

What You Don't Know Might Hurt Me: Keeping Secrets in Interpersonal Relationships

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Abstract

Despite being an interpersonal phenomenon, secrecy has not been extensively studied within the context of interpersonal relationships. This study examined how relationship quality and the target's connection to the secret relate to the experience of concealing a personal secret.

Participants ($n = 249$) completed an online questionnaire on which they described and answered questions about an actual personal secret that they are keeping from someone else. Keeping a secret was rated as more detrimental to participants' perceived well-being when it involved high effort and difficulty, frequent rumination, and expectations of negative consequences should it be revealed. The burden of keeping a secret was compounded when the information was directly relevant to and could negatively affect the target. Relationship quality was not related to the secret's perceived impact on well-being, but participants in high-quality relationships did expect the target to perceive the information more positively. Additional analyses explored how the experience of keeping a secret is moderated by attachment styles, fear of negative evaluation, and interpersonal trust. These results highlight the importance of expanding the research focus beyond the secret-keeper and emphasizing the broader relationship context.

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People are no strangers to secrets. At one point or another, everyone has kept a secret from someone, whether as trivial as liking a particular TV show or as serious as having experienced past abuse. Secrets can be positive, such as planning a surprise party, or negative, such as concealing an affair. Regardless of the content, everyone can relate to the stress of trying to conceal certain information.

Several studies have looked at the psychological and interpersonal dynamics of keeping a secret (Afifi & Steuber, 2010; Critcher & Ferguson, 2014; Slepian, Chun, & Mason, 2017; Vrij, Nunkoosing, Paterson, Oosterwegel, & Soukara, 2002). However, few studies have examined secret-keeping specifically within the context of people's relationships with those from whom the secret is kept. Given that a secret is always kept from at least one person, the experience of keeping a secret presumably varies with the nature of the relationship. Keeping a secret from a close friend, for instance, is probably quite different from keeping a secret from a casual acquaintance. This study aimed to examine secrecy from a relationship perspective, focusing on how concealing a personal secret affects the secret-keeper and his or her relationship(s) as a function of the nature of the relationship. Some general background on secrecy will first be presented, followed by a discussion of secrecy in interpersonal relations and a description of three personality variables that may moderate secret-keeping.

What Is a Secret?

Secrecy is an interpersonal phenomenon that depends less on the type of information being concealed and more on the person from whom the secret is kept (Kelly, 2002). For instance, a person's chronic illness may be common knowledge among family members but kept a secret from friends. Secrecy has commonly been defined as the conscious and active

concealment of information from others (Maas, Wismeijer, Van Assen, & Aquarius, 2012). Although lying is a common concealment strategy, secrecy and lying are distinct forms of deception, with secrecy being deception by omission and lying being deception by commission (Kelly, 2002). Secrecy is also distinct from privacy in that private information is typically information that other people do not have a right to know (Kelly, 2002). A secret, on the other hand, is information that the other person would normally expect to be told according to norms of disclosure and information sharing within the relationship. Thus, a secret arises when one person consciously decides to conceal information from someone who would otherwise expect to be privy to that knowledge.

Secrets differ along four dimensions – whether they are personal, interpersonal, secondhand, or putative. A personal secret directly involves the secret-keeper (Kelly, 1999), such as concealing one’s religious affiliation. An interpersonal secret is directly relevant to the person from whom the secret is kept. Concealing an affair from a spouse, for instance, would be considered an interpersonal secret, because the information directly affects the betrayed spouse. Other types of secrets include secondhand secrets kept on behalf of another person, such as when a friend asks one not to tell others about his or her drinking problem, and a putative secret, which is a secret that becomes known without the secret-keeper’s awareness (Caughlin, Scott, Miller, & Hefner, 2009). The primary focus of this study was on personal and interpersonal secrets.

Why Do People Keep Secrets?

Despite a prevailing preference for openness and honesty in relationships, people regularly find themselves compelled to keep secrets. Sometimes a secret is kept for fun or pleasure, such as in planning a surprise or having an exclusive inside scoop (Vrij et al., 2002). However, secrets are more commonly kept as a means of protecting oneself or close others

(Wismeijer, 2011). Having certain information come to light may cause other people to experience distress or feel hurt and betrayed, either by the information itself or the act of nondisclosure itself. The secret-keeper may want to avoid consequences that would negatively affect the other person or the relationship. Thus, maintaining positive relationships and being concerned about others' well-being are strong motivators for secrecy (Caughlin, Afifi, Carpenter-Theune, & Miller, 2005).

The desire to resist damaging or breaking existing attachments is rooted in the need to belong, a motivation to seek social acceptance that allows one to accrue the benefits of group membership and close relationships (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Being socially rejected or ostracized can be highly distressing, for without having the protection, support, or resources provided by others, people do not fare as well in life. Secrets are often driven by concerns over negative evaluation and disapproval (Caughlin et al., 2005), with the information being perceived as embarrassing, morally condemnable, or shameful (Wismeijer, 2011). Thus, keeping such information a secret protects one's relationships and avoids eliciting negative reactions from others.

Other reasons for keeping a secret include anticipating malicious use of the information, uncertainty in one's ability to communicate the information effectively, and a desire for privacy (Caughlin et al., 2005). More generally, people tend to make decisions using an expectancy-value model, in which expectations of positive outcomes are weighed against expectations of negative outcomes (Feather, 1982). If people anticipate the negative consequences of revealing a secret to be greater than the positive outcomes, they will likely decide to conceal the information.

The Experience of Secrecy

People commonly describe the relief of revealing a secret as having a weight lifted off their chest. Such analogies speak to the burdensome nature of concealing information, which can be cognitively, emotionally, and physically taxing. In fact, keeping a secret has been shown to increase people's estimates of hill steepness and perceived distance, much in the same way that a physical burden does (Slepian, Masicampo, Toosi, & Ambady, 2012). These effects are mediated by preoccupation with the secret and subjective effort of keeping the secret, suggesting that concealment depletes personal resources (Slepian, Camp, & Masicampo, 2015). When keeping secrets, people must work to avoid unintentionally revealing the information or looking suspicious in front of the person from whom they are keeping the secret. According to the psychosomatic theory of inhibition, such inhibition of thoughts or emotions, especially over a prolonged period of time, increases stress and autonomic nervous system activity, thus impacting physical and mental health (Gesell, 1999). Secrecy, in turn, is associated with a greater risk of somatic disease and lower physical and psychological well-being (Wismeijer, 2011).

People often think that the best way to keep a secret is simply to not think about it. However, according to the preoccupation model of secrecy, thought suppression actually increases the frequency of intrusive, unwanted thoughts related to the secret, thus requiring renewed efforts of thought suppression (Lane & Wegner, 1995). This process forms a cyclical repetition in which not thinking about the information makes it more accessible in one's mind. The mere presence of intrusive thoughts then creates further distress and preoccupation. The secret-keeper may also ruminate over the content, especially with shameful secrets, and such negative self-focused attention can induce depression, anger, and other negative emotional states (Orth, Berking, & Burkhardt, 2006; Thomsen, Mehlsen, Christensen, & Zachariae, 2002). Frequently letting one's thoughts wander to the secret also predicts lower well-being, which may

occur even when the secret-keeper is not actively concealing the information (Slepian et al., 2017). In fact, frequency of mind-wandering, but not frequency of concealment, predicts lower well-being (Slepian & Moulton-Tetlock, 2018). Thus, although secrecy tends to arise from a desire to avoid negative consequences, concealing information often entails its own physical and psychological consequences for the secret-keeper.

Secrets and Interpersonal Relationships

Given the interpersonal nature of secrecy, the negative consequences of concealing information often extend beyond the secret-keeper to affect the relationship with the person from whom the secret is kept. Having one's thoughts often wander to a secret predicts lower relationship quality and feelings of authenticity (Slepian et al., 2017), and self-concealment is associated with lower relationship satisfaction and commitment (Uysal, Lin, Knee, & Bush, 2012). Both self-concealment and a romantic partner's concealment independently predict higher conflict and lower satisfaction of autonomy, competence, and relatedness needs in a relationship (Uysal et al., 2012). Perceived concealment in a partner also reduces marital well-being and trust and increases conflict over time, with these effects being mediated by feelings of exclusion (Finkenauer, Kerkhof, Righetti, & Branje, 2009). Thus, keeping a secret affects the secret-keeper, the person from whom the secret is kept, and the relationship as a whole.

Of course, secrecy differs in different kinds of interpersonal relationships. For instance, adolescents tend to keep secrets from their parents to increase emotional autonomy but keep secrets from their friends to maintain social acceptance (Corsano, Musetti, Caricati, & Magnani, 2017). Characteristics of the relationship may also impact the experience of secrecy. Among family members, willingness to reveal a secret was best predicted by people's previous experiences with secret revelations, such as how verbally aggressive the confidant was and the

extent to which the response was more positive than expected (Afifi & Steuber, 2010).

Closeness, however, did not predict willingness to reveal a secret, suggesting that expectations of and experiences with supportive responses are crucial in impacting the decision to keep information a secret.

Attachment style has also been related to secret keeping. Securely attached people report less secrecy in their relationships, and anxious and avoidant attachment styles correlate with more secrecy (Vrij, Paterson, Nunkoosing, Soukara, & Oosterwegel, 2003). People high in anxious or avoidant attachment also report higher levels of rumination over their secrets, which is partly mediated by feelings of guilt (Merrill & Afifi, 2015). Thus, features of the relationship, including closeness, past experiences, and attachment style, are important to consider when analyzing secrecy.

Personality and Secrecy

Researchers have suggested that a predisposition to self-conceal may predict the negative symptoms associated with secrecy more strongly than the act of keeping a secret itself (Kelly & Yip, 2006). Some people are more secretive than others, and personality variables may moderate secrecy in ways that are independent of relationship characteristics. The two variables of interest in this study are fear of negative evaluation and interpersonal trust.

Fear of negative evaluation (FNE) involves experiencing apprehension and distress over others' evaluations and is characterized by expectations of negative evaluation and subsequent avoidance of evaluative situations (Watson & Friend, 1969). People high in FNE are more concerned with making a good impression when interacting with others (Leary, 1980), and fear of negative evaluation may be a strong motivator for concealing stigma (Pachankis, 2007). Regardless of how trustworthy or supportive a relationship is, people high in FNE may keep

secrets out of a desire to avoid feeling shame or guilt in the face of how others perceive and respond to the secret. Furthermore, people high in FNE may experience augmented distress from keeping a secret, for the mere act of nondisclosure could be a basis for negative evaluation if the secret is eventually revealed.

Interpersonal trust is a generalized belief that people in aggregate are reliable and trustworthy (Rotter, 1980). Several motives for keeping a secret may be rooted in a general mistrust of other people, particularly anticipation of malicious use of the information and a desire for privacy. People low in interpersonal trust may think that other people cannot be relied upon to keep information to themselves or to react supportively, making them reluctant to reveal a secret to anyone, regardless of the relationship. Thus, both stable personality characteristics and relationship variables must be considered in analyzing secrecy in interpersonal relationships.

The Present Study

This study examined personal secrets in interpersonal relationships, specifically how the quality of the relationship relates to *concealing* a secret. The nature of the relationship between the secret-keeper and the person from whom the secret is kept (the target) was examined with regard to various aspects of concealment, including reasons for keeping the secret, concealment tactics, perceived effects on the secret-keeper's well-being, and anticipated consequences of revealing the secret. This approach addresses gaps in the secrecy literature, which has primarily focused on the content of secrets or the effects on the secret-keeper without accounting for relational differences.

