

THE DYNAMICS OF SELF-DISCLOSURE IN ADOLESCENTS WITH MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS THROUGH THE INSTAGRAM ACCOUNT INTO THE LIGHT

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to describe the dynamics of self-disclosure carried out by adolescents facing mental health challenges through social media, with the Into the Light account serving as a contextual space that represents these practices. This research adopts a qualitative case study approach that allows for an in-depth exploration of participants' subjective experiences. The findings reveal that self-disclosure plays an important role in enabling adolescents to express their feelings and thoughts in a safe and anonymous environment on social media. Factors such as emotional needs, trust levels, past experiences, and perceptions of a safe digital space influence adolescents' decisions to engage in self-disclosure. Although the Into the Light account was not directly involved as a participatory object in this research, its presence provides context for understanding digital spaces that support openness. This study contributes to broadening the understanding of how social media, as a supportive and inclusive environment, can promote adolescent mental health

Keywords: Self- Disclosure, Adolescent Mental Health, Social Media

1. INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is one of the most complex developmental periods in human life. This phase is marked by various physical, emotional, social, and cognitive changes that simultaneously shape a person's personal identity. In this process of discovering their identity, adolescents often face significant psychological challenges, such as social pressure, crises of self-confidence, and mental health issues like anxiety, stress, and depression. Although mental health issues are increasingly discussed, in many social contexts—including in Indonesia—this topic is still often considered taboo (Prihatmojo et al., 2025). The stigma surrounding mental health, especially among adolescents, makes many reluctant to disclose their psychological conditions to others, including family or close

friends (Rizki et al., 2020). This makes the need for safe and supportive spaces for sharing even more pressing.

With the development of digital technology and the increasing use of social media among the younger generation, digital platforms are beginning to take over some of the roles of traditional social spaces (Purba et al., 2025). Social media platforms like Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok have become alternative platforms for adolescents to express their feelings, share personal experiences, and seek emotional support from online communities. The process of self-disclosure has become more accessible because social media offers features that allow users to share stories selectively, even anonymously. Digital spaces provide the flexibility to control the personal information they want to share publicly, while also providing opportunities to gain validation and emotional support from a wider, often unknown, audience (Prabowo et al., 2024).

In this context, self-disclosure on social media is an important phenomenon to examine, particularly in relation to adolescents' efforts to cope with psychological burdens and shape their social identities (Amelia, 2024). Feelings of isolation, pressure from their environment, and limited direct interpersonal communication encourage adolescents to use social media as both an escape and a space for healing (Ngatini, 2025; Humaizi et al., 2025). This is where the emergence of online communities and educational accounts that facilitate open discussions about mental health plays a crucial role. One relevant example in this context is the Instagram account *Into the Light* (Dalimunthe et al., 2025).

The *Into the Light* account was not the primary participant in this study, but rather positioned as a contextual space that provides a concrete illustration of how social media can provide a supportive, inclusive, and educational environment for adolescents who wish to share experiences related to mental health.

This account presents personal narratives, awareness campaigns, and psychology-based content aimed at breaking down the stigma surrounding issues such as depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts. Its existence symbolizes the ideal form of a safe digital space, where adolescents feel heard, understood, and not judged. Placing the *Into the Light* account as a context, rather than as a direct subject, in data collection should be understood as an effort to examine the dynamics of self-disclosure within the broader landscape of adolescent online behavior (Pattihua et al., 2022).

The phenomenon of adolescent self-disclosure on social media can be understood not only as a form of emotional escape but also as part of their adaptive strategy in constructing a social identity. Through the stories they post, whether in the form of text, images, or visual symbols such as emojis and stickers, adolescents strive to construct a self-image that aligns with the values of the online communities with which they interact. Positive feedback, such as supportive comments or empathetic emojis from the audience, can boost self-confidence and

foster feelings of acceptance. In many cases, this positive response reinforces the emotional healing process (Milyane et al., 2023; Dalimunthe, 2022).

