did not necessarily mean that every piece of information had to be examined. The meaning of access depended on the privacy rules that the couple negotiated after the breach of trust.

The findings are consistent with McBride et al. (2020), who show that the disclosure of personal information is always based on rules agreed upon by the parties involved in a relationship. However, the context of this study reveals a different dynamic. In workplace relationships, changes in privacy rules are influenced by the need to maintain professional relationships. In post-infidelity romantic relationships, by contrast, new rules are established in response to the loss of trust. Thus, digital access openness is no longer simply a form of information sharing but becomes a communication mechanism through which couples rebuild a sense of security within the relationship.

This difference also highlights the importance of relational context in understanding privacy management. The same behavior, such as checking a partner's phone, can have different meanings depending on the circumstances. In a relationship characterized by mutual agreement, the practice may be interpreted as part of a temporary recovery strategy. In a relationship where access is demanded without agreement, the same practice may be experienced as intrusive. The findings therefore support the idea that privacy management cannot be evaluated solely by observing the amount of information accessed. The relational rules and meanings attached to that access are equally important.

These findings also complement the research of Levy and Schneier (2021), who explain that close others are the parties most likely to have access to digital devices and personal information. While their research primarily discusses digital access as a potential threat to privacy, this study demonstrates a different dimension. In the context of relationship recovery after infidelity, access to mobile phones, social media, and other personal information is consciously negotiated by couples as part of the process of rebuilding trust. In other words, digital information does not function only as an object that must be protected but also as a communication resource used to repair a relationship that has been damaged.

This finding suggests that the relationship between privacy and surveillance is not always straightforward. Digital access may become surveillance when it is imposed, excessive, or disconnected from mutually accepted relational purposes. However, the participants in this study described access primarily within the context of repairing damaged trust. Their experiences indicate that the same technological affordance can be interpreted differently depending on the intention, agreement, and relational context surrounding it.

Based on these findings, this study argues that digital access openness cannot be understood solely as a form of transparency or as the loss of individual privacy. Rather, it results from a negotiation process through which couples reconstruct rules concerning access to personal information after infidelity. This process distinguishes the relationship before and after infidelity. Whereas privacy boundaries were previously built on trust, they are reconstructed after infidelity through mutually agreed digital access openness as a strategy for relationship recovery.

More broadly, the findings suggest that digital openness becomes meaningful when it is embedded in communication about expectations. Access itself cannot explain why couples choose to remain together or why trust begins to return. Instead, access functions as one element in a broader process

in which partners communicate what they expect from one another and demonstrate whether those expectations can be consistently fulfilled.

c) Digital Openness as a Strategy for Reconstructing Trust

Although couples implemented various forms of digital access openness, the interview findings show that trust did not return instantly. All participants described recovery as a gradual process. Most acknowledged that their relationships had improved compared with the initial stage of the conflict, but feelings of suspicion still occasionally emerged, particularly when their partners were slow to respond to messages, appeared active on social media, or engaged in activities that were unknown to them. Thus, digital access openness did not erase the experience of infidelity but helped couples reduce uncertainty while rebuilding their relationships.

This finding indicates that access openness should not be interpreted as a direct replacement for trust. Rather, it creates conditions in which trust can gradually be reconstructed. The distinction is important because a partner may have complete access to another person's phone while still experiencing doubt or insecurity. Conversely, the gradual reduction of suspicion may occur when openness is repeatedly accompanied by consistent behavior. Therefore, the recovery process appears to depend less on the quantity of information available and more on how that information is integrated into everyday relational experiences.

An interesting finding concerns the way participants interpreted digital communication after infidelity. Before the conflict, short WhatsApp messages were viewed simply as a means of everyday communication. After the infidelity was revealed, however, every message carried much greater meaning. The betrayed partners paid attention not only to the content of messages but also to response speed, the length of explanations, word choice, and whether the partner attempted to shift blame. In contrast, the unfaithful partners tried to demonstrate sincerity through prompt replies, more detailed explanations, and avoiding responses that appeared defensive.