The overarching premise of this study is that the experience of keeping a secret varies across different relationships. Specifically, this study examined nine central issues: (1) effects of keeping a secret on the secret-keeper's well-being, (2) keeping a secret in high- vs. low-quality

relationships, (3) effects of prior information sharing on secret-keeping, (4) effects of the type and frequency of interaction between the secret-keeper and target on the difficulty of keeping a secret, (5) attachment style and secret-keeping, (6) rumination and secret-keeping, (7) fear of negative evaluation and secret-keeping, (8) interpersonal trust and secret-keeping, and (9) tactics of concealment.

Hypothesis 1. The effects of keeping a secret on the secret-keeper's well-being will be related to: (a) how long the secret has been kept, (b) the number of people from whom the secret is kept, (c) the importance of keeping the secret, (d) the anticipated negative consequences of the secret being revealed, and (e) the amount of effort actively invested in keeping the secret. The higher the demands of keeping the secret, the more psychologically taxing the concealment should be.

Hypothesis 2. The more positive the relationship is between the secret-keeper and target: (a) the more the secret-keeper will endorse keeping the secret due to relationship concerns, (b) the more negative the effects on the secret-keeper's well-being, and (c) the more the secret will be perceived as negatively affecting the relationship. A strong, positive relationship should lead to greater feelings of guilt related to concealment, thus increasing the secret's emotional burden.

Hypothesis 3. The more information the secret-keeper and target have shared with each other in the past: (a) the more negative the effects on the secret-keeper's well-being, and (b) the more the secret will be perceived as negatively affecting the relationship. Keeping a secret would go against how the relationship typically works, making the secret-keeper feel guiltier about not meeting the implicit or explicit expectations of disclosure.

Hypothesis 4. The more frequent the interactions between the secret-keeper and target, particularly one-on-one, face-to-face interactions: (a) the more difficult it will be to keep the

secret, and (b) the more the secret-keeper will ruminate over the information. Each interaction with the target would serve as a reminder of the secret and require active concealment. One-on-one, face-to-face interactions may be particularly difficult for not revealing the secret.

Hypothesis 5. The more anxiously or avoidantly attached the secret-keeper is in the relationship: (a) the more negative the effects on the secret-keeper's well-being, (b) the more the secret will be perceived as negatively affecting the relationship, (c) the more negative emotions the secret-keeper will have when thinking about the secret, and (d) the more the secret-keeper will be concerned with the target learning the secret. Whereas secure attachment implies trust in the target, anxious and avoidant attachment are characterized by negative affect, mistrust, and worry that would compound the psychological and emotional burdens of keeping a secret.

Hypothesis 6. The more the secret-keeper thinks about the secret: (a) the more negative the effects on the secret-keeper's well-being, and (b) the greater the secret-keeper's anticipated relief if the secret were revealed. Constant rumination may make concealment more difficult, and it may also lead the secret-keeper to dwell on the negativity of the actual event. In accordance with the preoccupation model, rumination also expends cognitive resources, making concealment physically and psychologically taxing.

Hypothesis 7. The higher the secret-keeper is in fear of negative evaluation: (a) the more the secret-keeper will endorse keeping the secret due to concerns of negative evaluation, criticism, and other people's perceptions, (b) the more negative the effects on the secret-keeper's well-being, and (c) the more the secret will be perceived as negatively affecting the relationship. The burden of keeping a secret would be amplified by the prevalent and persistent concern with negative evaluation.

Hypothesis 8. The lower the secret-keeper is in interpersonal trust: (a) the more strongly the secret-keeper will endorse keeping the secret to avoid negative personal consequences, (b) the less positive benefits the secret-keeper will expect if the secret were revealed, (c) the more negative the effects on the secret-keeper's well-being, and (d) the more the secret will be perceived as negatively affecting the relationship. Low interpersonal trust reduces people's belief that others will respond positively to the information, thus amplifying the burden of keeping the secret.

Hypothesis 9. The secret-keeper will use more active concealment tactics that involve changing behavior or distorting information: (a) the more important it is for the secret to not come out, (b) the more personal the information is, (c) the more negative the perceived consequences are if the secret were revealed, (d) the higher the secret-keeper is in FNE, and (e) the lower the secret-keeper is in interpersonal trust. Higher stakes associated with the secret coming out may mobilize people to take stronger measures to ensure that the target will not learn the information.

Method

Participants

Participants over the age of 18 were recruited via Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) to participate anonymously in a 145-question Qualtrics questionnaire that took no more than 30 minutes to complete. Informed consent was obtained from each participant, and they received compensation of \$6.00. All participants were English speakers living in the United States.

Exclusionary criteria. A total of 298 subjects completed the questionnaire. However, 14 of these subjects had duplicate IP addresses. In nearly every instance, the second attempt began within roughly a minute of completing the first attempt and took significantly less time. Thus,

the second attempt for each of these IP addresses was eliminated out of concern that they were completed by the same person. Another two subjects were eliminated for nonsensical entries of random letter and number strings when asked to describe their secret, and one subject was eliminated for not giving a meaningful secret.

In addition, given the length of the questionnaire, any subject who finished in less than eight minutes was eliminated on the basis that they likely did not take the survey seriously enough or give adequate consideration to each question. This exclusionary criterion eliminated 19 more subjects. An additional 12 subjects were eliminated for providing a secret about someone else rather than a personal secret (despite instructions to report a personal secret), and one subject was eliminated for providing a secret that was not being kept from a specific person (i.e., a secret about doing business without a license was being kept from the state of Washington). Applying these exclusions eliminated 49 subjects, leaving 249 participants in the final data set ($M_{\text{age}} = 33.3$, $SD = 9.91$, age range = 19–72, 104 females, 145 males).

Measures

Attachment style. Attachment style was measured using the Relationships Structures questionnaire of the Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised (ECR-RS; Fraley, Heffernan, Vicary, & Brumbaugh, 2011). Six items assessed the avoidance dimension of attachment, and three items assessed the anxiety dimension. To assess the participants' specific attachment to the target, the target's name was used in place of the scale's original wording of "this person."

Interpersonal trust. Interpersonal trust was measured using the Trust Scale from the International Personality Item Pool (IPIP; 2018). This 8-item measure is the IPIP representation of the NEO A-1 agreeableness facet of the NEO-PI-R (Costa & McCrae, 1992).

Fear of negative evaluation. To minimize participant burden, fear of negative evaluation was assessed using a 4-item version of the Brief Fear of Negative Evaluation (BFNE) Scale (Leary, 1983). These items were selected via an item analyses of the BFNE Scale on an existing data set by identifying the two positively-keyed and two negatively-keyed items with the highest item-total correlations. In pre-testing, these four items had a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .81, and the sum of these items correlated .93 with the full BFNE scale.

Procedure

Participants completed the self-paced, online questionnaire through Amazon's MTurk. The questions pertaining to secrecy were created specifically for this study, drawing from the existing literature on secrecy to inform some of the options and categories. The full questionnaire can be found in Appendix A.

Content of the secret. To begin, participants read the following prompt:

Everyone has secrets – information that they try to conceal from one or more other people. We would like you to think of a personal secret – a secret about you – that you are trying to keep from one or more other people. It's possible that certain other people may know this information about you, but you are trying to conceal the information from one or more people who do not know it. What secret are you trying to keep? Describe it in a phrase.

After describing the secret, participants indicated whether it was a past, current, or future action, information about someone else, current thoughts or feelings, or other personal information. They rated how good or bad the information was (1 = *very bad*; 7 = *very good*) and how personal the information was (1 = *not at all personal*; 5 = *extremely personal*), then reported how many people they were keeping the secret from and how many people already knew the information.

Experience of secrecy. Participants were asked to indicate how often they thought about the secret (1 = *almost never*; 7 = *many times each day*) and what kind of emotions they felt when thinking about the information (1 = *very negative*; 7 = *very positive*). They then rated the extent to which they felt eight emotions when thinking about the information: nervous/worried, happy/content, angry/irritable, sad/depressed, guilty/regretful, embarrassed/ashamed, insecure/weak, and relaxed/calm (1 = *not at all*; 5 = *extremely*). To assess the perceived effects of keeping the secret on multiple aspects of the secret-keeper's life, participants rated how negative or positive of an impact *keeping* the secret, not the secret information itself, had on their self-esteem, self-views, quality of life, satisfaction with life, well-being, and relationships (1 = *very negative*; 7 = *very positive*).

Description of the relationship. Even when people strive to conceal information from absolutely everyone, there is often at least one person who is of greatest concern to the secret-keeper. Participants were asked to identify, by name or initials, the one person from whom they most wanted to keep their information a secret and indicate the type of relationship (e.g., friend, current or former romantic partner, parent, coworker, etc.). They then indicated how long they had known this person and how long they had been keeping the secret from him or her. All subsequent questions about the secret inserted the target's name into the question to make sure that participants continued to think about the secret within that specific relationship.

Reasons for keeping the secret. Participants indicated the degree to which they wanted to keep the information a secret from the target for 14 reasons (1 = *not at all a reason*; 5 = *the major reason*). These reasons were compiled from findings in the literature (Caughlin et al., 2009) and general ideas about why people may want to keep information a secret. Some examples of the reasons were "I want to maintain a positive public image", "I am worried about

hurting [target name]”, and “I don’t think [target name] will be supportive if he or she learns my secret.”

Keeping the secret from the target. Participants were asked to rate how important it was that the target did not learn the information (1 = *not at all important*; 5 = *extremely important*) and how relieved they would be to no longer have to keep the secret from the target (1 = *not at all*; 5 = *extremely*). They also indicated how difficult it was to keep the secret from the target (1 = *extremely easy*; 7 = *extremely difficult*) and how much effort they actively invested in concealing the information (1 = *none at all*; 5 = *whatever it takes*). They then rated the extent to which they used 12 tactics to conceal the secret (1 = *I do not do this at all*; 5 = *I always do this*). These tactics were surmised from the literature (Caughlin et al., 2009) and general ideas, and included tactics such as “Avoid [target name],” “Deny information that is true,” and “Try not to think about the secret so that I don’t accidentally leak it.”

In addition to how often they thought about the secret in general, participants were asked to indicate how often they thought about the secret when (a) they were with the target or communicating with him or her, and (b) they were not with or communicating with the target (1 = *almost never*; 5 = *almost constantly*). Participants also rated how positively or negatively keeping the secret affected their relationship with the target (1 = *very negatively*; 7 = *very positively*) and closeness with the target (1 = *creates significantly more distance*; 7 = *creates significantly more closeness*). Participants were also asked how they would expect their level of closeness with the target to change if they were to reveal the secret (1 = *significantly more distant*; 7 = *significantly closer*).

Relevance to the target. To assess the extent to which the secret has direct implications for the target, participants rated the degree to which the information was relevant to the target

and would be considered as within the target's right to know (1 = *not at all – it's absolutely none of their business*; 5 = *it's extremely relevant to them*). Participants also rated how positively or negatively the target would be affected if he or she found out the information (1 = *very negatively*; 7 = *very positively*).

Anticipated consequences. Participants were asked to imagine that the target learned the secret information and to rate how much they trusted the target to keep the information a secret (1 = *not at all*; 5 = *completely*) and how positively or negatively the target would view the information (1 = *very negatively*; 7 = *very positively*). Participants then indicated how good the consequences would be for them (1 = *not at all good*; 5 = *extremely good*) and how bad the consequences would be for them (1 = *not at all bad*; 5 = *extremely bad*). They also rated how likely seven positive and seven negative consequences would be if the target learned the secret (1 = *not at all likely*; 5 = *almost certain to occur*). Examples included “My public image or reputation would be damaged,” “[Target's name] would understand me better as a person,” and “[Target's name] would be hurt.”

