

## Information literacy and gen Z oversharing on Instagram

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### Abstract

This study examined the relationship between information literacy and the oversharing behavior of Gen Z students' outpourings on Instagram. The research was qualitative with an intrinsic case study approach, which allows for a holistic exploration of the experiences of the research subjects. Data were obtained through semi-structured interviews, online observations (netnography), and documentation of digital uploads of ten middle-level student informants who actively used Instagram. The thematic analysis results showed that low information literacy and unclear understanding of digital ethics made students vulnerable to impulsively sharing personal content. The need for social validation influenced this practice, as did social media cultural pressures and weak education about digital privacy, both in the family environment and educational institutions. This study highlighted the urgency of strengthening ethics-based digital literacy as a technical skill and a reflective competency to build wise and responsible digital behavior. These findings provide us with theoretical and practical contributions in developing contextual digital literacy education policies oriented towards the formation of the digital character of the young generation.

### Keywords

Digital ethics, Gen Z students, information literacy, Instagram, oversharing

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## Introduction

The development of digital technology has changed communication patterns and self-representation in the social life of modern society (Firamadhina & Krisnani, 2020). One of the most noticeable changes is how the younger generation, particularly Generation Z (Gen Z), utilizes social media as a platform for sharing information (Alamsyah, 2023). Gen Z students widely use Instagram as one of the most popular visual platforms to express themselves, build an image, and share personal problems openly (Yosida, 2025).

However, the practice of sharing information on social media is not always accompanied by an awareness of privacy boundaries (Sriwahyuni & Seprina, 2024) or an understanding of its long-term impacts (Sigalingging et al., 2023). The phenomenon of oversharing, namely the excessive sharing of personal information in digital public spaces, is one of the striking symptoms among Gen Z students (Hamzanwadi & Mukminin, 2024). This form of oversharing can include expressing emotions, discussing family conflicts, sharing relationship issues, or revealing sensitive personal data (Firamadhina & Krisnani, 2020). This tendency shows an information literacy gap, namely the inability of individuals to access, evaluate, and use information wisely in the digital era (Fadillah et al., 2022). This phenomenon is reinforced by the We Are Social report (2023) (Khomaini, 2024), which shows that more than 89 million Indonesians actively use Instagram, and most active users come from the 13–24 age group (Huvaidd & Maywita, 2022). Data from Kominfo (2022) also indicated that most teenagers do not yet understand digital privacy and are still weak at sorting out information suitable for sharing. As a result, many students use Instagram as a digital venting space (Anon, 2021), without realizing the social, psychological, and even legal risks of such actions.

In this context, information literacy is an important role in forming a critical and ethical attitude towards information, especially in sharing personal experiences online (Arnuset al., 2023). Low information literacy can cause students to be trapped in impulsive digital behavior (Arnus et al., 2023; Rastati, 2018), unaware of the impact, and easily become targets of data exploitation or online bullying (cyberbullying) (Rastati, 2018). Therefore, it is important to examine how it influences oversharing behavior on social media, especially Instagram.

Based on this phenomenon, this study aims to describe and analyze the relationship between information literacy and the tendency of Gen Z students to overshare personal outpourings on Instagram. This study is relevant because it can provide an overview of the quality of digital awareness of the younger generation and be an input in the development of information literacy and digital ethics programs in educational environments. Based on this background, the research questions raised are: How does information literacy affect the behavior of Gen Z students who overshare personal outpourings on Instagram social media?

## Literature Review

### *Information literacy*

Information literacy is an individual's ability to recognize information needs, find relevant sources of information, evaluate their truth and reliability, and use the information

appropriately and ethically (Siregar et al., 2024). In the context of the digital era, this literacy is limited to technical skills and includes critical awareness in sorting, understanding, and sharing information responsibly in the digital space (Komara & Widjaya, 2024).

Information literacy includes five main competencies: accessing, analyzing, evaluating, creating, and acting on information (Hidayat, 2025). Lack of these competencies, especially on social media such as Instagram, can lead to impulsive sharing of information without considering its ethical or social implications (Jubaidi & Fadilla, 2020). Therefore, information literacy is crucial in preventing oversharing i.e., the sharing of excessive personal information to the public (Fahriza & Rukiyah, 2023).

