Erriwak: Journal of Social and Human Studies | ISSN: 2437 - 0363 EISSN: 2602-6767 | Volume: 12 / N°: 01 (2026), p 253-268

Self-Disclosure on Digital Platforms: A Theoretical Approach to Identity and Interaction

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Received: 07/01/2026 Accepted: 27/04/2026 Published: 05/06/2026

Abstract:

The digital revolution has brought about significant transformations in contemporary societies, turning the world into a small global village and making communities more open and interconnected. This shift has reshaped human communication on multiple levels of individuals' daily lives, driven by rapid technological advancements in recent years. Digital platforms have become open spaces that allow individuals to express and reveal aspects of themselves to broad audiences through virtual identities and behaviors, including online online self-disclosure. This form of disclosure involves revealing personal information to others and may include social, psychological, health-related, and economic issues that reflect users' inclinations, emotions, aspirations, and personal thoughts.

This article seeks to provide a theoretical approach that links the concepts of digital identity and social interaction in order to understand the phenomenon of online self-disclosure and to identify its ethical and social boundaries. It also aims to analyze how digital platforms have contributed to understanding the relationship between the real self and the virtual self, a dynamic that has influenced patterns of interaction and identity formation within digital environments..

Keywords: self-concept; digital platforms; digital identity; social interaction.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, social media platforms have become among the most widely used spaces on the internet, offering users a broad range of unlimited possibilities for communication and interaction. These platforms have emerged as new mirrors that reflect the self and reshape it within digital environments, which have transformed into interactive arenas where individuals display their identities, preferences, and experiences through online self-disclosure.

The widespread use of these platforms and the increasing amount of time users spend within virtual environments have raised concerns about individuals' ability to adapt to offline reality. This shift has altered behavioral patterns and reactions, contributing to the development of distinct forms of the self and virtual identities.

Digital platforms have also reshaped the ways individuals express themselves and interact with others. The digital sphere has moved beyond simple communication to become a space that contributes to the construction of digital identity and the formation of social interaction whether direct or indirect. Through this medium, individuals express thoughts, emotions, and experiences that they may be unable to share with friends or those they trust in real life. Consequently, many users transition from their real-life persona to a virtual one. This transformation is illuminated by the concept of online self-disclosure, which serves as a key element for understanding digital identity and patterns of social interaction across social media platforms.

This article adopts a theoretical perspective to examine how online self-disclosure functions as a mediating process between digital identity construction and patterns of social interaction on digital platforms. Rather than reiterating descriptive aspects, the study seeks to critically explore the mechanisms through which individuals negotiate their self-concept in digitally mediated environments, highlighting the interplay between personal agency and platform affordances.

How have digital platforms contributed to shaping digital identity and social interaction through online self-disclosure?

2. Conceptual Definitions

2.1 The Concept of the Self

Ibn Sina considered the self to be the cognitive image of the human soul (Al-Jizani, 2012). Rogers, on the other hand, viewed the self as an organized and coherent conceptual whole composed of an individual's perceptions of their personal characteristics, their relationships with others, and various aspects of life, along with the values associated with these perceptions (Qahar, 2009, p. 110).

2.2 The Concept of online self-disclosure

Linguistically, the term refers to making something clear and revealing it. Conceptually, Jourard defines online self-disclosure as the process through which an individual reveals highly personal and confidential information to others information that enables the individual to become known and understood by them (Mohamed, 2012, p. 324). The term online self-disclosure refers to the voluntary and intentional act through which a person reveals truthful, important, personal, and confidential information to another individual. With the emergence of social media, the concept has expanded to denote the process through which individuals disclose their thoughts, values, and beliefs via social networking sites, shaping digital identity and influencing the social interaction of the self in digital environments (Mansour, 2017, p. 258).

2.3 The Concept of Digital Platforms

A platform is defined as a space where groups of stakeholders gather under clearly defined rules of participation for the purpose of exchanging ideas, goods, services, and more (Boutawous & Al-Jam'i, 2024, p. 348).

Digital platforms, more specifically, are highly effective sites that facilitate social life among networks of acquaintances and friends. They enable visual and audio communication, the

exchange of images, and various other features that strengthen social bonds between users (Rifaat, 2018, p. 16).

Accordingly, digital platforms have become environments that shape and direct individuals' behavior through online self-disclosure, which has become a primary resource for these platforms and a central factor in their success, particularly through increased user engagement that drives economic gains.

2.4 The Concept of digital Identity

Identity refers to a set of behavioral, social, and personal characteristics that allow an individual to be recognized. It functions as a social and personal "birth certificate" that distinguishes each person from others in society (Mortez, 2016, p. 5).

It is also defined as the set of attributes, symbols, and data used by individuals to present themselves to others in virtual communities and to interact with them accordingly (Djehad, 2022, p. 172).