However, this dynamic is certainly not entirely risk-free. Openness in digital spaces carries significant potential for vulnerability. Personal information shared without adequate safeguards can be misused, become the target of bullying, or even trigger new trauma if responded to negatively. These risks present a unique challenge in understanding self-disclosure behavior among adolescents. Therefore, studies on this phenomenon need to consider the emotional and psychosocial aspects, as well as the characteristics of digital interactions unique to the younger generation (Dalimunthe et al., 2025; Ritonga et al., 2025).

One gap that has not been widely explored in previous research is how adolescents subjectively interpret the process of self-disclosure on social media in relation to finding a safe space to manage mental health. Most research still focuses on the positive or negative impacts of social media in general, without delving deeper into adolescents' personal experiences when they self-disclose online. This study attempts to fill this gap by exploring adolescents' narratives, demonstrating how digital spaces can be a place for identity strengthening and emotional healing, as well as how they assess the boundaries between comfort and risk when disclosing themselves.

The approach used in this study also considers the importance of the digital cultural context that shapes how adolescents communicate. Today's adolescents grow up in a highly digitally connected environment (Fitri et al., 2025). Their language is not always formal or conventional, but rather shaped by online trends, memes, and fast-paced and dynamic visual expressions. By understanding the logic of adolescent communication on social media, we can capture the emotional and symbolic dimensions of self-disclosure that may not be readily apparent.

This study aims not only to describe the phenomenon but also to provide practical contributions to the development of digital-based psychosocial support strategies. The findings are expected to serve as a foundation for mental health practitioners, educators, and policymakers in designing intervention programs that are sensitive to the needs of adolescents. By understanding that adolescents need a space to be heard, valued, and not judged, social media can be optimized as a strategic channel for supporting their mental health. Accounts like Into the Light are a clear example of how inclusive, empathy-based, and educational digital spaces can bridge the gap between adolescent loneliness and collective efforts to care for mental health.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This research uses a qualitative approach with a case study method, as this approach is deemed most appropriate for delving deeply into adolescents' subjective experiences of self-disclosure on social media. Qualitative research

allows researchers to explore the hidden meanings behind social behaviors that cannot be reduced to numbers or statistics. Self-disclosure, as a form of personal expression and self-identity disclosure in digital spaces, is a complex phenomenon closely related to adolescents' psychological conditions, social relationships, and identity construction (Indah, 2023). Therefore, a contextual, reflective, and holistic understanding of the subjects' experiences is required, which can only be achieved through qualitative exploration.

The case study design was chosen to contextually explore the dynamics of self-disclosure among adolescents who have experience with or are connected to mental health issues. This study does not focus on the Into the Light account as the primary object of analysis, but rather utilizes the account as a relevant social context (Edwina et al., 2025). This account symbolizes and reflects how social media can provide a safe, supportive, and empathetic space for adolescents to disclose their psychological burdens. Thus, this account helps frame the phenomenon under study: how digital spaces contribute to shaping self-disclosure practices.

The research subjects consisted of adolescents aged 19 to 22 who actively engage in self-disclosure through their personal Instagram accounts or interact in digital communities discussing mental health issues. Informants were selected purposively, based on their willingness to share their stories and the relevance of their experiences to the research theme. Data collection techniques included in-depth interviews to explore personal experiences, non-participant observation of their online interactions, and literature review to enrich the analytical perspective. The collected data was analyzed using a thematic approach. This process involved coding the data based on emerging patterns and themes, such as triggers for self-disclosure, barriers encountered, perceived impacts, and perceptions of digital spaces as safe spaces. This analysis enabled researchers to map the narrative structures and meanings inherent in adolescents' self-disclosure processes, thus providing a more comprehensive picture of the dynamics of self-disclosure in the contemporary social media landscape.

3. RESULT AND ANALYSIS

Factors Driving Self-Disclosure in Adolescents

Based on interviews and questionnaires, it was discovered that one of the main drivers for adolescents to engage in self-disclosure is emotional need. Teenagers feel compelled to share personal feelings, experiences, and anxieties as a form of psychological release. Most respondents stated that they felt relieved after being able to express their feelings. Expressions such as, "I feel calmer after sharing," or "When I've let my feelings out, I feel relieved," illustrate how sharing serves as an important means of catharsis. Social media, in this regard, is chosen by some

adolescents because it provides a more open space and does not require face-to-face meetings.

