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The Tea App Data Breach: What Was Exposed and What We Know About the Class Action Lawsuit

DMs, photo IDs and selfie photos were exposed in the hack.

Katie Collins Corinne Reichert

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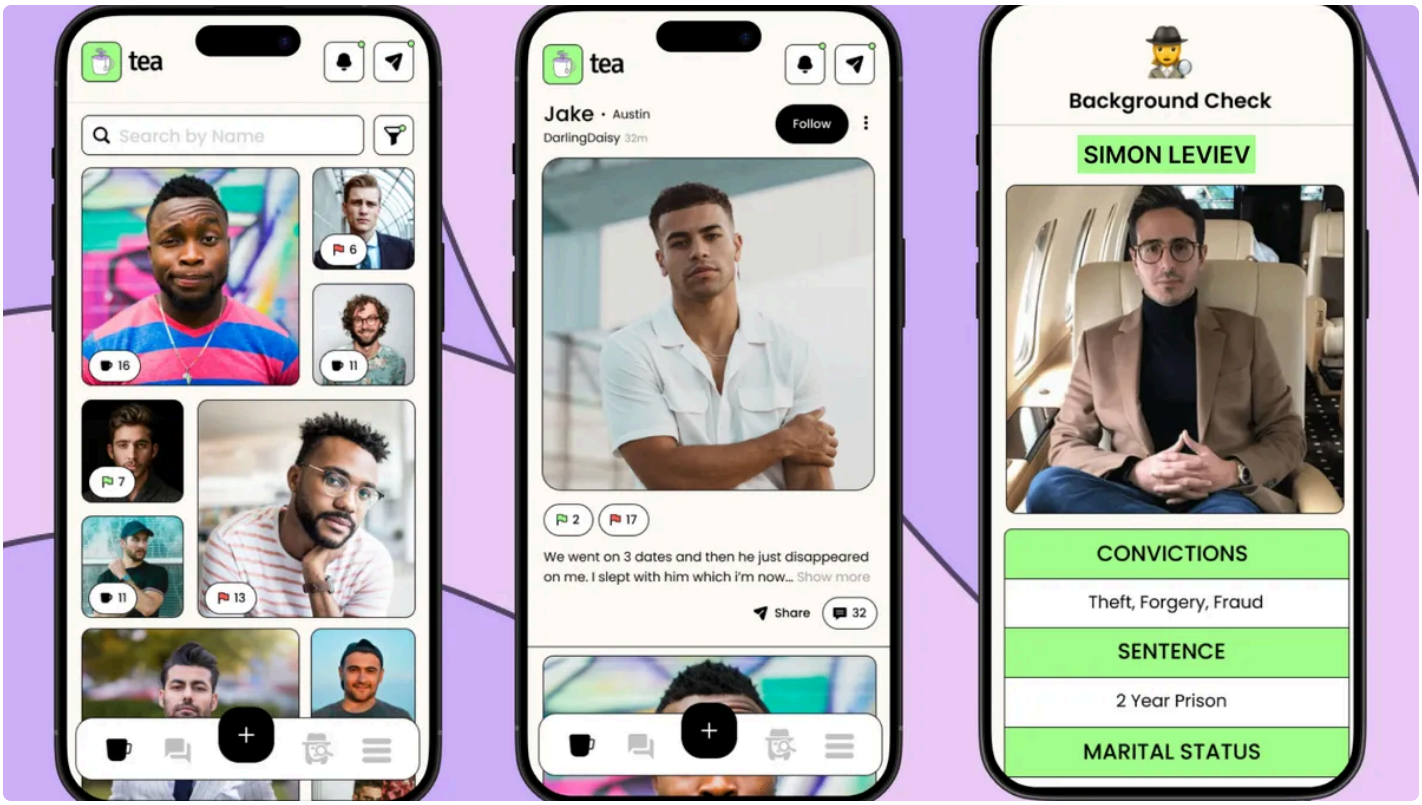
3 min read



The Tea app is built to let women get information about the men they encounter on the dating scene.

Tea

Tea, a women's dating safety app that recently surged to the top of the free iOS App Store listings, suffered a major security breach last week. The company confirmed Friday that it "identified authorized access to one of our systems" that exposed thousands of user images. And now we know that DMs were accessed during the breach, too.

Tea's preliminary findings from the end of last week showed the data breach exposed approximately 72,000 images: 13,000 images of selfies and photo identification that people had submitted during account verification, and 59,000 images that were publicly viewable in the app from posts, comments and direct messages.

Those images had been stored in a "legacy data system" that contained information from more than two years ago, the company said in statement. "At this time, there is no evidence to suggest that current or additional user data was affected."

Earlier Friday, posts on Reddit and 404 Media reported that Tea app users' faces and IDs had been posted on anonymous online message board 4chan. Tea requires users to verify their identities with selfies or IDs, which is why driver's licenses and pictures of people's faces are in the leaked data.

And on Monday, a Tea spokesperson confirmed to CNET that it additionally "recently learned that some direct messages (DMs) were accessed as part of the initial incident." Tea has also taken the affected system offline. That confirmation followed a report by 404 Media on Monday that an independent security researcher discovered it would have been possible for hackers to gain access to DMs between Tea users, affecting messages sent up to last week on the Tea app.

Tea said it has launched a full investigation to assess the scope and impact of the breach.

