

Online Disinhibition Effect Among Early Adult Social Media Users

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Article History

Received : January 26, 2026
Accepted : February 02, 2026
Published : February 04, 2026
Available Online :
February 06, 2026

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Cite This Article:

Rayhan Abi Mulya, & Desi Susanti. (2025). Online Disinhibition Effect Among Early Adult Social Media Users. *Jurnal Kesehatan Dan Kedokteran*, 5(1), 312–323.

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.56127/jukeke.v5i1.2577>

Abstract: Social media has become a major space for sharing content and opinions. In online settings, individuals may show behaviors they would usually inhibit in face-to-face interactions, known as the online disinhibition effect. Understanding this tendency among early adults is important because this group is highly active on social media and may be exposed to both constructive and harmful digital interactions.

Objective: This study aims to describe the characteristics and level of the online disinhibition effect among early adult social media users.

Methods: A quantitative descriptive design was used with 111 early adults (20–40 years; males and females) recruited through non-probability incidental sampling. Data were collected via an online questionnaire (Google Forms) using an adapted Online Disinhibition Scale based on Suler's dimensions, complemented by demographic items (gender, age, daily duration of use) and two open-ended questions. The instrument was evaluated for validity, item discrimination, and reliability. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and frequency-based categorization for open-ended responses. **Results:** The online disinhibition effect was categorized as high (empirical mean = 85.50; hypothetical mean = 73.50). Male participants showed higher disinhibition than female participants. Higher disinhibition was also observed among participants who used social media longer each day, especially those reporting more than six hours of use. Open-ended responses indicated that anonymity and the absence of face-to-face interaction were common reasons for feeling freer online, and hostile commenting was frequently reported as an activity more comfortably performed on social media than in real life.

Implications: Findings support the need for digital well-being efforts targeting early adults, including self-regulation strategies (e.g., screen-time limits, reflection-before-post routines) and digital civility education, alongside platform-level measures that strengthen accountability cues. **Originality:** This study provides a descriptive baseline of online disinhibition among Indonesian early adults using a psychometrically screened measure and triangulates findings with open-ended evidence linked to key theoretical dimensions.

Keywords: Online Disinhibition Effect; Early Adults; Social Media; Anonymity; Digital Behavior.

INTRODUCTION

Social media has become an integral part of everyday life in Indonesian society, reshaping how people communicate, access information, and build social connections. In recent years, Indonesia has emerged as one of the largest markets for major global social media platforms, reflecting not only widespread adoption but also the central role of these

platforms in daily interaction (Noor, 2024). As social media increasingly functions as a public arena for expression and social exchange, interpersonal dynamics that previously occurred predominantly offline are now frequently enacted in digital environments.

This broad adoption is also reflected in platform preferences. Data from the Indonesian Internet Service Providers Association indicate that the most widely used platforms in Indonesia include Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and X (APJII, 2024). Indonesia is estimated to have approximately 139 million social media users, with the largest proportion belonging to the early adult age group particularly those aged 25–34 years followed by individuals aged 18–24 years (Kemp, 2024). Early adults typically use social media for leisure, maintaining relationships, seeking information, and finding inspiration. However, intensive and less regulated use may also coincide with negative outcomes, including cyberbullying, online harassment, stalking, defamation, and identity manipulation, which can undermine digital safety and well-being (Keipi et al., 2017).

In the literature, one line of research highlights how online situational features can reduce behavioral restraint. (Lapidot-Lefler and Barak, 2011) found that hostile behaviors such as insults and threats are less likely to occur in face-to-face contexts than in online interaction, suggesting that the online setting may facilitate expressions that are typically inhibited offline. This phenomenon is commonly discussed as the online disinhibition effect, a term used to describe the tendency for individuals to behave more openly or more aggressively online than they would in offline encounters.

A second line of studies focuses on mechanisms that trigger online disinhibition, particularly anonymity and invisibility. Empirical findings indicate that when users feel less identifiable and less observable, they tend to disclose more and exercise less self-control, increasing the likelihood of disinhibited communication and behavior (Lapidot-Lefler & Barak, 2012; Scott, Stuart, & Barber, 2022). In explaining this effect, (Suler, 2004) emphasized several key dimensions that shape online disinhibition, including dissociative anonymity, invisibility, asynchronicity, solipsistic projection, dissociative imagination, and minimization of status and authority.

