

Openness in Social Media as a Form of Symbolic Interaction in the Digital Era

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Article Info

Article history:

Received: 1 Juni 2025

Publish: 1 July 2025

Keywords:

Digital Openness;

Privacy;

Self-identity;

Social Media.

Abstract

Social media has become a space for self-expression that allows individuals to display their personal sides more openly than in real life. This phenomenon shows a shift in communication patterns related to identity management, the search for social recognition, and the need for security. This study aims to explore the factors that influence openness on social media and its impact on individual social and psychological conditions. The method used is a qualitative approach with an open-ended questionnaire instrument distributed to social media users. The results showed that openness is influenced by emotional comfort, perception of the audience, and control over the information shared. However, openness also poses risks such as privacy violations and social pressure, especially when the responses received are negative. The findings emphasize the importance of reflective awareness in sharing personal information to keep social media use healthy and responsible.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Along with the rapid flow of digitalization, social media has become a new interactive space that allows individuals to express themselves more freely. Interestingly, individuals who tend to be closed in real life often show greater openness in cyberspace. Currently, social media not only functions as a communication tool, but also as a broad and open space for self-expression. This phenomenon can be seen on various digital platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, and Facebook, where individuals tend to share personal, emotional, and even sensitive things with the public (Susilo et al., 2025). This attitude is often at odds with their behavior in real life, where some people are more careful in expressing their thoughts and feelings directly.

In this digital space, a person has greater control in regulating how to communicate. Through uploading text, images, videos, and interactive features such as comments and “likes”, users can show the side of themselves that they want to show to others (Social et al., 2017). They can also filter information, choose words more calmly, and determine who can access the upload. In this condition, it is not uncommon for individuals to feel more comfortable expressing personal feelings or experiences openly. Factors such as anonymity, minimal direct social pressure, and emotional distance from the audience make some people feel safer when speaking in digital spaces.

This gives them the freedom to express things that may not be easy to express in face-to-face interactions. However, this kind of openness is not always positive. Several studies have shown that being too open in sharing personal information can have negative consequences, such as loss of privacy, data misuse, cyberbullying, and social pressure due to expectations that arise in online interactions (Akhtar, 2020). In addition, the difference between the self-displayed on social media and everyday reality can create internal tension and identity gaps that affect psychological well-being (Nur et al., 2024).

This phenomenon shows that openness on social media is not just a form of spontaneous expression, but is also closely related to how individuals form and adjust their identities in digital spaces, and how online social dynamics influence their communication behavior. Therefore, this article aims to review the various factors behind the tendency of openness on social media and its impact on the social and psychological aspects of users. This study is expected to encourage a wiser understanding in using social media as a safe and healthy space for expression.

Based on previous studies, openness on social media has been studied from various perspectives, but is still limited in linking it to the construction of digital identity and the psychological well-being of users, especially in the context of Indonesian culture. This article offers a new approach by viewing openness as part of a self-identity communication strategy in a digital space that is full of hidden social pressures. The issues raised in this article include factors that encourage openness on social media, as well as the accompanying psychosocial impacts. Therefore, this article aims to review the background of user openness on social media and evaluate its impact on digital identity and user mental health, so that it can encourage a wiser and healthier understanding in using social media as a space for self-expression.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with a survey method through a questionnaire. According to Creswell (2017), although this survey is generally used in quantitative research, the questionnaire can also be applied in qualitative research if it contains open-ended questions. With this approach, the questionnaire can help explore the experiences and views of respondents in depth. This method is often used in research that aims to explore individual stories or experiences related to a particular phenomenon. In this context, the questionnaire allows researchers to explore the experiences, meanings, and in-depth views of respondents regarding their openness on social media.

This method was chosen because it allows researchers to collect comprehensive data on how individuals express their feelings, opinions, and experiences on social media. Open questionnaires provide an opportunity for respondents to express their views freely and without rigid answer limitations, so that the data obtained is more descriptive and contextual.

This study focuses on the phenomenon of openness in social media, so it is very important to understand directly how social media users feel and respond to their experiences in interacting in digital spaces. Through questionnaires, researchers can obtain various perspectives on the reasons behind openness, the factors that influence it, the reactions received from the digital social environment, and how individuals manage the balance between openness and privacy.

The data obtained were then analyzed qualitatively to find patterns of meaning contained in the respondents' experiences. This approach allows researchers to capture the nuances and complexities of social interactions that occur on social media, which are not easily measured by quantitative methods. Thus, the qualitative survey method through an open

questionnaire is very appropriate to support research that aims to explore the meaning of openness as part of social interaction in the digital era.

3. RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Openness as an Identity Management Strategy in Digital Space

Social media that we know is a medium for socializing with each other which is done online so that it allows us users to interact with each other without being limited by space and time (Erland Hamzah & Eka Putri, 2020). The development of technology and the use of social media certainly affect the openness of individuals in expressing feelings and opinions experiencing a significant shift (Pokhrel, 2024). Currently, social media is developing very rapidly, where almost all platforms provide convenience for users to share information and news with friends and other users, both known and unknown (Putri et al., 2020). Many parties consider social media to be an effective and efficient means of communication in conveying information. In addition to functioning as a tool for sharing information, social media has also transformed into a personal space that allows individuals to express themselves, share their thoughts, feelings, and even their daily lives.

Openness on social media emerges as a form of strategy in managing self-identity, especially when individuals find it difficult to do so directly in real life. In digital space, a person can easily convey their thoughts without having to face the pressures of face-to-face interaction, such as embarrassment, awkwardness, or fear of being judged. This is especially important for individuals who have a closed personality, or who feel they do not have a safe space to express their feelings directly.

Social media plays an important role as a means of self-expression for its users, this openness is not only about emotional honesty, but also how individuals present the version of themselves they want to show to the public. Social media allows for a calmer, more measured, and more selective message-making process. With a time, lag in communication, a person can choose words more carefully, so that the message conveyed is in accordance with the image they want to build. Not a few also feel that on social media they are more heard or understood, because there is the possibility of finding a community or people with similar experiences and views. This provides a sense of social support, even though it occurs virtually.

Openness on social media is also influenced by audience perception. Because they do not have to see direct reactions from others, individuals tend to be more courageous in expressing personal matters. Some people even feel freer because their identities are not fully recognized or bound by rigid social norms. In this case, social media has developed not only as a space for sharing information, but also as a medium for self-expression that encourages openness. This openness no longer appears spontaneously, but has become an individual strategy in forming self-image and gaining social recognition.

Table 1. Key themes driving openness on social media

No	He	Quotation
1.	Emotional comfort	"I feel calmer sharing my feelings via IG"
2.	Anonymity and perception of security	"People don't know who I am, so I'm free to tell stories"
3.	There is no offline story room	"I don't have a place to confide in the real world"

4.	Avoiding confrontation	"I feel more honest when sharing on social media because I don't have to deal with immediate reactions from others."
5.	Want to be heard/known	"I want people to know about me, to feel noticed"

As stated by one of the respondents: *"I feel more comfortable because I don't have to see other people's reactions directly, so I am braver to be honest about what I feel."*

This statement is in line with the findings (Hardiana & Kurniawan 2021), which state that social media allows individuals to display their lives personally as a form of self-expression or search for meaning. In this context, openness is part of a complex digital social dynamic that is not always negative but reflects how individuals use online spaces to form identities and establish connections with others.

Social media becomes a symbolic interaction space that allows for the process of continuous formation, management, and adjustment of identity. The openness that occurs not only reflects what a person feels or thinks, but also shows how individuals want to be recognized and interpreted by others in the digital era. In this process, social media acts as a medium for self-expression, social validation, and a means to form and negotiate identity through interaction, participation in trends, and adaptation to social norms that develop in the digital realm.

2. The Role of Social Response in Shaping Openness

The social response received by individuals after being open on social media is one of the determining factors in forming subsequent communication patterns. Responses from others, both directly and indirectly, influence the extent to which a person feels safe, accepted, or even ostracized in the digital space. In this context, support, empathy, and even criticism from virtual colleagues play an important role in the process of forming self-image. As explained by (Hermawan & Gassing 2023), comments given in digital interactions have a significant impact on an individual's self-perception and social reputation. When someone feels that their openness is appreciated, they will be encouraged to continue expressing themselves. Conversely, if openness actually leads to social rejection or stigma, individuals tend to withdraw and become more closed.

Based on the questionnaire results, responses to openness on social media vary widely and are not always positive. Some respondents reported receiving significant emotional support, such as appreciation, empathy, and encouragement from their audience. This support not only provides a sense of security, but also builds self-confidence and encourages continued open behavior. One respondent stated: *"There are some people who are happy when I open up."* Positive responses like this strengthen social bonds and make social media a comfortable space to express oneself more authentically.