### ***Digital ethics and online behavior***

Digital ethics refers to moral principles that guide individual behavior in the digital space, including responsibility (Hendriyani et al., 2011), privacy protection, and awareness of the long-term impacts of online activities (Shandy & Pramudyo, 2023). On social media, digital ethics often faces a dilemma between self-expression and privacy boundaries (Harahap et al., 2024). Oversharing, which is sharing sensitive personal outpourings openly, can be triggered by emotional impulses, the search for social validation, or a lack of awareness of the digital footprint left behind (Ihsani & Febriyanti, 2021). In adolescents, especially students, this action is often carried out without adequate understanding of the accompanying it both social risks such as online judgment and psychological risks such as anxiety and regret (Azzahra et al., 2022). Thus, digital ethics plays an important role in shaping reflective attitudes (Twivy et al., 2025), empathetic, and responsibility in interacting in cyberspace (Vidianti et al., 2023). Both can be a foundation for shaping healthier digital behavior when combined with information literacy.

### ***Gen Z and social media interaction patterns***

Generation Z, individuals born between the late 1990s and early 2010s, are the digital native generation who grew up with digital devices and the internet (Twivy et al., 2025). For Gen Z, social media such as Instagram is a communication tool and a space to form self-identity, channel emotional expression, and establish social relations (Fang et al. 2014). However, Gen Z's mastery of technology is not always directly proportional to their ability to think critically and ethically on the internet (Festl, 2021). A Pew Research Center study (Greenhow & Lewin, 2016) showed that although Gen Z is very active and technically proficient in social media, many do not yet have a reflective and responsible digital mindset (Vraga & Tully, 2021). This makes them more susceptible to oversharing behavior, especially when under emotional stress or in need of social recognition (Pfaff-Rüdiger & Riesmeyer, 2016). By focusing on Gen Z students as research subjects, this study examines the dynamics between information literacy skills, digital ethics awareness, and the tendency to share personal outpourings on Instagram.

### ***Conceptual framework***

This study is built with a conceptual framework that integrates three main pillars: information literacy, digital ethics, and Gen Z digital behavior. Oversharing manifests the lack of critical and ethical skills in managing personal information in the digital public space. In the context of Gen Z students, oversharing is not just a momentary social symptom but reflects a gap in digital literacy education. This gap shows the urgency to build a deeper understanding of how teenagers interact with information and how they understand the risks and responsibilities in their digital lives.

### **Methodology**

#### ***Research design***

This study used qualitative with a case study approach to deeply understand the dynamics of Gen Z students' digital behavior in sharing personal outpourings on Instagram. This approach allows for exploration of subjective meanings, personal motivations, and digital ethics awareness that underlie the practice of oversharing. The qualitative approach is also considered appropriate because this phenomenon is related to factual actions and touches on complex social, emotional, and cognitive aspects. The focus is on one central issue: the oversharing of Gen Z students on Instagram through personal outpourings, either in text, video, or photos. This study does not aim for broad generalization, but to provide an in-depth understanding of one particular social group, middle-level students, in their digital lives. By focusing on a specific case study, researchers can map the relationship between information literacy, digital ethics awareness, and self-expression on social media.

#### ***Data collection techniques***

The data in this study were obtained through three main techniques:

- Semi-structured interviews: Conducted with 10 informants who are active high school students who use Instagram. The questions in the interviews focused on the experience of sharing personal outpourings, understanding of digital privacy, and reasons and feelings after oversharing.
- Online observation (netnography): Researchers directly watched the informants' digital activities through public Instagram accounts owned by students. The focus of observation includes the types of information shared, the frequency of oversharing, and patterns of audience interaction with uploads.
- Digital documentation: Collection of screenshots of uploads (with permission and with identity disguised) to be analyzed as textual and visual data. This documentation is used to identify categories of oversharing content and narrative forms used in personal outpourings.

The criteria for selecting informants were selected purposively by considering their active involvement in social media activities, especially those who have or often share personal information openly.