One participant explained: "I judge it from small things, such as how quickly he responds, how long the explanation is, and whether there are sentences that blame me" (I1). Another participant from the unfaithful partner perspective stated: "I try to show sincerity by replying quickly, writing longer messages, and not making excuses to justify myself" (I2).

One participant also described location sharing as a way of demonstrating sincerity: "Because text feels cold, I prove my sincerity through actions, for example by sending my location without being asked" (I4).

The increased attention to small details of digital communication suggests that the breach of trust changes the interpretive context in which messages are received. A delayed response, which might previously have been considered insignificant, can become meaningful when uncertainty already exists. Similarly, a detailed explanation may be interpreted as reassurance rather than unnecessary information. Digital communication therefore becomes more than the transmission of messages; it becomes a site where partners evaluate whether everyday behavior is

consistent with the expectations established during recovery.

These findings indicate that the function of digital communication changes after infidelity. WhatsApp, social media, and other digital platforms no longer function merely as media for exchanging information but become media for demonstrating behavioral consistency. Participants no longer evaluated their partners' honesty solely on the basis of what they said but also on the consistency between the messages they sent and their everyday actions. Therefore, an apology delivered through a short message was considered meaningless when it was not followed by observable behavioral change. Consistency in responding to messages, openness about daily activities, and willingness to provide access to digital devices became new indicators in the rebuilding of trust.

This shift from verbal assurance to observable consistency is particularly important in understanding trust recovery. The participants' experiences suggest that trust is reconstructed through repeated interactions rather than through a single disclosure or apology. Digital communication provides a continuous stream of opportunities for partners to demonstrate whether their behavior corresponds with their promises. Each interaction can therefore reinforce or weaken the emerging sense of trust.

The findings also suggest that the recovery process involves a form of relational monitoring, although this should not automatically be equated with surveillance. The betrayed partner may observe response patterns, social media activity, or access practices because these behaviors provide information about whether the new privacy rules are being respected. At the same time, the unfaithful partner may voluntarily provide information to reduce uncertainty. The difference lies in whether these practices are experienced as mutually accepted strategies for recovery or as coercive demands for control.

From the perspective of Communication Privacy Management, this condition shows that successful privacy management depends not only on information openness but also on the partners' ability to comply with mutually agreed privacy rules. However, compliance with these rules does not mean that all information accessible through a device becomes co-owned. Rather, when particular private information has been intentionally disclosed, both parties may have responsibilities concerning how that information is subsequently managed. When the agreed rules are respected, trust can gradually grow again. Conversely, violations of newly agreed rules may generate new boundary turbulence and hinder relationship recovery (McBride et al., 2020).

This interpretation also highlights the temporal dimension of privacy management. The rules established after infidelity should not necessarily be understood as permanent. They may change as the relationship becomes more stable and trust is gradually restored. If openness initially functions as a way to reduce uncertainty, its importance may decrease as confidence in the partner increases. Conversely, a new breach of trust may reactivate previous uncertainty and lead to another renegotiation of boundaries. Privacy management can therefore be understood as an ongoing process rather than a one-time agreement.

These findings also provide a different perspective from Levy and Schneier's discussion of privacy threats in intimate relationships. Levy and Schneier (2021) emphasize that partners' access to digital devices can develop into a form of surveillance that reduces individual privacy. This study shows that during the early phase of relationship recovery, such access may instead be consciously accepted by both parties as part of an effort to rebuild trust. In other words, opening access to mobile phones or social media is not always interpreted as a form of control. Its meaning depends on the purpose mutually agreed upon by the couple. When carried out on the basis of mutual agreement and commitment, digital access openness is understood as a form of responsibility for repairing the relationship.

The contrast with surveillance-oriented interpretations is useful because it demonstrates that digital access should be examined within its relational context. An identical practice may be experienced differently by different couples. For the participants in this study, access was meaningful because it was connected to the specific history of infidelity and the need to demonstrate accountability. This does not mean that unrestricted access is inherently beneficial. Rather, it indicates that the meaning and consequences of access depend on the privacy rules negotiated between partners.