2.5 The Concept of Social Interaction

Social interaction is a reciprocal process between two individuals, where each influences and is influenced by the other. In this dynamic, one person's response becomes a stimulus for the other, and the exchange of stimuli and responses continues until the interaction ends (Al-Bahi & Saad, 1999, p. 146). Through social interaction, an individual's behavior is modified and influenced by others' behavior via processes of stimulation and response. In this way, a biological organism transforms gradually into a human being with a distinct personality. Social interaction is therefore a joint activity in which each individual adapts themselves to work cooperatively with others (Al-Jam'u'i & Ahmed, 2021, p. 308).

Among its characteristics is that social interaction is intentional, repeated, and extends over a period of time. It differs from physical, chemical, or biological interactions in that it is grounded in meaning, value, purpose, and symbols (Al-Jamui & Ahmed, 2021, p. 309).

3. Self-Disclosure on Digital Platforms

Studies indicate that excessive self-disclosure poses certain risks, and that the possibility of hiding behind anonymous identities represents a key distinction between online communication and face-to-face interaction. This has raised several questions regarding whether individuals reveal their true selves online or whether they construct idealized versions of themselves within the digital sphere (Schlosser, 2019, p. 2). In digitally mediated environments, where physical embodiment is no longer directly observable, the focus shifts toward a person's interests, ideas, and attitudes as presented in the virtual space. The social actor thus finds themselves confronted with an unlimited number of interactants and must take this diversity of opinions and perspectives into account. Consequently, they tend to present themselves in ways that align with the image they wish to project (Al-Saadaoui, 2020, p. 78).

online self-disclosure and self-presentation are not necessarily contradictory. While self-disclosure involves conveying truthful information about oneself without concern for the impressions it may leave on others, self-presentation aims to project a desirable public image whether that image is authentic or not (Schlosser, 2019, p. 3).

Excessive internet use in general can lead to disorders related to digital addiction and psychological effects such as virtual isolation or excessive self-disclosure. Mental health has increasingly come under threat from what is termed *digital stress*, arising from information overload, constant social comparison, and immersion in a virtual world that blurs the boundaries between the real and the symbolic (Christophe F. Herbert, 2010, p. 745). The environmental context of disclosure is crucial, especially given the digital challenges that deepen the meaning and implications of self-disclosure. For this reason, clear parameters must govern disclosure online, since self-disclosure on digital platforms differs fundamentally from disclosure in offline settings. Simply changing the term "self-disclosure"

to "online self-disclosure" is insufficient in a context where motivations and behaviors diverge significantly (Beatrice Hayes & Lizete Murniece, 2024, p. 115).

Personal data revealed during the process of self-disclosure on digital platforms often serves the financial interests of platform owners. Control over personal data forms the essence of privacy, as it regulates the boundaries between the individual and their environment and determines whether to share information or not. According to Altman, privacy is the selective control of access to the self, whereas on social media it revolves around the flexibility of opening and closing access to specific individuals, groups, or institutions at particular moments in time (Michel Walrave, Sonja Utz, Alexander P. Schouten, & Wannes Heirman, 2016, p. 89).

Most users express concern over the theft of their personal data and the misuse of their private information. Often, online behavior occurs without full awareness of its consequences, leading to feelings of regret associated with excessive self-disclosure and neglect of privacy protections (Jooyoung Lee, Sarah Rajtmajer, Eesha Srivatsavaya, & Shomir Wilson, 2021, p. 375). Nonetheless, self-disclosure may also play a central role in the success of digital platforms. Encouraging users to disclose personal information can increase their satisfaction with the platform, although it may negatively affect individuals particularly when personal content is shared publicly. For example, personal posts may influence employers' evaluations of job applicants, affecting their reputation and social standing (Michelle Richey, Aparna Gonibeed, & M. N. Ravishankar, 2018, p. 225).

Thus, it can be said that online self-disclosure has two dimensions:

On the one hand, it helps individuals obtain support and maintain psychological stability; on the other hand, it may lead to psychological pressure, violations of privacy, and behavioral changes aimed at pleasing others, which exposes users to digital exploitation.

4. digital Identity and the Social Interaction of the Self on Digital Platforms

Virtual interaction is what shapes an individual's online identity, reflecting the symbolic image and data that users publish as representations of their personality. This identity may reflect their real self as it exists offline or it may be a constructed identity that embodies how the user *wants* to present themselves in the digital space, or what they want others to know about them as a virtual self (Jihad, 2022, p. 172).

Digital platforms possess several characteristics that reinforce self-disclosure, including **anonymity**, which helps protect privacy and offers space for marginalized identities to express themselves by concealing real-life identity. The element of time also allows users to craft and refine their self-presentation before publishing content. This enables precise control over what is shared and encourages users to adjust their self-presentation strategies based on audience feedback and interaction to achieve positive responses (Djoudi, 2024, p. 584).