A third line of research differentiates the forms and consequences of online disinhibition and examines its correlates in daily media use. Suler proposed that online disinhibition may manifest as benign online disinhibition (e.g., greater emotional expression, openness, and self-disclosure) as well as toxic online disinhibition (e.g., trolling, verbal aggression, hate speech, and threats) (Suler, 2004). Consistent with this,

studies have reported that longer durations of internet and social media use are associated with higher levels of online disinhibition, which can shape online behavior in both constructive and destructive directions ([Stuart & Scott, 2021](#); [Pangayuninggalih & Helmi, 2023](#)). Despite these advances, descriptive evidence that clearly maps online disinhibition among early adult social media users within the highly active Indonesian context remains important to establish a baseline understanding of the phenomenon.

Given the pervasive role of social media in the daily lives of early adults, this study aims to describe the online disinhibition effect among early adult social media users. By focusing on individuals who actively engage with major platforms, the study seeks to provide a systematic portrayal of online disinhibition as it appears in this population.

Building on prior theory and evidence, the study is grounded in the argument that reduced social cues and perceived constraints in digital settings can facilitate online disinhibition ([Suler, 2004](#)). Accordingly, it is expected that early adults who spend substantial time on social media will display measurable levels of online disinhibition, potentially reflected in both benign and toxic expressions. In the context of digital risks such as harassment and aggression, describing this tendency is a necessary step toward understanding behavioral patterns in online interaction ([Keipi et al., 2017](#); [Stuart & Scott, 2021](#)).

RESEARCH METHOD

The unit of analysis in this study was early adult individuals aged 20–40 years who actively used social media platforms particularly Instagram, X, and TikTok. A total of 111 participants were included, consisting of 59 males and 52 females. In addition to age and gender, the study also considered participants' daily duration of social media use, which was classified into 1–3 hours, 4–6 hours, and more than 6 hours per day, to provide a more detailed descriptive profile of online disinhibition across respondent characteristics.

This study employed a quantitative descriptive design because the primary purpose was to obtain a systematic description of the online disinhibition effect among early adult social media users, including its level and distribution across demographic categories. A descriptive approach was selected to map the phenomenon as it occurs naturally within the sample and to support categorical interpretation (e.g., high vs. moderate) based on empirical score distributions. To enrich the descriptive interpretation, the design also

incorporated a brief open-ended component to capture participants' explanations regarding disinhibited behaviors on social media.

The study relied on primary data collected from respondents through an online survey. The main instrument was an adapted version of the Online Disinhibition Scale developed by ([Cheung, Wong, and Chan, 2020](#)), which is theoretically grounded in six dimensions of online disinhibition proposed by ([Suler, 2004](#)): dissociative anonymity, invisibility, asynchronicity, solipsistic introjection, dissociative imagination, and minimization of status and authority. In addition to scale items, the questionnaire included demographic questions (gender, age, and daily duration of social media use) and two open-ended questions exploring (1) why individuals feel freer on social media and (2) what activities can be done on social media that are difficult to do in real-life settings.

Data were collected using an online questionnaire distributed via Google Forms. Eligible participants were recruited through online dissemination channels and completed the survey electronically. Prior to the main analysis, the instrument underwent a measurement screening process. Several items received minor wording revisions to improve clarity. The quality of the instrument was evaluated through item validity and item discrimination testing, and internal consistency was assessed using stratified alpha reliability. This procedure ensured that the instrument used in the descriptive analysis demonstrated adequate psychometric performance for the study context.

Data analysis consisted of two complementary procedures. First, the scale data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including the empirical mean, standard deviation, score distribution, and categorical classification of online disinhibition levels based on the empirical score range. Descriptive comparisons were also reported across demographic groupings (gender, age, and daily usage duration) to illustrate patterns of variation within the sample. Second, responses from the open-ended questions were processed using a simple content categorization approach: similar responses were grouped into recurrent themes (e.g., anonymity, no face-to-face interaction, free expression), and the results were summarized using frequency counts to support and contextualize the quantitative findings.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Validity, Item Discrimination, and Reliability

Prior to analysis, the online disinhibition scale was tested for validity, item discrimination, and reliability. Several items underwent minor wording revisions. The item

discrimination indices ranged from 0.300 to 0.723, and the reliability coefficient reached 0.912 using stratified alpha, indicating excellent internal consistency.