Nevertheless, this study also found that digital openness has limitations. All participants acknowledged that access to mobile phones or social media did not automatically eliminate suspicion. Trust still required time to develop through everyday experiences. Thus, digital access openness functions only as a facilitator in the recovery process, rather than as an end in itself. What determines the success of relationship recovery is not how much information is disclosed to the partner, but whether such openness is accompanied by consistent behavioral change and honest communication.

This finding is important because it prevents digital transparency from being treated as a simple solution to infidelity. If access is considered sufficient by itself, couples may focus on checking devices while overlooking the broader communication problems that contributed to the deterioration of trust. The participants' experiences instead suggest that digital openness becomes meaningful when it is accompanied by changes in everyday interaction. The rebuilding of trust therefore involves both informational and behavioral dimensions.

The findings further indicate that digital openness may initially reduce uncertainty but cannot completely eliminate the emotional consequences of infidelity. Suspicion may continue to appear even when the partner has become more transparent. This suggests that trust recovery is not simply an informational process in which uncertainty disappears once enough evidence is provided. It is also an experiential process in which the betrayed partner gradually develops confidence through repeated encounters with consistent behavior.

These findings contribute to the development of Communication Privacy Management in the context of post-infidelity romantic relationships. Previous research has examined privacy management and digital access in romantic or intimate relationships, including how partners negotiate access to mobile devices and how such access may create privacy risks (Doerfler et al.,

2024; Levy & Schneier, 2021; Ngcongo, 2016). The present study adds a more specific condition to this discussion: infidelity can act as a trigger that transforms previously implicit privacy rules and prompts couples to renegotiate access to particular forms of digital information during relationship recovery.

Information openness has often been understood as a consequence of trust. This study demonstrates a different direction. When trust has collapsed, digital access openness can instead be used as a communication strategy for rebuilding that trust. Thus, the relationship between privacy and trust is not unidirectional. Both influence each other through an ongoing process of negotiation as couples attempt to maintain their relationship after infidelity.

More specifically, the novelty of this finding lies not in the general observation that digital openness may support trust recovery, but in showing how a breach of trust changes the privacy rules through which digital information is managed. The participants' experiences indicate that couples do not simply become more transparent after infidelity. They negotiate which forms of access are acceptable, what information may be disclosed, when access is appropriate, and what boundaries remain in place. In this sense, the study extends CPM by showing that relationship recovery can involve a temporary or evolving reconfiguration of privacy boundaries rather than the simple removal of privacy.

Taken together, the three themes demonstrate a sequential but not necessarily linear process. First, infidelity disrupts existing privacy boundaries and creates uncertainty about the management of personal information. Second, couples respond by negotiating new rules that may include broader digital access. Third, these new practices become part of everyday efforts to reconstruct trust. However, the process may move back and forth between these stages. When a newly established rule is violated, uncertainty can re-emerge and create another episode of boundary turbulence. Likewise, when consistent behavior is maintained over time, the need for intensive access may gradually decrease.

The overall finding therefore suggests that digital access after infidelity is best understood as a negotiated relational practice. It is neither inherently liberating nor inherently intrusive. Its meaning emerges from the communication processes through which couples establish ownership, access, expectations, and responsibilities. In this sense, the study positions digital openness not as the disappearance of privacy but as a temporary or evolving reconfiguration of privacy boundaries in response to a major breach of trust.

Theoretically, this finding expands the application of CPM by demonstrating how a severe relational disruption can transform privacy rules in intimate relationships. Practically, it suggests that couples attempting to recover from infidelity may benefit not simply from increasing access but from explicitly discussing the purpose, limits, and duration of that access. Such negotiation can help prevent openness from becoming an uncontrolled form of surveillance while still allowing digital transparency to function as a means of demonstrating accountability. Ultimately, the recovery of trust depends on whether these

negotiated privacy practices are supported by honest communication and consistent behavior over time.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that infidelity affects not only trust within romantic relationships but also the way couples understand, negotiate, and manage communication privacy. The findings show that the disclosure of infidelity disrupts privacy boundaries that had previously been taken for granted. Digital devices and information that were once regarded as personal spaces become subject to new interpretations, particularly when they are used to seek evidence, reduce uncertainty, or evaluate a partner's honesty. Infidelity therefore creates not only a crisis of trust but also a disruption of the privacy rules that previously structured the relationship.