Relationship quality. Participants indicated how positively or negatively they viewed their relationship with the target (1 = *very negatively*; 7 = *very positively*). They also responded to several questions about sharing personal information with the target, specifically how much information they expect the target to share with them, how much information they think the target expects them to share, and how much information they actually share with the target (1 = *none*; 5 = *almost everything*).

Participants then responded to 11 questions regarding their relationship with the target (1 = *not at all*; 5 = *extremely*). Some of the relationship qualities that were assessed included how much they personally know, trust, and respect the target, and how open, honest, and genuine they

feel with the target. Participants then responded to the same set of 11 questions but in relation to how they thought the target feels in the relationship. For instance, they were asked how much they think the target personally knows, trusts, and respects them, and how open, honest, and genuine they think the target is with them.

Interaction frequency. Participants rated how often they interact with the target overall and how frequently they use various forms of communication with the target, such as talking in person, phone calls, video calls, and text or social media (1 = *daily or almost daily*; 7 = *almost never*). They also rated how often they interact with the target (a) one-on-one with no one else involved and (b) in group settings that involve other people (1 = *almost never*; 5 = *almost all of our interactions*).

Miscellaneous. Participants were asked how many secrets they think they keep compared to other people their age (1 = *many fewer secrets than other people*; 7 = *many more secrets than other people*) and in general how good or bad they perceive secrecy to be (1 = *almost always bad*; 7 = *almost always good*). Given the extensiveness of the survey and personal nature of the secret and questions, participants were also asked to respond to three post-survey questions regarding their participation in the study. They evaluated the extent to which they felt uncomfortable thinking about their secret, felt as though they were revealing their secret by answering the questions, and gained a sense of clarity or self-understanding from answering the questions (1 = *strongly agree*; 7 = *strongly disagree*). Lastly, participants reported their age, sex, and race.

RESULTS

The results will be described in four sections: (a) the experience of secrecy for the secret-keeper, (b) the secret's perceived impact on the relationship between the participant and the

target, (c) the secret as it relates to the target, and (d) the potential moderating roles of personality variables on certain effects.

All data were analyzed using SPSS, with the alpha-level for statistical tests set at $p < .01$ due to the number of tests being performed. A Pearson's correlation was used for all correlations, and unless otherwise specified, all correlations were based on $n = 249$ with 247 degrees of freedom.

The Experience of Secrecy for the Secret-keeper

Types of Secrets that People Keep

Content of the secret. The majority of secrets (82.7%) were rated as neutral or bad to some extent, and the average rating fell between slightly bad and neutral ($M = 3.24$, $SD = 1.83$). A coding scheme was created to identify the major topics that participants reported keeping a secret (see Appendix B). Inter-rater reliability between the two coders was high (87.95%), and coding discrepancies were discussed until a final consensus was reached.

The most common topic was finances and employment (18.9%, $n = 47$), including secrets involving debt, job prospects, a lack or surplus of money, and gambling problems. The next two most common topics were transgressions (13.3%, $n = 33$), which included secrets in which the secret-keeper broke a rule or did something that hurt someone (physically or psychology), and intimate romantic partners (12.4%, $n = 31$), which included secrets pertaining to past or present sexual or romantic relations with an intimate partner. Infidelity was coded as a transgression rather than an intimate romantic partner relation. Figure 1 shows the frequencies of each of the 14 categories of secrets.

Characteristics of the secret. Participants rated most secrets (86.3%) as moderately to extremely personal; the average rating was 3.91 out of 5.0 ($SD = 1.06$). The majority of

participants (61.8%) reported keeping the secret for over a year; among those who had kept the secret for a year or more, the average length was 7.17 years ($SD = 7.19$, $n = 97$). Participants reported thinking about the secret often ($M = 4.45$, $SD = 1.64$), and when thinking about the information, their overall emotions tended to be negative, with an average rating of 3.00 ($SD = 1.87$) on a 7-point scale where 4.0 was neutral. Keeping the information from the target was rated as moderately to very important ($M = 3.88$, $SD = 1.07$). Even so, if the target were to somehow learn the information, participants anticipated slight to moderate relief ($M = 2.58$, $SD = 1.40$). Participants indicated that they actively invested little to moderate effort in keeping the secret ($M = 2.64$, $SD = 1.14$) and that keeping the secret was relatively easy, or at least not difficult ($M = 3.49$, $SD = 1.96$).

Perceived Impact of Keeping the Secret on the Secret-keeper

Impact on well-being. The seven items pertaining to the secret's impact on aspects of participants' well-being (self-esteem, view of self, quality of life, satisfaction with life, physical well-being, emotional well-being, and relationships with other people) were highly correlated with one another, with correlations ranging from $r = .59$ to $r(246) = .82$, p 's $< .001$. In addition, Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the seven items was .94, and so the mean of all seven items was computed to create a single score for the impact of keeping the secret on participants' well-being. Participants reported that the secret had a negative to neutral effect on their well-being, with average ratings of 3.38 out of 7.0 ($SD = 1.22$).

Demands of keeping the secret. Contrary to H1, most of the variables hypothesized to make keeping a secret more demanding were not significantly related to the participants' ratings of the secret's impact on their well-being. The length of keeping the secret, the number of people from whom the secret was kept, and the importance of keeping the secret did not correlate with

participants' ratings of its impact on their well-being. However, the secret's perceived impact on well-being did correlate negatively with both the amount of effort that participants reported investing in keeping the secret, $r = -.16, p = .01$, and with the difficulty of keeping the secret, $r = -.25, p < .001$. Thus, participants reported that the secret had a more negative impact on their well-being when keeping the secret was more difficult and required more effort.

Thinking about the secret. In support of H6, how frequently participants reported thinking about the secret (*ruminations*) was negatively correlated with ratings of its impact on their well-being, $r = -.28, p < .001$. Similarly, participants' ratings of how often they thought about the secret both when they were with the target, $r = -.21, p = .001$, and when they were not with the target, $r = -.23, p < .001$, correlated negatively with ratings of perceived impact on their well-being. Anticipated relief if the secret were revealed correlated positively with rumination, such that the more often participants thought about the information, the more relieved they expected to be if the information were to come out, $r = .28, p < .001$. Thus, constantly thinking about the secret appeared to take a toll on the secret-keeper, resulting in an anticipated sense of relief if that burden were lifted.

In further support of H1, participants' ratings of the secret's impact on their well-being were related to the consequences they anticipated if the target were to find out the secret information. Perceived impact on well-being was positively correlated with anticipating good consequences, $r = .20, p = .001$, and negatively correlated with anticipating bad consequences, $r = -.19, p < .01$.

An exploratory factor analysis, using a principal axes solution, was conducted on the 14 anticipated consequences (e.g., improved quality of life, damage to one's reputation or relationship with the target, feeling ashamed, receiving help from the target). The eigenvalues

indicated the presence of four factors, with eigenvalues of 4.45, 2.96, 1.20, and 1.00, and the next highest eigenvalue being 0.72. The four-factor solution was rotated to an oblique, direct oblimin solution.

The first factor, *positive outcomes*, was defined by five items related to positive reactions from the target and improvements to the secret-keeper's quality of life and relationship with the target (e.g., "[Target name] would understand me better as a person", "I would receive help from [target name]"). The second factor was labeled *negative social consequences* and involved five items related to social rejection, formal repercussions, poor public image, and declines in the secret-keeper's quality of life and relationship with the target. The third factor, *negative emotional consequences*, involved three items related to shame and hurting the target and the relationship. The fourth factor, *relief of secrecy burden*, was based on four items related to decreased stress and negative feelings, improved quality of life, and feeling more comfortable around the target. All factor loadings on this factor were negative, so this factor was reflected.

Participants' ratings of the impact of keeping the secret on well-being correlated negatively with anticipating negative social consequences (Factor 2), $r(240) = -.17, p < .01$, and with anticipating negative emotional consequences (Factor 3), $r(240) = -.45, p < .001$. However, impact on well-being was not related to expecting positive outcomes (Factor 1) or expecting relief of the secrecy burden upon revealing the secret (Factor 4). Thus, worrying about the negative consequences of revealing the secret was related to lower well-being, whereas expecting positive outcomes, either for oneself or for the relationship, did not seem to affect personal well-being.

Secret-Keeping Tactics

An exploratory factor analysis, using a principal axes solution, was conducted on the 12 tactics for keeping the secret (e.g., changing topics away from the secret, denying information that is true, avoiding the target or situations in which the secret might come up, staying busy with other activities). Inspection of the eigenvalues indicated the presence of three factors, with eigenvalues of 4.55, 1.33, and 1.16; the next highest eigenvalue was 0.80. The three-factor solution was rotated to a direct oblimin solution.

The first factor was labeled *avoiding/evading the secret* and was defined by six items related to avoidance and distraction tactics such as not thinking about the secret, changing topics, and monitoring one's behavior. The second factor, *disinformation*, was identified by two items related to denying information and lying about the secret. All factor loadings on this were negative, and the factor was reflected. The third factor was labeled *avoiding the target* and involved two items related to talking about the secret with other people and avoiding the target.

The frequency with which participants reported avoiding or evading the secret (Factor 1) correlated positively with the importance of keeping the information secret, $r(246) = .21, p = .001$, and positively with how personal the information was, $r(246) = .18, p < .01$. Furthermore, the use of this tactic correlated positively with all four anticipated consequences if the secret were revealed; the frequency of avoiding or evading the secret increased as participants expected more negative social consequences, negative emotional consequences, improvements in the relationship, and relief of the burden of secrecy (see Table 1). Thus, regardless of whether the anticipated outcomes were positive or negative, participants reported frequently using the avoidance/evasion tactic, especially if the secret was highly personal and important to keep.

The frequency with which participants denied information or lied about the secret (Factor 2) correlated positively with the importance of keeping the information secret, $r(246) = .25, p <$

.001, but did not correlate with how personal the information was, $r(246) = .06, p = .39$.

Furthermore, the use of disinformation was positively correlated with anticipating negative social and emotional consequences if the secret were revealed but not with anticipating positive outcomes or relief of the secrecy burden (see Table 1).

The frequency with which participants tried to distance the target from the secret (Factor 3), either by talking about the secret with other people or by avoiding the target altogether, was not correlated with the importance of keeping the information secret, $r(246) = .02, p = .79$, or with how personal the information was, $r(246) = .06, p = .37$. Avoiding the target was also not correlated with anticipating negative emotional consequences but did correlate positively with anticipating positive outcomes, negative social consequences, and relief of secrecy burden (see Table 1). Thus, the extent to which participants avoided the target while keeping the secret appeared to be primarily related to the secret's perceived social and relationship consequences.

Keeping a Secret in High- vs. Low-Quality Relationships

Figure 2 shows the number of participants who reported keeping a secret in each type of relationship. The top three categories of people from whom participants were keeping secrets were current romantic partners (37.8%, $n = 94$), parents (24.1%, $n = 60$), and friends (12.0%, $n = 30$). Two hundred fifteen participants reported knowing the target for more than one year and provided the exact length of the relationship, with the average length being 17.3 years ($SD = 12.6$). Overall, participants tended to view their relationship with the person from whom they were keeping the secret positively; the average rating was 5.69 on a 7-point scale ($SD = 1.67$).

The 11 items on which participants rated the quality of their relationship with the target were strongly related; Cronbach's alpha coefficient was .95. Thus, the mean of all 11 items was calculated to create a single relationship quality score ($M = 4.07$ on a 5-point scale, $SD = 0.89$).

Similarly, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was .96 for the 11 items that assessed participants' ratings of how they thought the target viewed the quality of their relationship. Thus, a single relationship quality score from the target's perceived perspective was also calculated as the mean of those items ($M = 3.96$, $SD = 0.95$). Participants' responses to how positively or negatively they viewed their relationship with the target overall correlated positively with relationship quality scores from their perspective, $r(246) = .72$, $p < .001$, and with relationship quality scores from the target's perceived perspective, $r(246) = .72$, $p < .001$.