Furthermore, the presence of social media accounts like Into the Light provides an additional space that feels safe and supportive. Several respondents described these accounts as non-judgmental and empathetic. "I feel understood, even if I'm just reading the posts," said one respondent. For adolescents who lack access to healthy emotional communication in the real world, the existence of digital platforms that emphasize mental health is an important alternative channel.

Factors Inhibiting Self-Disclosure

Although emotional impulses are a powerful motivator, many teenagers are still reluctant to open up, especially in public spaces like social media. Some of the dominant concerns raised by respondents included fear of being perceived as weak, fear of being overreacted, and anxiety about privacy. One representative quote came from a respondent who said, "I'm afraid of being seen as dramatic," or "If I tell you, it'll be spread everywhere." These concerns indicate that external factors such as social stigma and lack of control over information are significant barriers to self-disclosure.

Respondents also expressed doubts about the validity of the support they receive in digital spaces. Some stated that negative comments can worsen the situation, such as, "Fear of negative comments actually makes me more stressed." Some even felt that previous experiences of sharing their stories led to being shunned by friends or ostracized, which ultimately reinforced their tendency to remain secretive.

Self-Disclosure Channel Preferences

When it comes to choosing a communication channel to express their feelings, the majority of respondents expressed a preference for sharing directly with close friends or trusted family members. Social media was only an option when direct channels were unavailable or when the context of the interaction felt more comfortable. This suggests that private interpersonal relationships remain the safest place to share sensitive information. However, others felt that social media provided a more relaxed space due to the physical distance and potential anonymity. The experience of sharing in a digital space provides a kind of "middle ground" for those who lack strong emotional support in the real world.

The Role of the "Into the Light" Account as a Safe Space

The Into the Light Instagram account was one of the digital entities consistently mentioned by respondents in relation to their comfort in sharing. While not all respondents actively engaged with the account, many reported feeling helped by its content. "At least I know I'm not alone," said one respondent. The account, which focuses on mental health issues, provided a sense of safe space—not only because

of its educational content, but also because of its empathetic and non-judgmental approach. Some even stated that even if they didn't comment or share directly, simply reading the account's posts was enough to make them feel understood.

Discussion

The results of this study generally confirm previous findings regarding the dynamics of self-disclosure in adolescents, particularly in the context of social media. In line with Social Penetration Theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973), self-disclosure occurs gradually, depending on the level of comfort and trust in the interlocutor. Respondents tend to disclose more deeply to people they trust or in situations where they feel safe. This is demonstrated by respondents' tendency to feel more comfortable confiding in close friends or family members than on social media.

However, in the digital context, self-disclosure patterns do not always proceed as linearly as described in the theory. The digital space actually exhibits an anomaly: many adolescents choose to share personal and sensitive matters directly because they feel a protective social and physical distance. This indicates that social media creates a "quasi-private" space that allows some individuals to feel safe enough to disclose themselves, even to a wide audience. In this regard, the digital space becomes a dynamic arena that accelerates the process of social penetration, especially when individuals feel in control of their anonymity and information.

Petronio's (2002) Communication Privacy Management (CPM) theory is also highly relevant in explaining the findings of this study. Adolescents demonstrated a high level of awareness regarding privacy control over the information they share. Most respondents stated that they would not share their stories if they did not feel they had full control over how the information would be used. Fear of sharing their stories without their permission, or of their stories being used to judge them, was a significant barrier. In CPM theory, the concept of "boundaries" or privacy boundaries is crucial, and the results of this study indicate that adolescents actively negotiate these boundaries before deciding to share.

This study also showed that past experiences are a significant factor in shaping self-disclosure patterns. Respondents who had received positive feedback from previous experiences sharing tended to be more open later. Conversely, those who felt shamed or shunned after sharing became more withdrawn. This finding reinforces the CPM concept of how "boundary turbulence" can hinder subsequent disclosure. When privacy boundaries are violated, individuals tend to withdraw and strengthen control over personal information.

