



NAVIGATING PRIVACY BOUNDARIES BY INTERNATIONAL ONLINE GAMING PLAYERS

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how international online gaming players navigate privacy boundaries in digital interaction, with particular attention to intimacy negotiation across cultural contexts. Using participant observation and autoethnography, the researcher immersed as a player in multiplayer games, joined guilds, and conducted interviews via in-game chat and external platforms. Findings reveal that privacy boundaries are managed through layered self-disclosure, reliance on game affordances such as guild and party systems, and the strategic migration of communication to platforms like Discord and WhatsApp. Cross-cultural differences are also evident: Indonesian players tended to be more cautious and gradual in disclosure, while Western players were more direct in revealing personal information. The study contributes to Communication Privacy Management (CPM) scholarship by highlighting the role of intercultural dynamics in digital intimacy and underscores the fragility of online relationships, which can be both rapidly formed and easily dissolved.

Keywords: *Online gaming, Privacy boundaries, Intimacy negotiation, Self-disclosure, Intercultural communication.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The global growth of online gaming has transformed digital entertainment into a vibrant ecosystem where social interaction, identity management, and intimacy are negotiated daily (Zervas & Maronitis, 2025). According to industry data, the number of active gamers worldwide surpassed three billion in 2022, with Asia contributing nearly half of this population (Simon, 2020; Zendle et al., 2023). Online games today are not only about competition and leisure but also function as social arenas that connect

individuals across cultures and geographies (Pizzo et al., 2022; Terason & Pahasing, 2025).

Recent research suggests that players do not merely “play the game” but engage in complex relational practices, including collaboration, friendship, and intimacy (Rautalahti et al., 2025; Zhao, 2024). These dynamics often involve a negotiation of privacy boundaries, as players weigh what aspects of their identity to disclose and what to withhold (Kayas et al., 2024). For international players, this negotiation is further complicated by cultural norms, language differences, and expectations regarding online intimacy (Jaidka et al., 2024; Korkmazer et al., 2022).

In Indonesia, online gaming has become a mainstream cultural phenomenon, particularly among young people. Games such as Mobile Legends and PUBG Mobile are not only popular but also shape new communication patterns and communities (Hosky & Wibowo, 2023). Studies from local contexts indicate that Indonesian gamers often approach online disclosure with caution, reflecting broader collectivist values and concerns about safety (Laoebela et al., 2023; Oguine et al., 2025).

However, despite this growing body of literature, there remains a gap in understanding how international players navigate privacy boundaries when intimacy is at stake. Existing research often treats players within a single cultural frame, overlooking how cross-border interaction reshapes disclosure practices (Durand et al., 2024). This paper addresses that gap by analyzing the strategies used by Indonesian, American, and British players in managing self-disclosure, intimacy, and privacy during gameplay.

Theoretically, the study draws upon Communication Privacy Management (CPM) theory (Wang et al., 2024), which views privacy as a boundary management process. In digital contexts, boundaries are dynamic and influenced by both technological affordances and cultural expectations (Erstad & Silseth, 2023; Spišák, 2025). Methodologically, the research employs participant observation and autoethnography, allowing the researcher to experience firsthand the negotiations of privacy and intimacy that occur in real-time game interactions.

By focusing on international online gaming, this article contributes to three main discussions:

1. How privacy boundaries are managed in the context of digital intimacy.

2. How game affordances shape disclosure practices.
3. How cross-cultural factors influence the negotiation of intimacy in online communities.

In doing so, it provides both theoretical and practical insights into the fragile yet meaningful ways that intimacy is constructed in global digital environments.

2. RESEARCH METHODE

This study employs a qualitative autoethnographic design combined with participant observation. Autoethnography enables the researcher to reflect critically on personal experiences as both participant and observer in online gaming environments (Orel, 2024). Participant observation complements this approach by allowing immersion in natural interactions, providing access to the everyday negotiation of privacy boundaries and intimacy.

The study was conducted in popular online multiplayer games, including multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA) and battle royale genres. These platforms were chosen because of their international player bases and integrated communication affordances such as team-based missions, guilds, text chat, and voice channels, which provide rich contexts for observing self-disclosure and intimacy-building.

The researcher assumed a dual role as both active player and observer. By joining international teams and participating in missions, the researcher established rapport and gained access to natural conversations. This insider–outsider stance reflects digital ethnography practices that stress reflexivity and researcher positionality (Creswell, 2021; Yip, 2024).