Relationship Quality and Perceived Impact on the Secret-Keeper's Well-Being.

Contrary to H2, participants' overall ratings of the relationship, ratings of relationship quality, and ratings of relationship quality from the target's perspective were not significantly related to their ratings of the secret's impact on their well-being (see Table 2). Thus, the secret's perceived impact on well-being did not differ as a function of the quality of the relationship with the target.

Contrary to H3, ratings of the secret's impact on well-being were also not related to the extent to which participants (a) expected the target to share information with them, (b) thought the target expected them to share information, or (c) actually shared information with the target. To explore these results, a multiple regression analysis was conducted for each of these three information-sharing variables to determine whether H3 might be confirmed in cases in which the secret was not highly personal. An extremely personal secret may fall outside the realm of information that would generally be shared with the target, and so the secret-keeper might not experience stress over concealing the information, thus resulting in no perceived impact on well-being.

For each analysis, the information-sharing variable (mean-centered), the rating of how personal the secret was (mean-centered), and the product of the two variables were entered as predictors. The information-sharing variable and the extent to which the secret was personal were entered on Step 1, and the product of the two variables was entered on Step 2. For all three regression analyses, the interaction was not significant. Thus, the personal nature of the secret did not account for the lack of relationship between expectations of information sharing and participants' ratings of the secret's impact on their well-being.

Relationship Quality and Perceived Impact on the Relationship

On average, participants reported that keeping the secret had a slightly negative effect on their relationship with the target ($M = 3.49, SD = 1.14$) and created slightly more distance from the target ($M = 3.48, SD = 1.22$). In partial support of H2, all three indices of relationship quality (ratings of the relationship overall, ratings of relationship quality, and ratings of relationship quality from the target's perspective) correlated positively with ratings of the secret's impact on closeness with the target. However, they were not correlated with ratings of the secret's impact on the relationship (see Table 2). Thus, the better the relationship was between the secret-keeper and target, the less participants thought that the secret was creating distance in that relationship.

Contrary to H3, ratings of the secret's impact on their relationship and closeness with the target were not related to the extent to which participants (a) expected the target to share information, (b) thought that the target expected them to share information, or (c) actually shared information with the target. Thus, prior expectations regarding information sharing within the relationship were not related to participants' ratings of the extent to which the secret created more or less closeness or had a positive or negative effect on the relationship.

Reasons for Keeping the Secret

An exploratory factor analysis, using a principal axes solution, was conducted on the 14 reasons for keeping the secret (e.g., concerns about hurting the target, wanting to avoid criticism or ridicule, feeling ashamed, wanting to keep personal information private). Inspection of the eigenvalues indicated the presence of five factors, with eigenvalues of 4.00, 1.89, 1.45, 1.10, and 1.02, with the next highest eigenvalue being 0.72. The five-factor solution was rotated to a direct oblimin solution, and the factors were identified by considering items that loaded at least 0.40 on each factor, with one exception of 0.37.

The first factor was labeled *evaluation concerns within the relationship* and was defined by two items related to how supportive or critical the target would be if he or she learned the secret. Factor 2, *relationship concerns*, involved the four primary items related to desiring to maintain good, close relations with the target and not wanting to cause the target harm or distress. All loadings of this factor were negative, so this factor was reflected such that higher ratings corresponded to stronger endorsement of keeping the secret for this reason. Factor 3, *privacy concerns*, was defined by four items related to disclosing or not spreading the information and maintaining appropriate distance from the target. The fourth factor, *personal repercussions concerns*, involved three items related to avoiding trouble, negative consequences, and the information being misused. The fifth factor was labeled *public reputation concerns* and was defined by two items related to shame and maintaining a positive public image.

In partial support of H2, the five reasons for keeping the secret were differentially related to the three indices of relationship quality (see Table 3). The general trends were that relationship quality was (a) negatively correlated with evaluation concerns within the relationship (Factor 1) and privacy concerns (Factor 3), (b) positively correlated with relationship concerns (Factor 2) and public reputation concerns (Factor 5), and (c) not correlated with personal repercussions

concerns (Factor 4). Thus, the higher participants rated the quality of the relationship, the less concerned they were with privacy and negative evaluation, and the more concerned they were with causing the target harm or distress and experiencing shame or having a poor public image.

The Target's Connection to the Secret

Interaction Type and Frequency

Contrary to the second prediction of H4 regarding rumination, the frequency with which participants thought about the secret was not correlated with how frequently the secret-keeper and target interacted (overall, one-on-one, or in group settings) or with how frequently they used any of the different forms of communication (face-to-face, text/email/social media, phone calls, and video calls). The difficulty of keeping the secret was not correlated with how frequently the participant and target interacted overall, one-on-one, or in group settings. However, the difficulty of keeping the secret was negatively correlated with all four forms of communication, such that the more frequently the participant and target communicated via each form, the more difficult it was to keep the secret. Correlations ranged from $r = -.24$ to $r = -.17$, p 's $< .01$, thus partially supporting the first prediction of H4 regarding difficulty of concealment.

Exploratory Analyses

In looking at how the relationship with the target was related to participants' experience of keeping the secret, the secret's relevance to the target is also relevant. Thus, exploratory data analyses examined how keeping a secret relates to the relevance of the information to the target, beliefs about how the target might perceive the information, and the secret-keeper's assessment of how the target might be affected by learning the secret information.

Relevance to the target. A secret that is highly relevant to the target is information that the target would in principle have a right to know. Keeping such information secret may create

an additional burden for the secret-keeper because he or she is hiding pertinent information. Indeed, Pearson correlations showed that the relevance of the information to the target correlated positively with participants' ratings of the difficulty of keeping the secret, the amount of effort they invest in keeping the secret, and their anticipated relief if the secret were revealed (see Table 7). Furthermore, relevance to the target correlated negatively with the secret's perceived impact on participants' well-being, overall emotions, and relationship with the target, such that higher relevance corresponded to a more negative perceived impact on participants' well-being and the relationship, and generally more negative emotions (see Table 7). Thus, keeping a secret that is highly relevant to the target may pose an increased burden on the secret-keeper.

The secret's relevance to the target also correlated positively with all of the anticipated consequences of revealing the secret, with the exception of anticipating positive outcomes (see Table 8). Thus, the more relevant the secret was to the target, the more participants expected to experience overall bad consequences, negative social and emotional consequences, and relief of the burden of secrecy, but not positive outcomes such as improvements in participants' quality of life or the relationship with the target.

Reactions of the target. The ways in which the target might react to learning the secret information were assessed by participants' ratings of how positively or negatively the target would perceive the information and how positively or negatively the target would be affected by knowing the information. Ratings of both the target's perceptions of the information and how he or she would be affected by knowing the information correlated positively with the extent to which participants anticipated positive outcomes upon revealing the secret (see Table 8). Thus, participants expected positive outcomes upon revealing the secret to be more likely when the target would perceive the information positively and be positively affected by it. Participants also

indicated that if the secret were revealed, they anticipated a greater sense of relief, overall consequences to be less bad, and negative social and emotional consequences as less likely if the target perceived the information more positively and was positively affected by it (see Table 8). Thus, not surprisingly, the extent to which participants expected particular consequences upon revealing the secret was related to their perceptions of the target's potential reactions to the information.

Ratings of the target's perceptions of the secret and the extent to which the target would be positively or negatively affected by the information also correlated positively with participants' ratings of how revealing the secret would affect their closeness with the target (see Table 8). Participants also indicated greater trust in the target to keep their secret if they thought target would perceive the information positively and be positively affected by it (see Table 8). Thus, participants' expectations of increased closeness with the target and confidentiality is also related to their perceptions of the target's potential reactions to the secret.

Additionally, the extent to which keeping the secret was burdensome for participants correlated with their expectations of the target's reactions to the secret. Quite reasonably, participants reported more positive emotions when thinking about the secret and perceived the secret to have a less negative impact on their well-being the more positively they expected the target to perceive the information and to be positively affected by it (see Table 7). Furthermore, participants' ratings of the importance of keeping the secret correlated negatively with their ratings of how positively the target would perceive the information and be affected by it (see Table 7). The amount of effort participants reported investing in keeping the secret also correlated negatively with how the target would be affected by the secret, $r = -.17, p \leq .01$. This last finding suggests that participants may invest less effort in keeping secrets that they expect to

have more positive effects on the target. Thus, several aspects of participants' experiences of keeping the secret were related to how they expected the target to react to the information.

Finally, participants' ratings of how positively or negatively the target would perceive the information correlated positively with their ratings of both relationship quality, $r = .18, p < .01$, and relationship quality from the target's perspective, $r = .18, p < .01$. Thus, participants anticipated the target to perceive the information more positively if they had a higher-quality relationship quality.

Personality Moderators of Secret-Keeping

This section explores the potential moderating roles of attachment style, fear of negative evaluation, and interpersonal trust in the experience of secrecy.

Attachment Style

Insecure attachment style has been shown to correlate positively with the frequency of secrecy in a relationship (Vrij et al., 2003) and with the extent to which people ruminate over secrets (Merrill & Afifi, 2015), suggesting that individuals may differ in their experience of secrecy depending on their attachment style. An avoidant attachment score was computed as the mean of the six avoidance items on the ECR-RS after reverse-coding negatively worded items; Cronbach's alpha coefficient was .92. Similarly, the three items on the ECR-RS that assessed anxious attachment were averaged to provide an anxiety score. Cronbach's alpha coefficient was .80. Avoidant attachment and anxious attachment were negatively correlated, $r = -.28, p < .001$.

Contrary to H5, neither anxious nor avoidant attachment was significantly related to participants' ratings of the secret's impact on their well-being. However, avoidant attachment did correlate positively with ratings of the secret's effect on closeness with the target, and anxious attachment correlated negatively with ratings of the secret's effect on both the relationship and

closeness with the target (see Table 4). Thus, having an anxious or avoidant attachment style was related to participants' ratings of the secret's impact on their relationship with the target.

Avoidant attachment correlated positively with wanting to maintain a positive public image and to avoid harming the relationship, and correlated negatively with a desire to maintain privacy and avoid negative evaluation by the target (see Table 5). Anxious attachment correlated positively with concerns over negative evaluation, privacy, and suffering personal repercussions such as getting into trouble or having others misuse the information (see Table 5). No other correlations between attachment style and reasons for keeping the secret were significant. Thus, anxious attachment corresponded to greater concerns over personal consequences, and avoidant attachment corresponded to greater concerns over disrupting the present status of the relationship or affecting the participant's public image.

Avoidant attachment correlated positively with anticipating positive outcomes and negatively with anticipating negative social consequences if the secret were revealed (see Table 6). Anxious attachment correlated positively with anticipating negative social consequences (see Table 6). No other correlations among attachment style and anticipated consequences were significant. These patterns suggest that anxious attachment corresponded to participants' expectations of social rejection upon revealing the secret, whereas avoidant attachment corresponded to expectations of increased understanding and higher relationship quality upon revealing.

Contrary to H5, neither avoidant attachment nor anxious attachment correlated with the extent of positive or negative emotions participants experienced when thinking about the secret. To examine the possibility of an interaction between avoidant attachment and anxious attachment, a set of multiple regression analyses was conducted for participants' ratings of the

secret's effect on their relationship, the secret's effect on their closeness with the target, reasons for keeping the secret (five separate analyses), anticipated consequences (four separate analyses), and overall emotions. For each analysis, avoidant attachment (mean-centered), anxious attachment (mean-centered), and the product of the two variables were entered as predictors. Anxious attachment and avoidant attachment were entered on Step 1, and the product of the two variables was entered on Step 2. In none of the regression analyses was the interaction of anxious and avoidant attachment significant in predicting the variable of interest.