When compared to previous research, these findings are similar to those of Richey et al. (2019), who noted that adolescents in the digital age experience ambivalence between the desire to be heard and concerns about the social repercussions of self-disclosure. Consistent with Claretta et al. (2020), this study

also shows that the presence of supportive online communities like Into the Light significantly influences their comfort with sharing. However, there are important differences compared to the findings of Affandi et al. (2021), who stated that adolescents tend to actively share stories on social media to gain social validation. In this study, adolescents emphasized emotional safety and comfort as primary motivations, rather than validation or popularity.

These findings provide an important contribution to theoretical discussions on the dynamics of adolescent interpersonal communication. In practice, self-disclosure is determined not only by the structure of social relationships but also by individual perceptions of risk and available support. Social media as a medium is not neutral—it creates both opportunities and risks that users, particularly adolescents undergoing the process of identity formation, must negotiate. The theoretical implications of this study are that the theories of Social Penetration and Communication Privacy Management need to be further expanded to understand how digitalization is changing interpersonal communication patterns. Specifically, how the concept of "perceived control" over personal information becomes central to decision-making in online sharing. This study also confirms that the existence of empathetic and non-judgmental digital spaces (such as the Into the Light account) can reduce psychological and social barriers to self-disclosure.

From a practical perspective, the results of this study have important implications for mental health practitioners, educators, and digital platform managers. First, for mental health practitioners, it is crucial to create safe consultation spaces, including in digital formats, that guarantee confidentiality and provide emotional validation. Second, for educators and youth mentors, it is crucial to understand that self-disclosure is a form of emotional adaptation that requires support, not judgment. Digital literacy and social empathy efforts need to be strengthened so that adolescents can feel safer expressing their feelings, both in the real world and online.

Meanwhile, for policymakers, it is crucial to develop regulations that protect digital privacy and reduce the risk of misuse of adolescents' personal data. Social media platforms are also encouraged to develop more transparent security features and empower users to control who can see or respond to their posts. This way, the experience of sharing becomes less of a threat, but rather a bridge to psychological recovery and a strengthened social network.

This research opens the door to further exploration of how Indonesia's socio-cultural context influences adolescent self-disclosure patterns, given that collectivist norms and social honor values still play a strong role in societal interactions. Furthermore, longitudinal studies can help explain how self-disclosure experiences in adolescence influence social relationship patterns and mental health in adulthood.

The findings regarding the role of the Into the Light account suggest that digital spaces built with an educational, empathetic, and non-judgmental approach can

serve as a model for developing social media-based interventions to support mental health. While not all adolescents actively share, the existence of such accounts still has a positive symbolic impact, creating a sense of community and acknowledging that “I’m not alone.” This strengthens the argument that social media, when used wisely and with empathy, can be a strategic tool in building emotionally healthy communities, particularly among adolescents.

4. CONCLUSION

This study reveals that the dynamics of self-disclosure among adolescents with mental health issues via social media are influenced by a number of psychological, social, and digital factors. Adolescents tend to be cautious and deliberate before disclosing, considering their emotional need to be heard on the one hand, and concerns about risks such as negative comments, stigma, and potential privacy violations on the other. These findings align with the theories of Social Penetration (Altman & Taylor, 1973) and Communication Privacy Management (Petronio, 2002), and highlight that disclosure on social media can occur more quickly due to the anonymity it offers. While disclosing is an important way to release psychological burdens and seek support, the inherent risks often hinder adolescents from sharing. Accounts like Into the Light exemplify how safe and supportive digital spaces can help break down social stigma and create a more positive environment for adolescents who want to disclose. Overall, the results of this study emphasize the need to develop safer, more inclusive, and empathetic digital spaces to support adolescent mental health. These findings are expected to provide a basis for intervention programs and policies that are more sensitive to the needs of adolescents, as well as increase understanding of the dynamics of self-disclosure in the digital era.

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