This process leads to the construction of a **virtual image**, which refers to how users shape their persona online. It is not necessarily a deceptive act, but rather a strategic process of selection choosing what aspects of the self to reveal and how to appear in the digital world in a more appealing or attractive manner (Dmitry N. & Elena A., 2022, p. 105). In this virtual space, the physical body is absent, shifting the focus to one's interests, thoughts, and positions as presented within the digital sphere. The social actor thus finds themselves facing an unlimited number of interactants, and must take this diversity and constant presence into account. As a result, individuals shape their self-presentation in the way they desire, seemingly in search of maximum recognition from others.

This environment fosters a tendency toward **individualism and detachment** from the surrounding social context, leading users to immerse themselves in a parallel world. Consequently, individuals interact as independent entities, detached from traditional social, cultural, religious, or political determinants (Al-Saadaoui, 2020, p. 78).

5. Theories Explaining the Relationship Between Self-Disclosure and digital Identity on Digital Platforms:

5.1 Psychological Theories of Self-Disclosure:

Self-disclosure is a fundamental personal process influenced by multiple factors, including the goals of disclosure and the depth or type of information shared, such as intimate or personal exchanges. To understand and interpret the phenomenon of self-disclosure, several theories have been proposed, highlighting its role in supporting self-expression, social validation, control, and the development of social relationships (Nandita Vijayakumar, 2020, p. 136).

Carl Rogers, in his theory of the self, asserts that self-actualization is closely linked to the ability to engage in self-disclosure. An individual who lives authentically and acknowledges their true feelings is on the path to self-actualization. Rogers considers self-disclosure an essential condition for achieving self-actualization and psychological maturity, as it reflects the individual's internal acceptance of the self (Mezzour, 2020, p. 127). The self constantly seeks coherence; therefore, individuals act in ways consistent with their self-concept. Experiences inconsistent with the self-concept are perceived as threats, potentially leading to emotional disturbance and reduced adaptability (Chekchek, 2009, p. 7).

Mayer and Davis, in their trust and self-disclosure theory, argue that trust involves an individual's willingness to become vulnerable to the actions of another, based on the expectation that the other party will act in ways significant to the trustor, along with the ability to monitor and control these actions. Online trust, however, requires considerable effort from users. Consequently, electronic trust is not a precondition for engaging in online interactions; rather, it is closely linked to users' levels of self-disclosure on digital platforms (Chen-Wei Chang, 2014, p. 80).

This reflects users' awareness of the risks associated with revealing personal information, which often leads to a reduction in self-disclosure behaviors. Thus, there is a

tension between the desire for social interaction and the fear of privacy breaches on digital platforms (Liang Ma, 2020, p. 1).

Altman and Dalmas Taylor, in their **Social Penetration Theory**, argue that human relationships develop gradually from superficial to deeper levels through increasing stages of self-disclosure. These stages vary in terms of topics and intimacy, and involve a balance between openness and privacy in social relationships (Koles B. & Peter N., 2012, p. 5). Individuals naturally tend to disclose more as a personality trait, such as openness or receptivity. Self-disclosure serves as a mechanism for relationship-building and also functions as a therapeutic tool, helping patients to release emotions.

Additionally, Zarghoni (S. Zarghoni) introduced a new concept in self-disclosure called **"Separated Self-Presentation"**, which refers to the cognitive partitioning of the self caused by the difference between the offline self and the online self. Self-presentation occurs in a separated or imaginary emotional state due to the influence of a dramatic approach, where the cyber-individual operates "behind the scenes," making it impossible for anyone to observe and evaluate their behavior directly (Mourad, 2021, p. 78).

The Self-Verification Theory, a socio-psychological theory, posits that people want others to know and understand them according to their established beliefs and feelings about themselves their self-views. Some individuals may possess a psychological drive to maintain their self-verified identities, even if these are negative. For instance, people who believe they are disliked often attempt to undermine the positive evaluations of interaction partners whom they perceive as well-liked (Mourad, 2021, p. 80).

Based on the psychological theories explaining self-disclosure, it can be concluded that they play a significant role in understanding the motivations and underlying reasons behind self-disclosure. However, when these theories are applied to communication technologies, they remain insufficient to fully explain the phenomenon, as self-disclosure is influenced by digital media, which adds new dimensions affecting behavior.

5.2 Communication Theories of Self-Disclosure:

The **Uses and Gratifications Theory** in communication posits that self-disclosure plays a central role on digital platforms. These platforms allow users to identify the people they interact with, thereby understanding and evaluating these interactions. This process often leads to the emergence of an online identity that may appear somewhat ambiguous, as it diverges from the identity determinants traditionally recognized in offline contexts. Personal profiles and networks of friends created by users constitute the core of social networking sites. Upon registration, users are required to create their personal profiles, which define their online identity and vary according to the nature of the platform (Derdari, 2024, p. 158).