Fear of Negative Evaluation

As noted earlier, fear of negative evaluation is characterized by a pervasive concern over how one is evaluated by other people. Thus, people who score high on FNE may keep secrets primarily to avoid judgment and rejection from others. A fear of negative evaluation score was computed for each participant as the mean of the four items on the Brief Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale. The items "Other people's opinions of me do not bother me" and "If I know someone is judging me, it has little effect on me" were reverse coded. Cronbach's alpha coefficient was .81.

In partial support of H7, FNE correlated negatively with participants' ratings of the secret's impact on their well-being but did not correlate with ratings of the secret's effects on their relationship or closeness with the target (see Table 4). Thus, participants higher in FNE reported a more negative impact on their well-being from keeping the secret but not a more negative impact on their relationship. Furthermore, FNE correlated positively with keeping the secret due to evaluation concerns within the relationship and public reputation concerns, but it did not correlate with any other reasons for keeping the secret (see Table 5). Thus, being high in FNE corresponded to greater concerns over negative evaluation because of the secret.

Contrary to H9, FNE did not correlate with any of the concealment tactics. However, FNE did correlate positively with anticipating negative emotional consequences, $r(240) = .20$, $p < .01$, but not with any of the other anticipated consequences (see Table 6). Thus, participants high in FNE expected to feel ashamed or to cause harm to the target or the relationship if they were to reveal the secret.

Interpersonal Trust

The decision to keep a secret often depends on how much the secret-keeper trusts the other person to be a supportive and discreet confidant. Such trust may vary depending on the specific relationship, and it may also stem from a generalized belief regarding the extent to which people are reliable and trustworthy. An interpersonal trust score was computed by averaging the eight items on the Trust Scale after reverse-scoring negatively-worded items (“I suspect hidden motives in others,” “I am wary of others,” “I distrust people,” and “I believe that people are essentially evil”). Cronbach’s alpha coefficient was .83.

Contrary to H8, none of the findings regarding interpersonal trust were significant. Interpersonal trust did not correlate with participants’ ratings of the secret’s impact on their well-being, relationship, or closeness with the target (see Table 4). Furthermore, interpersonal trust did not correlate with any of the reasons for keeping the secret (see Table 5), anticipated consequences of revealing the secret (see Table 6), or tactics of concealment. In brief, interpersonal trust was not related to any of the examined aspects of secrecy.

Discussion

Keeping a secret is often not easy. Even when people feel justified in concealing the information, they might still be plagued by concerns that the secret might accidentally slip out and, thus, constantly monitor what they say and do in the presence of the target. Not surprisingly,

studies have shown that secrecy is associated with lower physical and psychological well-being (Slepain & Moulton-Tetlock, 2018; Wismeijer, 2011).

The present study expanded upon earlier findings by examining precisely which aspects of keeping a secret are related to diminished well-being. Specifically, participants reported that the secret had a more negative impact on their well-being when keeping the secret was more difficult, required more effort, and was accompanied by more frequent thoughts about the secret. Slepian et al. (2015) found a similar relationship between the physical toll of keeping a secret, as measured by participants' judgments of hill slants, and the subjective effort involved in concealment. In another study, frequently letting one's thoughts wander to the secret also predicted lower well-being (Slepian et al., 2017). Taken together, these findings suggest that keeping a secret is detrimental to well-being to the extent that the secret-keeper expends significant resources of effort and behavioral control to conceal the information and is preoccupied with thinking about the secret.

When keeping a secret becomes stressful or difficult, the secret-keeper may start to think, "What would happen if I just came clean?" A slew of possible consequences come to mind, ranging from the target becoming angry and distant to being understanding and supportive. Participants in the current study reported that the secret had a more negative impact on their well-being when they anticipated revealing the secret to result in greater negative social and emotional consequences, such as rejection, damage to their reputation or relationship with the target, and feeling ashamed. This finding is consistent with research showing that negative expectations for personality test results were positively correlated with negative affect (Golub, Gilbert, & Wilson, 2009). Thus, by expecting more negative consequences if the secret

information becomes known, the secret-keeper experiences higher negative affect, which in turn diminishes overall well-being.

Along similar lines, participants who expected positive consequences upon revealing the secret perceived that keeping the secret had a less negative impact on their subjective well-being. Other studies have similarly found optimism and positive expectations about the future to have beneficial effects on well-being (Alarcon, Bowling, & Khazon, 2013). However, participants' expectations of specific positive outcomes – such as being understood by or receiving help from the target, improved relationship quality, and relief of the secrecy burden – were not related to perceptions of the secret's impact on their well-being. This lack of relationship may be due to the fact that even secret disclosures with positive outcomes can still be accompanied by negative consequences as well. For instance, even if the secret-keeper expected the target to understand him or her better, he or she may still expect to feel ashamed upon revealing the information. In this case, the positive effects of optimistic future expectations could be cancelled out by the accompanying negative expectations.

Alternatively, this null finding could have arisen because participants' expectations of positive outcomes were more diverse and widely distributed than their expectations of negative consequences. Strained relations with the target could be a consequence of any secret, but receiving help from the target could apply to only some secrets. Thus, the effect for any particular positive outcome may not have been strong enough across a large number of participants to be significant. In sum, anticipating negative consequences upon revealing the secret was related to diminished well-being while keeping the secret, but the effect of expectations of positive outcomes remains unclear.

Participants' expectations of the possible consequences of revealing the secret were also related to the tactics participants used to conceal the information. The frequency of avoiding or evading the secret – whether by suppressing one's thoughts or behaviors, distracting oneself or the target, or changing topics in conversation – correlated positively with participants' expectations of both positive and negative outcomes. This finding suggests that avoiding the topic may be a common, general strategy for concealing secrets.

However, the frequency with which participants explicitly lied or denied true information correlated positively only with the anticipation of negative social and emotional consequences and not with expectations of positive outcomes involving improved relations with the target or relief of the secrecy burden. Thus, participants seemed to rely on deceptive tactics of concealment when the consequences of revealing the secret would be more negative. People tend to lie less to close compared to distant others and to experience greater distress when they lie in close rather than distant relationships (DePaulo & Karshy, 1998). Furthermore, the discovery of deception in a close relationship can be an intense negative emotional experience, one that may lead to the dissolution of the relationship (McCornack & Levine, 1990). Given that deception is associated with potential negative consequences for the secret-keeper and the relationship, people may turn to this tactic only when the anticipated consequences of revealing the secret are negative enough to justify and offset the potential risk and costs of deception.

The Secret-Keeper-Target Relationship

Contrary to the hypotheses, the quality of participants' relationship with the target was not related to the extent that they perceived the secret to have a negative impact on their well-being. However, participants in higher-quality relationships did perceive the secret to create more distance in their relationship with the target. This finding is consistent with research

showing that self-concealment is negatively associated with relationship satisfaction and commitment (Uysal et al., 2012), both of which can contribute to increased feelings of emotional distance.

The explanation for why relationship quality was associated with some negative outcomes but not others may lie in previous work on relational authenticity. Authenticity and secrecy are closely related in that, by keeping a personal secret, the secret-keeper is not being entirely authentic with the target. Lopez and Rice (2006) found that relational authenticity correlated negatively with self-concealment, supporting this link between secrecy and authenticity. Furthermore, greater relational authenticity was related to greater relationship satisfaction, supporting the present study's finding that secrecy in a high-quality relationship was related to higher feelings of distance.

Relational authenticity also correlates with greater psychological well-being, as indicated by higher life-satisfaction and lower negative affect (Goldman & Kernis, 2002). This finding seems contrary to the present study, which did not find a relationship between keeping a secret in high-quality relationships and participants' well-being. Several explanations may account for this discrepancy. First, this study did not assess participants' feelings of relational authenticity with the target. The one secret they reported may not have been significant enough in the grand scheme of their relationship to make participants feel inauthentic in general. Second, although authenticity in a relationship may lead to higher well-being, inauthenticity may not necessarily undermine well-being. Third, relational authenticity, and by extension its effects on well-being, could be related to the overlap between people's relational and ideal selves rather than their relational and actual selves (Gan & Chen, 2017). People often keep secrets to present themselves in a better light and to avoid negative evaluation, thus maintaining a more positive image in the

target's eyes. Subsequently, keeping a secret in a high-quality relationship may not have a negative impact on participants' well-being because they do not experience relational inauthenticity. Instead, the secret allows them to maintain an overlap between their relational and ideal selves. Further research should examine the connection between relational authenticity and secret-keeping in interpersonal relationships.

Relationship quality was related to participants' reasons for keeping their secret. Those in high-quality relationships were less concerned with issues of privacy and negative evaluation and more concerned with causing the target harm or distress, experiencing shame, or having an unfavorable public image as a result of the secret information. Emotional closeness is typically associated with lower privacy as one strives to be more open and is less careful about the information one discloses (Ben-Ze'ev, 2003). This greater openness would thus explain why participants in high-quality relationships were not as concerned with privacy as they were with other issues related to the secret.

The more prominent concern with the potential of causing the target harm or distress when keeping a secret in a high-quality relationship is consistent with research showing that people who had a close relationship with the target were less likely to tell self-serving lies that protected their personal interests and more likely to tell other-oriented lies that protected the target's feelings (Whitty & Carville, 2008). Thus, a close, high-quality relationship seems to promote other-oriented actions and concerns. Furthermore, high commitment in a relationship is associated with cognitive interdependence, resulting in more partner- and relationship-oriented thoughts and seeing the relationship as a central component of one's life (Agnew, Van Lange, Rusbult, & Langston, 1998). Taken together, these findings suggest that people who keep secrets

in high-quality relationships often do so out of a concern for the relationship or the other person, not necessarily for self-oriented privacy reasons.

Interestingly, participants anticipated the target to perceive the information more positively when they had a higher-quality relationship, further highlighting the ways in which the relationship affects the experience of secrecy. Foynes and Freyd (2013) similarly found that relational health – the extent of engagement, authenticity, and empowerment/zest in the relationship – strongly predicted how supportive or unsupportive participants perceived listeners to be after disclosing a stressful life experience. Similarly, frequency of self-disclosure is positively associated with how much the secret-keeper likes the other person and the quality of their relationship (Greene, Derlega, & Matthews, 2006; Sprecher & Hendrick, 2004), potentially because of this positive association between relationship quality and real or anticipated reactions from the target upon disclosure. High-quality relationships characterized by mutual liking, commitment, and understanding likely promote positive and supportive reactions from the target – rather than conflict and rejection – upon learning negatively-valenced information. By expecting more positive reactions, the secret-keeper may feel less apprehensive about revealing the secret in a high-quality relationship and, thus, engage in more frequent self-disclosure.

Another element of the relationship between the secret-keeper and target examined in this study was the frequency of their interactions. Slepian and Moulton-Tetlock (2018) found that the frequency of actively concealing information did not predict lower well-being, presumably because successful concealment of the information from the target could be viewed as effective goal pursuit rather than as a significant stressor. The present study found no relationship between how frequently participants and targets interacted and rumination or the difficulty of keeping the secret. Building on Slepian and Moulton-Tetlock's work, these null findings suggest that

frequency of concealment does not predict well-being because it is not related to two features that were identified in this study as constituting a burdensome secret: information that is (a) difficult to conceal and (b) constantly at the forefront of one's mind.