However, there are also quite a few respondents who admitted to getting negative reactions. Stigma such as being labeled as "alay," "seeking attention," or being considered too dramatic are forms of social pressure faced by individuals when they try to be open in the digital space. One respondent said, *"My friends call me 'alay' because I often share my problems on social media."* In fact, some experienced more serious treatment, as stated by another respondent: *"I once shared my feelings, and then it became the subject of gossip. Since then, I stopped sharing stories on social media."* This shows that openness can be a double-edged sword, on the one hand offering space for

self-expression, but on the other hand it can give rise to unanticipated social vulnerabilities.

Negative responses experienced by individuals not only have a momentary impact, but can also disrupt emotional balance, reduce self-confidence, and affect future digital communication patterns. In some cases, even indifference from the audience is also felt quite painful, especially when openness does not receive genuine attention or empathy. This is as emphasized by (Tamaraya & Ubaedullah 2021), that the absence of a meaningful response can reduce the urge to share and make individuals feel unappreciated. (Basuni & Ningsih 2025) added that shallow interactions on social media reinforce the perception that openness is not always greeted with the expected social warmth.

Thus, openness on social media is a process that involves complex social interactions, not just a one-sided act of conveying personal feelings or experiences. Every time someone shares personal information, it has the potential to trigger various responses from the audience, ranging from interpretations, judgments, to comments that shape social perceptions of them. As explained by (Agus et al. 2022), constructive responses can strengthen an individual's motivation to continue expressing themselves, while negative responses can make individuals feel vulnerable, alienated, and even withdraw from the digital space.

3. Maintaining the Boundary between Openness and Privacy in the Digital World

The practice of openness on social media has become part of the daily lives of many individuals, but openness that is not accompanied by awareness of privacy boundaries can have negative consequences (Dian Rahmawati et al., 2023). Based on the testimonies of the informants, excessive openness on social media can have various negative impacts. A number of respondents stated that they had experienced the distribution of personal information without consent, being the target of ridicule, and having their personal photos misused for inappropriate purposes. These situations reflect the high level of vulnerability that occurs when the boundaries between the private and public spheres in the digital environment are not managed wisely.

In response to these risks, the majority of respondents stated that they have begun implementing strategies to maintain a balance between openness and privacy. These strategies generally include sorting the information to be shared, setting the audience (such as using the "close friends" feature), and avoiding publishing sensitive data such as addresses or telephone numbers. Some individuals also realize the importance of maintaining mental health by limiting the use of social media and focusing more on other activities in the real world. According to (Kalam, 2025), social media users tend to use a second account as a means to manage privacy more flexibly. With this account, they can determine for themselves who can access personal content and adjust the level of openness according to their comfort. This strategy provides a safer space for expression and allows individuals to remain open without having to sacrifice control over personal information. However, challenges remain. Some respondents admitted that they still have difficulty controlling openness, especially when they feel comfortable with someone in the digital space. This shows that maintaining privacy is not only a matter of technical awareness, but also requires emotional control and an understanding of the social consequences of every action in online media.

Amidst the rapid flow of information on social media, the ability to limit what is shared is an important skill that every user needs to have. Openness can indeed strengthen social relationships and provide emotional support, but without wise management, it can also pose a risk of misuse of personal information and psychological

and social losses. In her research, (Dewi Bunga et al., 2022) emphasized that low digital awareness encourages many users to share personal information without considering the potential impacts, such as threats to personal security and data misuse. Therefore, every act of sharing in the digital space needs to be based on reflective awareness and an understanding of the boundaries between public and private information.

4. CONCLUSION

Openness on social media is a complex phenomenon that is not only rooted in the need to express oneself, but is also closely related to how individuals shape and display their identities in the digital space. Social media provides a space for individuals to selectively compose messages, shape self-images, and gain social recognition, especially for those who have difficulty expressing themselves directly in real life. Openness is not just a form of emotional honesty, but a communication strategy that is influenced by social dynamics and audience perceptions.

However, openness does not only occur in a vacuum, the social response received after sharing also plays an important role in shaping subsequent openness patterns. Support from others can strengthen a sense of security and encourage continued openness, while negative responses such as neglect or bad judgment can create psychological stress and make individuals withdraw from digital spaces. The quality of social interactions formed after openness greatly determines whether individuals feel accepted or alienated.

Furthermore, the findings show that openness on social media must be balanced with awareness to maintain privacy. Without wise control, excessive sharing of personal information can pose risks such as data misuse, harassment, or emotional harm. Therefore, the ability to sort information, manage audiences, and understand the social consequences of each post are important skills in using social media healthily. The balance between self-expression and privacy protection is key to creating a safe, supportive, and meaningful digital space for each individual.

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