The study involved four active players from three different countries: Indonesia, the United States, and the United Kingdom. All participants were selected purposively based on two criteria: (1) active engagement in social interaction within the game, and (2) willingness to reflect on privacy and disclosure practices during gameplay. Participants were diverse in age and gaming experience, ranging from late adolescence to young adulthood, with between three to six years of gaming

involvement. To protect confidentiality, no real names or specific identifiers are disclosed.

Data Collection

Data were collected using three techniques:

1. **Participant Observation.** The researcher engaged in daily gameplay, joining missions, raids, and guild activities. Detailed field notes were maintained to capture how intimacy and disclosure unfolded.
2. **In-Game Interviews.** Semi-structured interviews were conducted through in-game chat and direct messages. Questions explored what information participants shared, how they managed privacy, and how they responded to intimacy in gaming contexts.
3. **Chat Logs and Documentation.** Relevant conversations were saved as digital records and later transcribed for thematic analysis.

This triangulation enhanced the depth and reliability of findings (Schlunegger et al., 2024).

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Schlunegger et al., 2024). The process included:

1. Reading and re-reading chat logs for familiarity.
2. Coding segments related to disclosure, privacy, and intimacy.
3. Identifying recurrent themes across cases.
4. Interpreting themes through the lens of Communication Privacy Management (CPM) theory.

Themes that emerged included: layered intimacy, the role of game affordances, migration to external platforms, cultural negotiation, and fragility of digital intimacy.

The study followed digital research ethics guidelines (Molina et al., 2023). Participants provided informed consent digitally before interviews. All data were

anonymized, and sensitive information such as photographs, personal addresses, or account details were excluded. The researcher also engaged in reflexivity, recognizing that their dual role as both player and researcher could influence interactions.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings reveal that intimacy and privacy in online gaming are negotiated in layered and fragile ways. International players continuously balanced openness and caution, shaped by technological affordances and cultural expectations. Seven themes emerged from the analysis.

Layered Intimacy: From Surface to Deeper Disclosure

Initial interaction among players commonly involved surface-level disclosures, such as nickname, age, country of origin, or general interests. This stage created minimal vulnerability while enabling basic trust. For instance, one Indonesian player introduced themselves simply as “20, from Medan,” while an American player replied with “college sophomore, East Coast.” These exchanges reflect a protective boundary where only low-risk information is shared.

Deeper disclosures, such as family situation, emotional struggles, or romantic relationships, emerged gradually after repeated interactions. One chat excerpt shows this transition:

“At first, I only told him my age. Weeks later, after many matches, I shared about my breakup. I felt safer because he already knew me in the game.”

This pattern aligns with Communication Privacy Management theory (Petronio 2018), which explains disclosure as boundary opening dependent on relational trust. The gradual movement from surface to deeper sharing demonstrates how intimacy in gaming environments is layered rather than immediate.

Game Affordances as Social Gateways

Game mechanics and communication features played a central role in facilitating intimacy. Text chat, team missions, and guild systems functioned as social gateways.

During collaborative missions, casual coordination often led to off-topic conversations:

"We were supposed to plan our strategy, but then the talk shifted to hobbies, favorite movies, and family traditions."

These conversations illustrate how affordances designed for gameplay unintentionally become spaces for personal disclosure. Conversely, when games provided limited or toxic environments (e.g., public chat filled with harassment), players withdrew and avoided sharing. This finding echoes previous research that online environments simultaneously enable and constrain disclosure (Melzner et al., 2023; Suhendar et al., 2023).

Migration Beyond the Game (Discord, WhatsApp, Voice Call)

A critical threshold of intimacy occurred when communication moved from in-game chat to external platforms. Discord and WhatsApp were the most common choices. Migration was perceived as a marker of trust:

"When I added him to WhatsApp, it meant I trusted him more than just a game buddy."

However, not all migrations were comfortable. One participant described withdrawing after trying a voice call:

"I felt awkward when we switched to voice. Suddenly it was too real, so I stopped replying."

This illustrates both the opportunity and risk of external migration: while it deepens intimacy, it may also cause discomfort and rupture.

Cross-Cultural Variations in Privacy Negotiation

Differences emerged between Indonesian and Western participants. Indonesian players tended to practice cautious, gradual disclosure, often requiring weeks before sharing personal details. In contrast, American and British players were more direct and immediate in revealing sensitive information, including mental health struggles or relationship problems.