Thus, although the hypotheses assumed that more frequent interactions would necessitate more active concealment, which would in turn increase rumination and the difficulty of keeping the secret, this appeared not to be the case. However, greater frequency of communication with the target, regardless of the medium involved (face-to-face, text/email/social media, phone calls, or video calls), was related to greater difficulty in keeping the secret. The difference in the results between interaction frequency and communication frequency may reflect the possibility that some interactions have limited opportunities for conversation, thus decreasing the need for active concealment during interaction. For instance, two friends may regularly get together to work out or watch a movie, but those activities don't necessarily require much talking.

Future research should explore which types of interactions make keeping a secret more or less difficult. In the case of lying, studies have found that people lie more over email and phone calls than in face-to-face interactions, presumably because email and phone calls create a sense of social distance and also remove some of the verbal and nonverbal cues that may otherwise give the liar away (Whitty & Carville, 2008). Thus, the frequency with which people lie might be related to the ease of lying successfully. Given that lying and secrecy are often related, similar results might be expected by looking at the ease and frequency of keeping secrets across different modes of interaction.

The Target's Connection to the Secret

Whereas some secrets concern only the secret-keeper, other secrets may contain information that is directly relevant to the target, such as when concealing an affair from a

significant other. The fact that the information could potentially provoke anger or cause harm to the target may augment the burden of keeping the secret. In support of this hypothesis, participants' ratings of the secret's relevance to the target correlated positively with their ratings of the difficulty and effort of keeping the secret and negatively with the secret's perceived impact on their well-being and relationship with the target. Thus, keeping a secret that was relevant to the target appeared to pose a greater burden on the secret-keeper.

Furthermore, participants reported expending more effort to keep the secret when they expected the target to be negatively affected by the information. This finding is consistent with the MUM effect in which people are reluctant to communicate information that is undesirable or negative for someone else (Rosen & Tesser, 1970), hence the allocation of more effort to prevent the secret from becoming known. Secrets that were expected to affect the target negatively were also rated as more important to keep, further accounting for the higher effort expenditure. Participants also had greater expectations of negative consequences upon revealing if the secret was more relevant to the target and would negatively affect him or her. Altogether, these results suggest that keeping a secret that is directly relevant to the target is accompanied by additional negative effects for the secret-keeper precisely because the information concerns someone else.

Even if the information is not directly relevant to the target, an integral component of the distress of keeping a secret is anticipating how the target might react to the information. In fact, imagining accepting, discreet reactions from a confidant after revealing a personal secret results in significantly less distress than imagining unaccepting reactions (Rodriguez, 2004). The present study found similar results in that participants experienced a less negative impact on their well-being and more positive emotions when thinking about the secret when they expected the target to perceive the information positively. Furthermore, when they expected more positive

reactions from the target, participants expected better outcomes after revealing the secret, including experiencing relief, becoming closer with the target, and the target being discreet about the information. Thus, the overall experience of keeping a secret was less distressing when the secret-keeper expected positive reactions from the target upon learning the information.

As discussed, participants who expected negative consequences indicated that the secret had a more negative impact on their well-being. Participants expected such consequences to be less likely if the target would perceive the information more positively, suggesting that the burdensomeness of a secret depends not only on aspects inherent in keeping the secret (i.e., difficulty, effort, rumination frequency) but also on the target's anticipated reactions to the secret. Indeed, research on the consequences of actually revealing secrets has shown that people who perceived positive reactions from the target experienced less rumination than those who perceived negative reactions (Afifi & Caughlin, 2006). Taken together, these results suggest that a supportive target can play a key role in reducing some of the distress associated with both keeping and revealing a secret.

Moderating Effects of Personality Variables

Personality variables were expected to moderate some aspects of secret-keeping. Research has shown that anxious and avoidant attachment styles correlate with more secrecy (Vrij et al., 2003) and more rumination over the secret (Merrill & Afifi, 2015). The present study expanded upon these findings by looking at how attachment style was related to the motives behind keeping a secret. Being high in anxious attachment, for instance, correlated positively with keeping the secret out of concerns with negative evaluation, consistent with characterizations of anxious attachment as involving a strong desire for intimacy accompanied by a fear of rejection and negative evaluation (Vrij et al., 2003). Anxious attachment also

correlated positively with expectations of negative social consequences upon revealing the secret, further supporting the notion that anxiously-attached people are concerned with being rejected or ostracized.

Additionally, anxious attachment correlated positively with keeping the secret out of concerns with privacy and personal repercussions, both of which involve potential threats to one's sense of security. In fact, the goal of seeking security is a primary component of anxious-ambivalent persons' sense of trust (Mikulincer, 1998). The goal of maintaining personal control and self-reliance, on the other hand, was a primary component of avoidant persons' sense of trust (Mikulincer, 1998), which may explain why high avoidance attachment correlated positively with keeping the secret to protect one's public image and relationship with the target. Maintaining a positive image can help avoid social sanctions that would otherwise limit one's freedom and autonomy, and preserving the current relationship with the target may help prevent negative consequences that could otherwise occur.

The results regarding fear of negative evaluation and secrecy were in the expected directions. Specifically, fear of negative evaluation correlated positively with keeping the secret due to concerns over negative evaluation and damaging one's public reputation, consistent with work that has shown concealment of stigma to be strongly motivated by fears of negative evaluation and rejection (Pachankis, 2007). Fear of negative evaluation also correlated positively with participants' expectations of negative emotional consequences upon revealing the information. This finding is consistent with Lutwak and Ferrari's (1997) finding that fear of negative evaluation was related to shame-proneness. Taken together, these findings suggest that individuals high in fear of negative evaluation tend to keep secrets to avoid negative evaluation and expect to feel ashamed if the information is revealed.

Although trust is a crucial component of secrecy, interpersonal trust was not significantly related to any of the variables examined in this study. One reason might be that the measure of trust used here assessed interpersonal trust rather than dyadic trust. Whereas interpersonal trust refers to the trustworthiness of people in general, dyadic trust refers to the extent to which one believes that a specific person is honest and benevolent (Larzelere & Huston, 1980). Given that this study focused on a specific secret that was being kept from a specific person rather than on secret-keeping in general, dyadic trust may have been more relevant for studying how trust may be related to the reasons for keeping a secret in a specific relationship and the secret's perceived impact on the secret-keeper's well-being and closeness with the target.

Limitations

One of the primary limitations of this study was that it relied entirely on self-report data. People's reports of their thoughts, motives, and behaviors are sometimes inaccurate, making it difficult to discern the extent to which their reported experiences of keeping the secret reflect reality. Furthermore, a key focus of this study was on the secret-keeper's assumptions of how the target might react to the information, but the target's actual perceptions of the secret were not assessed. Although this study stresses the importance of moving beyond focusing solely on the secret-keeper, it too falls back into prior trends of evaluating the secret only from the secret-keeper's perspective.

Another limitation is that this study consisted of a lengthy, self-paced questionnaire that was completed online in the participants' own work or home environments. Thus, participants could have easily been distracted while completing the questionnaire; even if there were no distractions in their immediate environment, participants may have grown tired of the long questionnaire and lost focus by the end. Thus, there was no way to control the degree to which

participants reflected carefully when answering the questions. The fact that the results were coherent and often in line with hypotheses showed that participants were responding in a reasonably valid fashion, yet there is no way to know whether some null effects reflected careless responding.

Future Directions

Given that this study relied on the secret-keeper's perspective, an important future direction would be to assess secrets in interpersonal relationships using both the secret-keeper's and the target's perceptions of their relationship and how a secret affected them individually as well as their relationship. Such a study could employ daily diary methods or ask both participants to recall a previous secret that had already been revealed. Future studies could also ask people to recall how they felt when a secret was being kept from them and to reflect on what they perceived to be the secret-keeper's motives for keeping the secret and the effects on their relationship. This approach would eliminate the need to assess both people in the relationship but would also be constrained by the limitations of retrospective self-report measures.

Another interesting direction would be to differentiate between reactions to the secret information itself and reactions to the general act of secrecy. For instance, under what conditions does the simple fact that a secret was kept outweigh the impact of the information being concealed? People might be predominantly upset with the concealment itself if the information is no longer relevant or occurred in the distant past. Furthermore, people who prioritize openness and honesty in the relationship might react more negatively to secrecy compared to people who prioritize other values. The hesitancy to reveal a secret could thus be based on the secret-keeper's concern with how the target will react to either the information itself or the mere existence of the secret. Along these lines, it would be interesting to explore what factors are associated with

supportive reactions to disclosed information, a willingness to forgive the secrecy, and an understanding of the secret-keeper's motives for concealment.

This study specifically focused on concealment and asked only a few hypothetical questions about revealing the secret. Thus, a natural future direction would be to explore the factors associated with people's intentions and decisions to reveal a secret. What are the reasons behind self-disclosure, and what makes these motives more compelling than the motives for keeping a secret? To what extent do the expected consequences of revealing analyzed in this study actually occur? How often do people intend to reveal a secret but then fail to follow through with their plans?

This study was also restricted to personal and interpersonal secrets and did not examine the extent to which these findings apply to a secondhand secret, one that pertains to someone else. If the information is no longer personally relevant, is the secret less burdensome to keep? Are people more likely to reveal a secondhand secret than a personal secret to close others? Furthermore, it would be interesting to see what cues people rely on to judge whether secondhand information should be kept secret when there are no explicit instructions to do so.

Further research could also focus on other personality variables that may play a role in secrecy, such as the Big Five Personality Traits, self-esteem, or paranoia. It would also be interesting to look at how chronic secret-keepers may vary in their tactics and experiences of keeping secrets compared to people who rarely keep secrets. For instance, perhaps people with more experience keeping secrets find it less difficult to conceal information and subsequently experience less negative effects on their well-being when keeping a secret.

Lastly, it would be interesting to see how secrets function within one's broader social network beyond a dyadic relationship. For instance, how would the experience of keeping a

secret change if two friends were keeping a secret from another person in their friend group? The shared responsibility and ability to talk about the information with another person could potentially lessen the burden of secrecy, but the exclusion of the other friend could also lead to greater feelings of guilt. Furthermore, people may strategically use secrets to establish trust in interpersonal relationships, either by faithfully keeping others' secrets or by self-disclosing personal information to only a close few.

Conclusion

In conclusion, keeping a secret appears to have a more negative impact on the secret-keeper's well-being when the process of concealment is characterized by high effort expenditure, a greater degree of difficulty, frequent rumination over the information, and expectations of negative consequences upon revealing the secret. The burden of keeping a secret is further compounded when the information is directly relevant to the target. People use different tactics of concealment depending on how important and personal the secret is and their expectations of what would happen if the information were to become known. These expectations and the reasons for keeping the secret depend on the quality of the relationship with the target, assumptions about how the target would perceive and be affected by the information, and the personality variables of attachment style and fear of negative evaluation. Interpersonal trust was not related to any of the aspects of secrecy examined in this study.

These results highlight the importance of looking at secrecy not only from the perspective of the secret-keeper but also within the context of the relationship between the secret-keeper and target. Secrecy is inherently an interpersonal phenomenon, and future research should strive to examine it accordingly by considering all three elements: the secret-keeper, the target, and the relationship between the two.

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Table 1

Correlations between Secret-Keeping Tactics and Anticipated Consequences of Revealing the Secret

	Positive outcomes	Negative social consequences	Negative emotional consequences	Relief of secrecy burden
Avoiding/evading the secret	.16*	.39**	.32**	.28**
Disinformation	-.02	.43**	.35**	.14
Avoiding the target	.22**	.21**	.06	.28**

* $p \leq .01$, ** $p \leq .001$.