Goffman's Impression Management Theory likens individuals to performers on a stage, presenting the narrative of their lives in what he called the "Theater of Life." Here, individuals aim to persuade their audience about themselves and construct a positive image aligned with the expectations of others and what they wish to project publicly. Behaviors, speech, and attention to appearance are deliberately organized so that individuals present themselves in the best possible light. Self-disclosure, in this context, is not spontaneous but selective; individuals choose which behaviors, thoughts, and emotions to reveal, much like actors performing on a stage (Lounis, 2018, p. 728).

Goffman's **Social Presence Theory** further emphasizes that self-presentation helps in understanding social presence. Individuals adapt their behavior according to the prevailing context, including the roles they play, social norms, and situational expectations.

The distinction between self-presentation and social presence lies in the fact that self-presentation involves an *expected self* that an individual projects to others. This expected self is not solely determined by the behaviors and expressions of the individual but also by the classification and evaluation performed by others, whether intentionally or unintentionally. Consequently, the self perceived by others may differ from the self that the individual intends to present (Bouchlaghem, 2017, p. 66).

Additionally, the Privacy Management Theory provides a new perspective on the disclosure process by emphasizing the importance of disclosure practices within different contexts. It focuses on the depth and breadth of disclosure, which can enhance intimacy between individuals. The theory highlights that the emotional vulnerability resulting from discussing specific content with others is often more significant than the content itself. According to Petronio, individuals perceive the sensitivity of disclosed information differently, which leads them to consider some topics easier to reveal than others. The theory emphasizes how individuals navigate the decision-making process regarding what information to disclose or withhold, the role of others in this process, and how access to information is managed within privacy boundaries (Bouziane, 2024, p. 173).

Through the examination of both psychological and communication theories that explain the self and self-disclosure on digital platforms, it becomes evident that technological advancements have reshaped patterns of human interaction, such as through telecommunication and social networking. This necessitates a reconsideration of how self-disclosure theories are applied and adapted to accommodate the variables and behaviors of new generations (Greene, 2016, p. 4).

Based on the study of communication theories explaining self-disclosure, it is evident that the medium itself is a fundamental factor in this process and cannot be disregarded. Self-disclosure is examined as a communicative phenomenon that can generate pressures experienced by users within digital environments.

6. Ethics of Self-Disclosure on Digital Platforms:

Ethics can be defined as a set of principles, values, and general rules that guide human behavior within society, aiming to achieve what is considered good and to avoid what is deemed harmful. Ultimately, the purpose of ethics is to improve relationships between individuals (Cherif, 2014, p. 49).

Goffman argues that during social interactions, individuals must avoid behaviors that disrupt the coherence of their presented activities by managing impressions. Many seemingly minor actions, committed unintentionally, can create impressions inconsistent with the interaction context. Such actions may undermine the intended presentation due to a lack of awareness of the consequences (Radhi, 2014, p. 25). This is especially relevant given that live streaming videos do not occur in isolation but within a social context.

Therefore, societal ethics play a crucial role in determining the extent to which individuals adhere to these norms. Ethics guide individuals in deciding which behaviors should be adopted and which should be avoided. Social media platforms are often used because they provide a safe environment where individuals can form social relationships with others, allowing them to present themselves freely and without constraints (Abd Samad, 2023, p. 328).

Consequently, self-disclosure is not only related to users' self-discipline but is also influenced by digital platforms themselves, which often encourage this phenomenon excessively. Therefore, it has become essential to protect users by enhancing digital awareness regarding excessive self-disclosure on these platforms.

7. Conclusion:

Based on the concepts and theories examined regarding self-disclosure on digital platforms, it can be concluded that digital platforms are no longer merely tools for communication. They have become expansive spaces for identity formation, behavioral and cognitive change, and the restructuring of social relationships. Psychological and communication theories demonstrate that individuals' self-disclosure on digital platforms stems from multiple motivations, including the need for social recognition, psychological relief, relationship-building, and the creation of virtual identities aimed at gaining acceptance and approval.

Psychological perspectives explain internal motivations, while communication perspectives examine the media, interactions, and social outcomes. Self-disclosure is influenced by users' trust and sense of privacy, shaping symbolic perceptions. In communication, this sense of privacy mobilizes public opinion, while digital identity represents a combination of psychological belonging and communicative environment.

Thus, it is imperative for researchers to reconsider existing theories and analytical frameworks used to study the motivations behind online self-disclosure on digital platforms, as well as the ethical guidelines governing self-presentation. These factors now have significant psychological, social, and behavioral implications within society.

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