For example, a British player openly discussed anxiety in early interactions, while Indonesian players delayed personal topics until long-term rapport was built. This

reflects broader collectivist versus individualist cultural orientations (Lomas et al., 2023). These variations sometimes created misunderstandings: Indonesians perceived Western openness as “too fast,” while Western players occasionally found Indonesian caution as “distant” or “cold.”

Trust-Building and Withdrawal as Privacy Strategy

Trust was not static but negotiated continuously. Players used testing strategies before disclosure, such as sharing minor secrets or personal preferences and waiting for the other’s reaction. When trust was broken, withdrawal became the dominant strategy. Several participants described situations of suddenly being blocked or ignored after disclosure:

“I thought we were close, but after I shared about my family, he disappeared.”

This abrupt withdrawal reflects what CPM theory calls boundary turbulence (Spalart & Dodd, 2024), where disclosure creates discomfort leading to relationship termination.

Gender and Safety Concerns in Online Intimacy

Gender dynamics shaped disclosure practices. Female players, in particular, expressed caution due to experiences of harassment in gaming environments. One Indonesian female participant avoided voice chat entirely, fearing misinterpretation or unwanted attention:

“I prefer to keep silent in voice chat. If they know I’m a girl, they start acting differently.”

This resonates with global studies on gendered harassment in gaming (Ginting et al., 2023; Hoffman, 2024). The need for safety influenced how women navigated intimacy, often prioritizing self-protection over openness.

Fragility of Digital Intimacy

Finally, findings reveal that online intimacy is fragile. Relationships formed quickly due to frequent interaction, but could dissolve just as easily. One participant described the paradox:

"We talked every night for a month, then one day he just never came back. No explanation."

This fragility reflects the ephemeral nature of digital spaces, where anonymity, lack of physical presence, and ease of disconnection make intimacy both possible and precarious (Adams, 2024).

Thematic Synthesis

Overall, the themes highlight that privacy negotiation in online gaming is layered, culturally situated, and technologically mediated. While games offer opportunities for intimacy, these relationships are unstable and deeply dependent on both trust and cultural understanding.

Table 1. Thematic Table

Informant	Theme	Key Finding	Example Quote
Darkness12 (27, USA)	Cautious Disclosure	Shares personal info gradually; avoids giving address/phone; keeping game persona separate.	<i>"I wouldn't really give people my Discord unless I knew them for a decent amount of time... I probably wouldn't give out my phone number, I think that's a different territory."</i>
Keefus (26, UK)	Openness & Trust	More open and trusting, willing to share name, location, even gifts after only weeks of interaction.	<i>"I'm a pretty trusting person so not long, a couple of weeks maybe... My name, near the area of where I live, some life stories... stuff like that."</i>
Yui (24, USA)	Social Impressions & Boundaries	Decides interaction based on how others treat a person; uses gender/age/country info to	<i>"Knowing gender helps me address them, later comes"</i>

		set conversational boundaries.	<i>age... it also helps me adapt within conversations."</i>
Mashwell (20s, Indonesia)	Selective Sharing & Mutual Trust	Shares only minimal info (gender, approximate age, occupation); exchanges gifts only after years of knowing, with limited personal details.	<i>"Well, I didn't give the package a return address... the name isn't even my full name. But because I've known them for years, it's okay."</i>

4. CONCLUSION

This study explored how international online gaming players negotiate privacy boundaries in building digital intimacy. Findings show that disclosure is layered and fragile, starting with surface-level information before moving toward deeper personal topics. Communication features and game affordances act as gateways for closeness but can also become barriers in toxic environments.

A key turning point occurs when players migrate to external platforms such as Discord or WhatsApp, signaling higher trust yet also increasing vulnerability. Cultural differences further shape disclosure styles: Indonesian players tend to be more cautious, while Western players are more direct. Gender also plays a critical role, with female players adopting protective strategies to avoid harassment.

These dynamics demonstrate that privacy management is not only an individual choice but also a culturally and technologically mediated process. The study extends Communication Privacy Management theory to intercultural online contexts and highlights practical implications for developers, moderators, and players in creating safer and more inclusive gaming communities.

Despite its small sample, this research contributes valuable insight into the complexity of intimacy in digital play. Future studies with larger and comparative samples could further illuminate how privacy and intimacy evolve across gaming platforms and cultures.

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