Descriptive Findings

Based on the results of the descriptive analysis, the empirical mean score was 85.50, which falls within the range of $84.67 \leq \bar{x}_E < 95.84$. This finding indicates that the level of online disinhibition effect among early adult social media users in this study is categorized as high. In other words, participants in this study early adult social media users exhibited online disinhibition behaviors such as adopting anonymity when using social media, feeling free to express opinions without concern, creating different online personas, and experiencing greater courage due to the absence of direct face-to-face interaction.

These findings are supported by responses to the open-ended questions, which revealed that participants felt more liberated on social media because they perceived that they could conceal their identities by remaining anonymous. The online environment was also perceived as a space for self-expression and as being distinct from the offline world. This is consistent with the dimensions proposed by ([Suler, 2004](#)), namely dissociative anonymity, in which individuals can hide their identities online; asynchronicity, where the lack of immediate interaction facilitates disinhibition; and dissociative imagination, in which individuals perceive the online world as separate from real life.

A description of respondent categories on the online disinhibition effect scale is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Mean Scores of the Online Disinhibition Effect Scale

Scale	\bar{x}_E	\bar{x}_H	Standard Deviation	Category
<i>Online Disinhibition Effect</i>	85.50	73.5	11.17	High

Descriptive Results Based on Demographic Data

a. Gender

A total of 111 participants were involved in this study, consisting of 59 males and 52 females. Table 2 presents the distribution of participants based on gender.

Table 2. Participant Distribution Based on Gender

Gender	n	%	<i>Online Disinhibition Effect</i>	Category
			\bar{x}	
Male	59	53.2%	89.66	High
Female	52	46.8%	80.79	Moderate

The data presented in the table indicate that male participants in this study obtained a higher empirical mean score than female participants, suggesting that the level of online disinhibition effect among males falls within the high category. This finding implies that early adult male social media users in this study engage in online disinhibition behaviors more frequently than their female counterparts. Consistent with this result, a study conducted by ([Knežević, Topalov, and Halupka Rešetar, 2022](#)) reported that male internet users tend to exhibit higher levels of online disinhibition, share personal information more frequently, and feel freer in online environments compared to female users.

b. Age

Age Participants ranged in age from 20 to 40 years, with the majority in their early twenties.

Table 3. Participant Distribution Based on Age

Age (Years)	n	%	<i>Online Disinhibition Effect</i>	
			\bar{x}	Category
20	9	8,1%	91,22	High
21	13	11,7%	83,46	Moderate
22	17	15,3%	81,82	Moderate
23	15	13,5%	90,53	High
24	19	17,1%	91,79	High
25	9	8,1%	90,67	High
26	3	2,7%	91,33	High
27	6	5,4%	78,83	Moderate
28	1	0,9%	95	High
29	8	7,2%	66,88	Moderate
30	1	0,9%	91	High
31	1	0,9%	73	Moderate
32	1	0,9%	65	Moderate
33	1	0,9%	96	Moderate
35	1	0,9%	99	Moderate
36	2	1,8%	77,50	High
37	2	1,8%	87	High
40	2	1,8%	73	Moderate

In this study, the largest proportion of participants was in their early twenties. Participants aged 24 years (n = 19) obtained an empirical mean score of 91.79, which falls into the high category. Similarly, participants aged 23 years (n = 15) showed a high level of online disinhibition effect, with an empirical mean score of 90.53. In contrast, participants aged 22 years (n = 17) recorded an empirical mean score of

81.82, placing them in the moderate category. Lastly, participants aged 21 years (n = 13) obtained an empirical mean score of 83.46, which is also categorized as moderate.

c. Daily Duration of Social Media Use

In this study, social media usage was classified into three duration categories: 1–3 hours, 4–6 hours, and more than 6 hours per day.