Table 2

Correlations between Relationship Quality Indices and Impacts of Keeping the Secret

	Impact on secret-keeper's well-being	Effect on relationship with target	Effect on closeness with target
Overall +/- view of the relationship	.06	.14	.26**
Relationship quality: secret-keeper's perspective	-.03	.01	.21**
Relationship quality: target's perspective	-.01	.04	.21**

** $p \leq .001$.

Table 3

Correlations between Relationship Quality Indices and Reasons for Keeping the Secret

	Evaluation concerns within the relationship	Relationship concerns	Privacy concerns	Personal repercussions concerns	Public reputation concerns
Overall +/- view of the relationship	-.32**	.14	-.27**	-.16*	.15
Relationship quality: secret- keeper's perspective	-.30**	.25**	-.32**	-.15	.20**
Relationship quality: target's perspective	-.29**	.24**	-.26**	-.11	.15

* $p \leq .01$, ** $p \leq .001$.

Table 4

Correlations between Personality Variables and Impacts of Keeping the Secret

	Impact on secret-keeper's well-being	Effect on relationship with target	Effect on closeness with target
Avoidance attachment	-.04	.01	.21**
Anxiety attachment	-.15	-.24**	-.21**
Fear of negative evaluation	-.19*	-.02	.06
Interpersonal trust	-.07	.05	.03

* $p \leq .01$, ** $p \leq .001$.

Table 5

Correlations between Personality Variables and Reasons for Keeping the Secret

	Evaluation concerns within the relationship	Relationship concerns	Privacy concerns	Personal repercussions concerns	Public reputation concerns
Avoidance attachment	-.23**	.18**	-.38**	-.08	.19**
Anxiety attachment	.40**	.09	.20**	.21**	.08
Fear of negative evaluation	.20**	.10	-.04	.13	.26**
Interpersonal trust	-.04	.03	-.11	-.08	.09

** $p \leq .001$.

Table 6

Correlations between Personality Variables and Anticipated Consequences of Revealing the Secret

	Positive outcomes	Negative social consequences	Negative emotional consequences	Relief of secrecy burden
Avoidance attachment	.28**	-.22**	.13	.07
Anxiety attachment	-.15	.43**	.15	.13
Fear of negative evaluation	.03	.04	.20**	.00
Interpersonal trust	.04	-.15	.00	.02

** $p \leq .001$.

Table 7

Correlations between Target-Related Variables and Aspects of Keeping the Secret

	Relevance of information to target	Target's perception of the information (+/-)	How the target would be affected by the information (+/-)
Impact on secret- keeper's well-being	-.16*	.39**	.36**
Overall emotions (+/-)	-.16*	.51**	.41**
Relief if secret were revealed	.24**	.06	.07
Difficulty of keeping the secret	.28**	-.03	-.08
Effort invested in keeping the secret	.21**	-.09	-.17*
Importance of keeping the secret	.05	-.41**	-.44**
Effect on relationship with target	-.25**	.12	.13

* $p \leq .01$, ** $p \leq .001$.

Table 8

Correlations between Target-Related Variables and Anticipated Consequences of Revealing the Secret

	Relevance of information to target	Target's perception of the information (+/-)	How the target would be affected by the information (+/-)
Overall bad consequences	.21**	-.52**	-.56**
Positive outcomes	.06	.47**	.46**
Negative emotional consequences	.27**	-.60**	-.59**
Negative social consequences	.17*	-.39**	-.39**
Relief of secrecy burden	.28**	.21**	.17*
Effect of revealing on closeness with target	-.14	.64**	.65**
Trust in target to keep the secret	.01	.38**	.35**

* $p \leq .01$, ** $p \leq .001$.

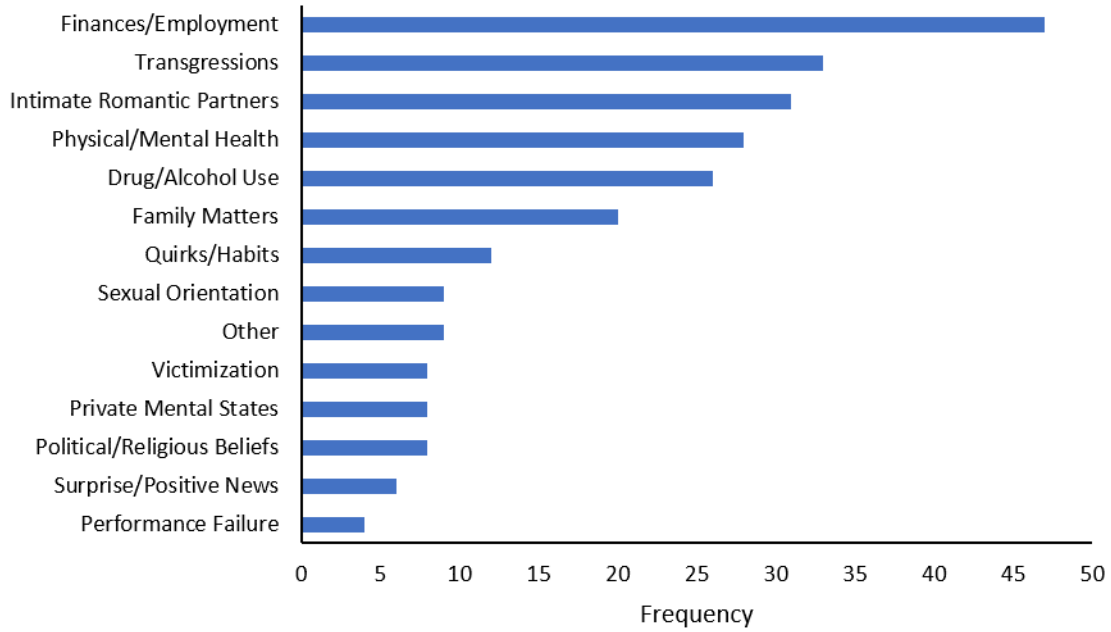


Figure 1. Number of participant responses for each category of secrets ($n = 249$).

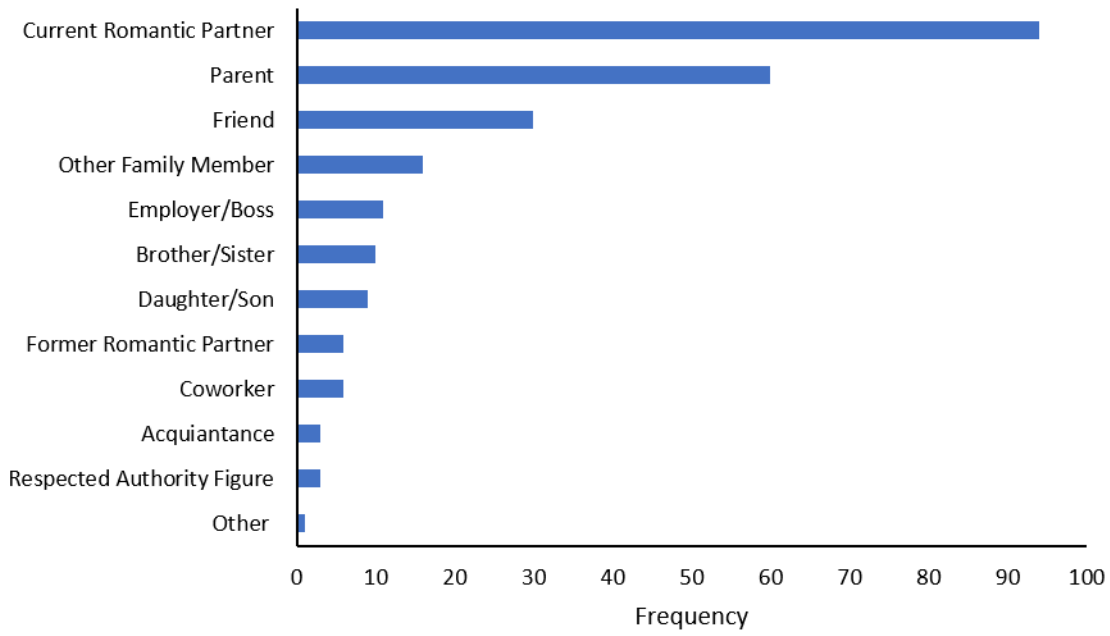


Figure 2. Number of participant responses for each type of relationship from whom the secret was kept ($n = 249$).

Appendix A

Amazon Mechanical Turk Questionnaire

Everyone has secrets – information that they try to conceal from one or more other people. We would like you to think of a personal secret – a secret about you – that you are trying to keep from one or more other people. It's possible that certain other people may know this information about you, but you are trying to conceal the information from one or more people who do not know it.

What secret are you trying to keep? Describe it in a phrase:

Which of the following best describes the secret? (Check one.)

- It is about something I did in the past.
- It is about something I am currently doing.
- It is about something I plan to do.
- It is about something I think or feel.
- It is about something that happened to me.
- It is about something I know about someone else.
- It is about something I am currently struggling with.
- It is about something personal or private about me (but not something I did).
- The secret does not fit in any of these categories.

Sometimes, secrets are about good, desirable things, and sometimes they are about bad, undesirable things. From your personal standpoint, how good or bad is the information you want to keep secret?

- Very bad
- Moderately bad
- Slightly bad
- Neither good nor bad; neutral
- Slightly good
- Moderately good
- Very good

How personal is the information you want to keep secret?

- Not at all personal
- Slightly personal
- Moderately personal
- Very personal
- Extremely personal

How many other people do you think already know this information about you?

- No one

Just one person
A few people
Many people
Almost everyone
I have no idea

How many people are you trying to keep this information secret from?

Just one person
A few people
Many people
Almost everyone (except a few close confidants)
Absolutely everyone

How often do you think about this secret?

Almost never
Rarely
Occasionally
Often
Almost every day
Every day
Many times each day

Overall, what kind of emotions do you feel when you think about the information you are keeping secret?

Very negative
Moderately negative
Slightly negative
Neutral
Slightly positive
Moderately positive
Very positive

To what extent do you feel each of these specific emotions when you think about the information that you are keeping secret?

Not at all
Slightly
Moderately
Very
Extremely

Nervous, worried
Happy, content
Relaxed, calm

Angry, irritable
Sad, depressed
Guilty, regretful
Embarrassed, ashamed
Insecure, weak

How negative or positive of an impact does keeping the secret (not the secret information itself) have on each of the following?

Very negative
Moderately negative
Slightly negative
No impact
Slightly positive
Moderately positive
Very positive

My self-esteem
My view of myself
My quality of life
My satisfaction with life
My physical well-being
My emotional well-being
My relationships with other people

When we keep secrets, sometimes we want to conceal the information from one person, sometimes from a set of people, and sometimes from everyone. But even when we are keeping the secret from many people, there are usually particular people who are of greatest concern.

Think of the person whom you most wish to conceal the secret information from. (Even if you want to keep the secret from many people, think of the person that you most want to keep it from.)

Type the person's first name or initials here – this information is needed to insert into later questions below. _____

What is your relationship with XX [*pipe in answer from above*]?

Friend
Current romantic partner
Former romantic partner
Parent
Brother or sister
Daughter or son
Other family member

Teacher, coach, pastor, priest, or other respected authority figure
 Employer or boss
 Coworker
 Employee, student, or other individual under your authority
 Acquaintance
 Roommate or neighbor
 Other: _____

How long have you known XX?

Less than 1 month
 1 to 6 months
 6 months to 1 year
 More than 1 year
 How many years? _____

How long have you been trying to keep this information secret from XX?