Class action lawsuit filed

One of the users of the Tea app, Griselda Reyes, has filed a class action lawsuit on behalf of herself and other Tea users affected by the data breach. According to court documents filed on July 28, as reported earlier by 404 Media, Reyes is suing Tea over its alleged "failure to properly secure and safeguard ... personally identifiable information."

"Shortly after the data breach was announced, internet users claimed to have mapped the locations of Tea's users based on metadata contained from the leaked images," the complaint alleges. "Thus, instead of empowering women, Tea has actually put them at risk of serious harm."

Tea also has yet to notify its customers personally about their data being breached, the complaint alleges.

The complaint is seeking class action status, damages for those affected "in an amount to be determined" and certain requirements for Tea to improve its data storage and handling practices.

Scott Edward Cole of Cole & Van Note, the law firm representing Reyes, told CNET he is "stunned" by the alleged lack of security protections in place.

"This application was advertised as a safe place for women to share information, sometimes very intimate information, about their dating experiences. Few people would take that risk if they'd known Tea Dating put such little effort into its cybersecurity," Cole alleged. "One chief goal of our lawsuit is to compel the company to start taking user privacy a lot more seriously."

Tea declined to comment on legal proceedings.

What is the Tea app?

The premise of Tea is to provide women with a space to report negative interactions they've had while encountering men in the dating pool, with the intention of keeping other women safe.

The app is currently sitting at the No. 2 spot for free apps on Apple's US App Store, right after ChatGPT, drawing international attention and sparking a debate about whether the app violates men's privacy. Following the news of the data breach, it also plays into the wider ongoing debate around whether online identity and age verification pose an inherent security risk to internet users.

In the privacy section on its website, Tea says: "Tea Dating Advice takes reasonable security measures to protect your Personal Information to prevent loss, misuse, unauthorized access, disclosure, alteration and destruction. Please be aware, however, that despite our efforts, no security measures are impenetrable."

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Even The Guy Who Makes ChatGPT Says You Probably Shouldn't Use Chatbots as Therapists

OpenAI's Sam Altman thinks it's "very screwed up" that his company can't necessarily keep your chat logs private in a lawsuit.

Jon Reed
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3 min read

Maybe don't spill all your secrets in a chat with ChatGPT. OpenAI CEO Sam Altman says he's worried his company wouldn't have the legal protections to keep those things secret.

Photo by Andrew Harnik/Getty Images

Maybe don't tell your deepest, darkest secrets to an AI chatbot like ChatGPT. You don't have to take my word for it. Take it from the guy behind the most popular generative AI model on the market.

Sam Altman, the CEO of ChatGPT maker OpenAI, raised the issue this week in an interview with host Theo Von on the This Past Weekend podcast. He suggested that your conversations with AI should have similar protections as those you have with your doctor or lawyer. At one point, Von said one reason he was hesitant to use some AI tools is because he "didn't know who's going to have" his personal information.

"I think that makes sense," Altman said, "to really want the privacy clarity before you use it a lot, the legal clarity."

More and more AI users are treating chatbots like their therapists, doctors or lawyers, and that's created a serious privacy problem for them. There are no confidentiality rules and the actual mechanics of what happens to those

conversations are startlingly unclear. Of course, there are other problems with using AI as a therapist or confidant, like how bots can give terrible advice or how they can reinforce stereotypes or stigma. (My colleague Nelson Aguilar has compiled a list of the 11 things you should never do with ChatGPT and why.)

Altman's clearly aware of the issues here, and seems at least a bit troubled by it. "People use it, young people especially, use it as a therapist, a life coach, I'm having these relationship problems, what should I do?" he said. "Right now, if you talk to a therapist or a lawyer or a doctor about those problems, there's legal privilege for it."

The question came up during a part of the conversation about whether there should be more rules or regulations around AI. Rules that stifle AI companies and the tech's development are unlikely to gain favor in Washington these days, as President Donald Trump's AI Action Plan released this week expressed a desire to regulate this technology less, not more. But rules to protect them might find favor.

Read more: AI Essentials: 29 Ways You Can Make Gen AI Work for You, According to Our Experts

Altman seemed most worried about a lack of legal protections for companies like his to keep them from being forced to turn over private conversations in lawsuits. OpenAI has objected to requests to retain user conversations during a lawsuit with the New York Times over copyright infringement and intellectual property issues. (Disclosure: Ziff Davis, CNET's parent company, in April filed a lawsuit against OpenAI, alleging it infringed Ziff Davis copyrights in training and operating its AI systems.)

"If you go talk to ChatGPT about the most sensitive stuff and then there's a lawsuit or whatever, we could be required to produce that," Altman said. "I think that's very screwed up. I think we should have the same concept of privacy for your conversations with AI that you do with your therapist or whatever."

Be careful what you tell AI about yourself

For you, the issue isn't so much that OpenAI might have to turn your conversations over in a lawsuit. It's a question of whom you trust with your secrets.

William Agnew, a researcher at Carnegie Mellon University who was part of a team that evaluated chatbots on their performance dealing with therapy-like questions, told me recently that privacy is a paramount issue when confiding in AI tools. The uncertainty around how models work -- and how your conversations are kept from appearing in other people's chats -- is reason enough to be hesitant.

"Even if these companies are trying to be careful with your data, these models are well known to regurgitate information," Agnew said.

If ChatGPT or another tool regurgitates information from your therapy session or from medical questions you asked, that could appear if your insurance company or someone else with an interest in your personal life asks the same

tool about you.

"People should really think about privacy more and just know that almost everything they tell these chatbots is not private," Agnew said. "It will be used in all sorts of ways."

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