Table 4. Participant Distribution Based on Daily Social Media Use Duration

Duration per Day	n	%	<i>Online Disinhibition Effect</i> \bar{x}	Category
1-3 hours	24	21,6%	77,13	Moderate
4-6 hours	38	34,2%	85,47	High
More than 6 hours	49	44,1%	89,50	High

Based on Table 4, participants who used social media for more than six hours per day demonstrated the highest level of online disinhibition effect, as indicated by the largest empirical mean score ($\bar{x} = 89.50$). This finding suggests that longer durations of social media use among early adults are associated with more frequent engagement in online disinhibition behaviors. Consistent with this result, ([Zakiah and Iswari, 2022](#)) reported that increased time spent on social media is positively associated with higher levels of online disinhibition.

d. Open-Ended Questions

The open-ended section of this study consisted of two questions related to social media use: (1) why individuals feel freer to engage in certain behaviors when using social media, and (2) what activities individuals can perform on social media that they cannot do in real-life settings

Table 5. Responses Regarding Social Media Use

Question	Response	Frequency
Why do you think individuals can behave more freely when using social media?	Being anonymous	49
	No face-to-face interaction	19
	Platform for free expression	13
	Online world differs from real life	13
	No response	9
	Lack of supervision	5
	Creating a new persona	5
		111

Based on Table 5, participants reported that the primary reasons individuals feel freer on social media include the ability to remain anonymous, the absence of direct face-to-face interaction, the perception that the online environment differs from offline reality, the belief that social media serves as a space for free self-expression, the opportunity to create alternative identities, and the lack of supervision.

Table 6. Activities Performed on Social Media but Not in Real Life

Question	Response	Frequency
What activities can you do on social media that you cannot do in real life?	Posting hostile comments	30
	No response	25
	Expressing opinions	19
	Communicating with distant people	13
	Sharing photos	10
	Updating status	10
	Meeting strangers	2
	Creating hoaxes	2
		111

As shown in Table 6, participants indicated that behaviors uniquely or more comfortably performed on social media include posting hostile comments, updating status, meeting strangers, spreading hoaxes, sharing photos, communicating with geographically distant individuals, and expressing personal opinions.

DISCUSSION

This study set out to describe the online disinhibition effect among early adult social media users aged 20–40 years. Overall, the findings indicate that participants demonstrated a high level of online disinhibition (empirical mean = 85.50). The pattern was not uniform across respondent characteristics: males showed higher online disinhibition than females (male = high; female = moderate), and longer daily social media use was associated with higher disinhibition (highest among users spending more than six hours per day). These quantitative patterns were reinforced by the open-ended responses, where participants repeatedly cited anonymity, lack of face-to-face interaction, and the perception that the online world feels separate from real life as reasons for feeling freer to behave online.

A key question is why this pattern emerges, particularly the high overall level and the dominance of anonymity-related explanations. Consistent with the online disinhibition

framework, social media environments reduce immediate social cues (e.g., direct eye contact, tone, real-time social sanctions) and provide users with psychological distance from the consequences of their expressions (Suler, 2004). This distancing mechanism can lower self-regulation and social inhibition, making individuals more willing to post opinions, experiment with identity, or engage in confrontational behavior. The open-ended findings align closely with Suler's dimensions especially dissociative anonymity (concealing identity), asynchronicity (no immediate interaction), and dissociative imagination (online space perceived as "not real life") which together can help explain why early adults may feel more courageous and less restrained in online settings (Suler, 2004).

When compared with prior research, the present findings are largely consistent with existing evidence. The higher disinhibition level among participants who spend longer time online supports earlier work suggesting that increased exposure and engagement in online contexts is associated with stronger disinhibition tendencies (Stuart & Scott, 2021; Pangayuninggalih & Helmi, 2023; Zakiah & Iswari, 2022). Likewise, the gender pattern males exhibiting higher disinhibition than females echoes findings reported by (Knežević, Topalov, and Halupka Reštar, 2022), who observed greater online freedom and disclosure among male users. In addition, the emphasis on anonymity and invisibility is aligned with research showing that reduced identifiability and observability can facilitate disinhibited communication and behavior (Lapidot-Lefler & Barak, 2012; Scott et al., 2022). The novelty of this study lies in providing a descriptive baseline of online disinhibition among Indonesian early adults using a psychometrically screened instrument (high internal consistency) and complementing the quantitative description with open-ended frequency-based evidence that maps users' own explanations to key theoretical dimensions (Suler, 2004).