Less than 1 month
 1 to 6 months
 6 months to 1 year
 More than 1 year
 How many years? _____

People try to keep information secret for many reasons. Rate the degree to which each of these is a reason that you want to keep this information a secret from XX:

Not at all a reason
 A small reason
 A moderate reason
 A big reason
 The major reason

I want to maintain a positive public image.
 I want to avoid criticism, ridicule, or teasing from XX.
 I am worried about the information spreading to other people (beyond XX).
 I don't want to get into trouble.
 I prefer to keep information about myself private.
 I don't think XX will be supportive if he or she learns my secret.
 XX might use the information against me somehow.
 I want to maintain good relations with XX.
 I don't want XX to worry or experience stress from the information.
 I am worried about hurting XX.
 I am trying to maintain an appropriate level of distance or closeness with XX.
 I am ashamed of myself.
 There are not good opportunities to disclose this information.
 I don't want to deal with whatever consequences might come from revealing the secret.

How important is it to you that XX does not learn this information?

- Not at all important
- Slightly important
- Moderately important
- Very important
- Extremely important

Even when people do not want other people to know the information, sometimes they feel relieved when the secret comes out. To what extent would you feel relieved to no longer have to keep the secret from XX?

- Not at all
- Slightly
- Moderately
- Very
- Extremely

How easy or difficult is it to keep the information secret from XX?

- Extremely easy
- Moderately easy
- Slightly easy
- Neither easy nor difficult
- Slightly difficult
- Moderately difficult
- Extremely difficult

How much effort do you actively invest in keeping this information secret from XX?

- None at all
- A little
- A moderate amount
- A great deal
- Whatever it takes

People can keep secrets in many ways, using many different behaviors. To what extent do you use each of the following tactics to keep the secret from XX?

- I do not do this at all.
- I rarely do this.
- I occasionally do this.
- I often do this.
- I always do this.

Avoid XX

Change topics or steer conversations away from the topic of the secret

Deny information that is true

Lie about the secret by saying things that are false or misleading
 Try not to think about the secret so that I don't accidentally leak it
 Distract myself by staying busy with other activities
 Avoid situations in which the secret might come up
 Monitor my behavior to make sure I don't accidentally reveal the secret
 Behave in ways that will lower any suspicions XX may have about the secret
 Talk about the secret with other people to get it off my chest (e.g. tell a confidant, counselor, or pet; write about it in a journal, diary, or online forum, etc.)
 Give vague, noncommittal answers to questions about the secret
 Distract XX with other activities or conversation topics

Sometimes seeing or talking to the person from whom you are keeping a secret reminds you of that secret. How often do you think about this secret when you are with XX or communicating with him or her?

Almost never
 Rarely
 Occasionally
 Often
 Almost constantly

You may also spontaneously think about the secret you are keeping when you are not in a situation when you would have to conceal it. How often do you think about this secret when you are NOT with XX and NOT communicating with him or her?

Almost never
 Rarely
 Occasionally
 Often
 Almost constantly

How does keeping the secret affect your relationship with XX?

Very negatively
 Somewhat negatively
 Slightly negatively
 No effect
 Slightly positively
 Somewhat positively
 Very positively

Keeping a secret from someone may create or maintain distance from that person or create or maintain closeness with that person. How does keeping the secret affect your level of closeness with XX?

Creates significantly more distance
 Creates moderately more distance
 Creates slightly more distance

- No effect
- Creates slightly more closeness
- Creates moderately more closeness
- Creates significantly more closeness

Revealing a secret may bring two people closer or create more distance between them. If you were to reveal your secret, how would you expect your level of closeness with XX to change?

- Significantly more distant
- Moderately more distant
- Slightly more distant
- No change or about the same
- Slightly closer
- Moderately closer
- Significantly closer

Sometimes we keep information secret from other people because it's none of their business and they aren't entitled to know it. To what extent is the information that you are keeping secret relevant to XX -- something that most people would say they have a right to know?

- Not at all – it's absolutely none of their business
- It's slightly relevant to them
- It's moderately relevant to them
- It's very relevant to them
- It's extremely relevant to them

If XX found out the information that you are keeping secret from him or her, how positively or negatively would he or she be affected by knowing the information?

- Very negatively
- Somewhat negatively
- Slightly negatively
- No effect
- Slightly positively
- Somewhat positively
- Very positively

When people learn our secrets, the consequences can be bad, good, or some mix of bad and good. Imagine that XX learned the information you are trying to keep secret.

How much do you trust XX to keep your secret if you told him or her?

- Not at all
- Slightly
- Moderately
- Very much
- Completely

How positively or negatively would XX view the information?

- Very negatively
- Moderately negatively
- Slightly negatively
- Neither positive nor negatively; neutral
- Slightly positively
- Moderately positively
- Very positively

How bad would the consequences be (for you) if XX learned this information?

- Not at all bad
- Slightly bad
- Moderately bad
- Very bad
- Extremely bad

How good would the consequences be (for you) if XX learned this information?

- Not at all good
- Slightly good
- Moderately good
- Very good
- Extremely good

How likely is it that each of these consequences would occur if XX learned this secret?

- Not at all likely
- Slightly likely
- Moderately likely
- Very likely
- Almost certain to occur

My public image or reputation would be damaged.

XX would be hurt.

My relationship with XX would be damaged.

I would be socially rejected or ostracized by XX.

The quality of my life would decrease.

I would feel ashamed.

There would be formal legal or administrative repercussions.

I would be able to act more like myself around XX.

I would receive help from XX.

XX would understand me better as a person.

My relationship with XX would improve.

The quality of my life would increase.

I would feel less upset when I think about the information.

I would feel less stress from trying to keep the information secret.

The following sections contain questions about your relationship with XX.

Overall, how positively or negatively do you view your relationship with XX?

- Very negatively
- Moderately negatively
- Slightly negatively
- Neither; neutral
- Slightly positively
- Moderately positively
- Very positively

How much personal information do you expect XX to share with you?

- None
- A little
- A moderate amount
- A great deal
- Almost everything

How much personal information do you think XX expects you to share with him or her?

- None
- A little
- A moderate amount
- A great deal
- Almost everything

How much personal information have you shared with XX in the past?

- None
- A little
- A moderate amount
- A great deal
- Almost everything

	Not at all	Slightly	Moderately	Very	Extremely
How well do you personally know XX?					
To what extent do you respect XX?					
How much do you trust XX overall?					
How open and honest are you with XX?					
How close do you feel to XX?					
How understanding and supportive are you toward XX?					

How much do you like XX?					
How much do you value your relationship with XX?					
How well do you understand XX?					
How concerned are you about the welfare and well-being of XX?					
To what extent can you genuinely be yourself around XX?					

	Not at all	Slightly	Moderately	Very	Extremely
How well does XX personally know you?					
To what extent do you think XX respects you?					
How much do you think XX trusts you overall?					
How open and honest do you think XX is with you?					
How close do you think XX feels to you?					
How understanding and supportive is XX toward you?					
How much do you think XX likes you?					
How much do you think that XX values his or her relationship with you?					
How well do you think XX understands you?					
How concerned do you think that XX is about your welfare and well-being?					
To what extent do you think that XX can you genuinely be him- or herself around you?					

[Attachment Style]

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat agree

Agree
Strongly agree

I usually discuss my problems and concerns with XX.
I talk things over with XX.
It helps to turn to XX in times of need.
I find it easy to depend on XX.
I prefer not to show XX how I feel deep down.
I don't feel comfortable opening up to XX.
I'm afraid XX may reject or abandon me.
I worry that XX doesn't care about me as much as I care about him or her.
I often worry that XX doesn't really care for me.
I don't fully trust XX.

How often do you interact with XX overall?

Daily or almost daily
Several times a week
At least once a week
Once or twice a month
A few times a year
Once a year or less
Almost never

How often do you interact with XX one-on-one – with no one else involved?

Almost never
Rarely
Occasionally
Often
Almost all of our interactions are one-on-one

How often do you interact with XX in group settings in which other people are involved?

Almost never
Rarely
Occasionally
Often
Almost all of our interactions are in groups

How frequently do you communicate with XX in each of the following ways?

Daily or almost daily
Several times a week
At least once a week
Once or twice a month
A few times a year

Once a year or less
Almost never

Talking in person (face-to-face)
Text messaging, email, or social media (Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, etc.)
Phone calls
Video calls

Compared to other people your age, how many secrets do you think you keep from others?

Many fewer secrets than other people
Somewhat fewer secrets than other people
Slightly fewer secrets than other people
About the same number as other people
Slightly more secrets than other people
Somewhat more secrets than other people
Many more secrets than other people

In general, how good or bad is it to keep secrets from other people?

Almost always bad
Usually bad
Occasionally bad
Neither bad nor good
Occasionally good
Usually good
Almost always good

Rate the degree to which each of the following statements describes you.

Not at all descriptive of me
Slightly descriptive of me
Moderately descriptive of me
Very descriptive of me
Extremely descriptive of me

[Interpersonal Trust]

I believe that other people have good intentions.
I trust what people say.
I suspect hidden motives in others.
I believe that people are basically moral.
I am wary of others.
I believe in human goodness.
I distrust people.
I believe that people are essentially evil.

[Fear of Negative Evaluation]

I worry about what other people will think of me even when I know it doesn't make any difference.

Other people's opinions of me do not bother me.

If I know someone is judging me, it has little effect on me.

Sometimes I think I am too concerned with what other people think of me.

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements regarding your participation in this study?

Strongly agree

Moderately agree

Somewhat agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Somewhat disagree

Moderately disagree

Strongly disagree

I felt uncomfortable thinking about this secret.

I felt as though I were revealing my secret by answering these questions.

Answering questions about my secret gave me some sense of clarity or helped me understand myself or my secret better.

Appendix B

Coding Scheme for Categories of Secrets

- 1 – Drug/Alcohol Use (*includes smoking, marijuana, alcohol, and other drug usage, as well as addictions to any substances or unspecified addictions*)
- 2 – Performance Failure (*instances in which the person did not meet expectations, including poor grades, athletic performance, etc.*)
- 3 – Surprise/Positive News (*includes surprise trips, proposals, etc., so long as the surprise or news is not yet known to the other person and is expected to be a happy/positive event*)
- 4 – Finances/Employment (*anything pertaining to money or career, including finances, debt, job positions, career prospects/success, workplace skills, issues in the workplace, gambling, etc.*)
- 5 – Sexual Orientation (*includes current sexual orientation, questioning one's sexual orientation, or prior relations that were contrary to one's identified sexual orientation*)
- 6 – Political/Religious Beliefs (*includes church membership or lack of affiliation, political attitudes and opinions, etc.*)
- 7 – Transgressions (*anything in which the person keeping the secret did something that hurt someone physically/psychologically or broke some rules/norms/standards, including infidelity, cheating on tests, theft, property damage, criminal record/jail time, harming others, etc.*)
- 8 – Physical/Mental Health (*includes physical or mental illness, depression, anxiety, physical conditions like scars/rashes, weight-related issues, dieting, eating habits/disorders, surgery, etc.*)
- 9 – Intimate Romantic Partners (*pertains to past/present/future sexual or romantic relations with an existing or potential intimate partner, including crushes/romantic desire, sexual partners, past relationships, rejection, current/past feelings, relationship dynamics, etc.*)
- 10 – Victimization (*anything in which the person keeping the secret was on the receiving end of a transgression and thus experienced physical/psychological/material harm, including being cheated on, physically/psychologically abused, the target of theft, insulted, etc.*)
- 11 – Family Matters (*events that pertain to the broader family unit, beyond a single intimate relationship, including pregnancy, current engagement or relationship status being kept from the family/others, family secrets, divorce, marriage, abortion, family relationship dynamics, etc.*)
- 12 – Quirks/Habits (*anything that the person keeping the secret does at least somewhat regularly which would be considered odd, excessive, interesting, or unusual, including watching porn and masturbation*)
- 13 – Private Mental States (*includes emotions, thoughts, attitudes, fears, worries, doubts, self-evaluations, intentions, etc.*)
- 14 – Other (*includes answers too vague to code*)