The study further shows that couples who choose to remain together respond to this disruption by renegotiating their privacy boundaries. Digital access openness, including access to mobile phones, social media accounts, email, photo galleries, and location information, emerges as one of the practices through which couples establish new rules for managing personal information. From the perspective of Communication Privacy Management (CPM), this process reflects boundary coordination through negotiated access to particular forms of information, rather than automatically creating co-ownership of all information contained in a device. Importantly, the findings indicate that digital openness does not necessarily mean the complete elimination of individual privacy. Rather, privacy is reorganized according to new relational circumstances and expectations following the breach of trust.

The findings also demonstrate that digital access openness functions as a strategy for reducing uncertainty and facilitating trust reconstruction, rather than as a direct mechanism for restoring trust. Participants continued to experience suspicion even after broader digital access had been established. Trust developed gradually through repeated experiences of openness, honest communication, and behavioral consistency. Digital communication consequently acquired a different meaning after infidelity: messages, response patterns, explanations, and voluntary disclosures became indicators through which partners assessed whether words were consistent with actions. This finding suggests that the effectiveness of digital openness depends less on the amount of information made accessible than on how consistently openness is accompanied by trustworthy behavior.

Taken together, the three themes identified in this study point to an ongoing and potentially non-linear process of privacy renegotiation. Infidelity initially produces boundary turbulence by disrupting previously established privacy rules. Couples then negotiate new forms of access and information sharing in response to this disruption. Over time, these practices may contribute to the reconstruction of trust when they are supported by consistent behavior and communication. However, violations of newly established rules may generate renewed uncertainty and require further renegotiation.

Privacy management in post-infidelity relationships should therefore be understood as an ongoing relational process rather than a one-time agreement.

Theoretically, this study extends the application of Communication Privacy Management to the context of post-infidelity romantic relationships by demonstrating how a breach of trust can transform previously established privacy rules and lead couples to renegotiate access to particular forms of digital information. The findings also highlight that the relationship between privacy and trust is not unidirectional. While trust may initially provide the basis for maintaining personal boundaries, the loss of trust can lead couples to renegotiate those boundaries through greater openness. At the same time, consistent adherence to newly negotiated privacy rules can contribute to the gradual reconstruction of trust. In this sense, privacy management and trust reconstruction are interconnected processes that develop through continuous negotiation.

The contribution of this study lies not simply in showing that digital openness can support trust recovery, but in demonstrating how infidelity triggers a reconfiguration of privacy rules within romantic relationships. Couples do not simply remove privacy boundaries after infidelity; instead, they negotiate which information may be accessed, under what circumstances, and with what relational purpose. This finding adds a more specific dimension to the application of CPM in intimate relationships by showing that privacy boundaries may be temporarily or gradually reorganized in response to a breach of trust.

Practically, the findings suggest that digital access openness should not be treated as a single or universal solution for recovering from infidelity. Increased access may help reduce uncertainty, but it does not by itself resolve the emotional and relational consequences of a breach of trust. Couples may therefore need to communicate explicitly about the purpose, scope, and boundaries of digital access so that openness does not develop into unwanted surveillance or control. Digital transparency is most meaningful when it is mutually understood as part of relationship repair and accompanied by honest communication and consistent behavioral change.

This study is limited to couples who chose to maintain their relationships after infidelity and therefore does not capture how communication privacy is managed by couples who decide to separate. The relatively small number of participants also limits the range of experiences represented in the findings. Future research could involve participants with more diverse relationship characteristics and examine privacy boundary negotiation longitudinally to capture how digital openness and trust change over time. Future studies could also explore when and how couples gradually renegotiate or restore more individual privacy as trust becomes more stable.

Overall, this study concludes that recovering from infidelity involves more than rebuilding emotional trust. It also requires couples to reconstruct the privacy boundaries that organize their everyday communication. Digital access openness can serve as an important relational resource in this process, but its contribution depends on mutual agreement, boundary coordination, honest communication, and consistent behavior. Thus, the recovery of trust is not achieved simply by giving a partner greater access to digital information,

but through the sustained negotiation of privacy and trust within the relationship.

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