In terms of interpretation, these results suggest that online disinhibition among early adults is not merely an individual tendency but is strongly shaped by the architecture of online interaction. The high overall score indicates that social media can become a space where expression is amplified sometimes in constructive ways (e.g., voicing opinions, social connection), but also in harmful forms. The open-ended results are particularly important here: the most frequently mentioned "unique" activity was posting hostile comments, which signals the salience of toxic online disinhibition in everyday user experience (Suler, 2004). At the same time, responses such as "expressing opinions," "communicating with distant people," and "sharing photos" imply that benign disinhibition

also coexists, reflecting the dual nature of disinhibition as both enabling and risky (Suler, 2004). This duality matters socially: the same mechanisms that facilitate openness and connection can also normalize aggression, reduce civility, and escalate conflict in public digital spaces (Keipi et al., 2017).

Reflecting on the implications, the findings point to both functional and dysfunctional consequences. On the functional side, benign disinhibition may support self-expression, social support seeking, and interpersonal connection, particularly for individuals who feel inhibited in offline contexts (Suler, 2004). On the dysfunctional side, toxic disinhibition evidenced by hostile commenting and the reported perception of “lack of supervision” may contribute to harassment, defamation, and other online harms that undermine psychological safety and community trust (Keipi et al., 2017). The gender and usage-duration patterns also suggest practical risk stratification: early adults who spend extensive time online and male users (in this sample) may warrant targeted preventive efforts, without assuming that disinhibition is exclusive to any group.

Based on these findings, several action-oriented implications can be proposed. At the individual level, digital well-being programs can emphasize self-regulation strategies (e.g., pause-before-post routines, reflection prompts) and awareness of how anonymity and asynchronicity distort perceived accountability. At the community and institutional level, universities and workplaces can incorporate digital civility and online ethics into psychoeducation modules for early adults, focusing on recognizing triggers of toxic disinhibition and promoting constructive engagement. At the platform level, the prominence of anonymity and hostile commenting supports the need for stronger moderation cues and friction-based features (e.g., prompts before posting potentially harmful content, clearer reporting pathways), alongside campaigns that reinforce accountability norms. Taken together, these steps can help preserve the benefits of social media use while reducing the risks associated with toxic online disinhibition (Suler, 2004; Keipi et al., 2017).

CONCLUSION

The main lesson from this study is that the online disinhibition effect among early adult social media users is high, indicating that participants tend to express themselves more freely in online settings than in offline interactions. This heightened openness appears to be facilitated by reduced situational control in digital environments, where users perceive

their identities as more protected and experience limited face-to-face social cues. The findings also show meaningful descriptive differences: male participants reported higher online disinhibition levels than female participants, and respondents who spent more than six hours per day on social media demonstrated higher disinhibition, suggesting that longer daily exposure is associated with stronger disinhibited tendencies among early adults.

In terms of scientific contribution, this study provides empirical baseline evidence describing online disinhibition among Indonesian early adults and supports theoretical explanations that link disinhibition to online interaction features such as perceived anonymity and reduced direct social feedback. By combining psychometrically screened scale data with open-ended responses, the study strengthens understanding of how online disinhibition manifests in everyday social media use and highlights its relevance to digital risk behaviors, including forms of toxic expression that may escalate into harassment or cyberbullying. Practically, the results underline the importance of digital self-regulation, such as implementing screen-time limits and reflection-before-post strategies, to help early adults maintain self-control and reduce harmful online behavior.

Despite these contributions, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study did not differentiate whether respondents completed the questionnaire based on their primary social media accounts or secondary/alternate accounts, which may influence the intensity and style of disinhibited behavior reported. Future research is therefore encouraged to control for account type and to explore how primary versus alternate identities shape online disinhibition. In addition, subsequent studies may extend this work by using broader sampling strategies and incorporating inferential analyses to examine predictors of online disinhibition more comprehensively.

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