### ***Data analysis techniques***

Data analysis was conducted using the thematic analysis method developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis process includes several stages:

- Data familiarization: Reading interview transcripts and observation notes thoroughly.
- Initial coding: Identifying important statements, narrative patterns, and affective responses to the experience of oversharing.
- Theme formation: Grouping codes into themes such as self-representation on social media, private and public boundaries, information literacy awareness, and social responses to oversharing.
- Review and theme maturation: Compiling analytical narratives based on the interrelationships between themes and referring to theoretical foundations.

The analysis was conducted inductively, while still considering digital literacy theory and social media ethics to strengthen the interpretation of the results.

### ***Trustworthiness***

This study prioritizes the trustworthiness principles of Lincoln and Guba (Watson, 2023), which are described as follows:

- Credibility: Obtained through technical triangulation (interviews, observations, documentation), as well as member checking by confirming the interpretation of the results with the informant.
- Transferability: Improved by providing detailed descriptions of the social background, digital culture, and traits of Gen Z students, which helps readers determine how the results might apply to similar situations.
- Dependability: Maintained through systematic documentation of the entire research process, from planning to implementation to analysis, so that it can be replicated or audited by other parties.
- Confirmability: Achieved through critical reflection and avoidance of the researcher's personal bias, as well as the use of an audit trail as evidence of the transparency of the data analysis process.

## **Findings and Discussion**

### ***Oversharing patterns of personal outpouring by Gen Z students***

The results of observations and interviews indicated that most Gen Z students use Instagram as a space for intense self-expression. They tend to share personal outpourings that include:

- Emotional complaints and feelings of stress (such as family problems, academic pressure, and friendship relationships),
- Romantic experiences (both joyful and heartbroken),
- Traumatic stories or sensitive experiences (conflicts with parents or bullying experiences),
- Mental health (feelings of anxiety, stress, and even depressive issues).

The outpourings are primarily published through the InstaStory feature, photo uploads, or long, reflective captions. The need for validation, sympathy, or emotional outlets often triggers this content. Interestingly, some students do not fully understand personal and public information boundaries. They feel "safe" sharing stories because they assume their audience is close friends, even though the account is public or semi-open.

### ***Inadequate information literacy awareness***

Despite admitting their understanding of the importance of digital privacy, some informants did not accompany this awareness with real practices. They have not been able to sort information based on the level of sensitivity and potential long-term risks. Interviews showed that only a few informants considered the impact of uploads on digital reputation, data security, or the risk of disinformation. This evidence shows that information literacy is still low, especially in selecting and managing personal data in the digital space. Some students even admitted to regretting uploading personal outpourings because they felt "too open" or received negative responses from netizens. However, no long-term changes in attitude have immediately followed this reflective action.

### ***Blurred digital ethics: Normalization of oversharing in online culture***

The findings also show that Gen Z students' digital culture has normalized oversharing. Personal uploads are considered part of the "trend" and an expression of freedom. Some informants admitted feeling more "real" and "relatable" when sharing personal experiences. Some even stated that personal content is easier to interact with, thus strengthening the incentive to repeat the behavior. However, quite a few students who experience social pressure to share something because they are afraid of being left behind by the digital flow or being considered passive. This phenomenon demonstrates the ongoing blurring of digital ethics in the online student community. Emotional support from comments, likes, or direct messages blurs the boundaries between private and public spaces.

This phenomenon highlights a more profound ethical concern: the erosion of boundaries between personal privacy and public persona (Nissenbaum, 2020). This indicates that Gen Z might not completely understand how to judge what information is suitable to share, what the lasting effects of their online actions are, or the possible mental health impacts of frequently sharing too much. Thus, oversharing should not merely be viewed as a behavioral trend but as a critical issue tied to digital ethics and the gaps in information literacy education. Strengthening digital literacy programs that address ethical self-disclosure, privacy management, and critical thinking is key to encouraging responsible online behavior in youth-dominated digital spaces.



### ***The role of schools and families in strengthening digital literacy-ethics***

Most students said they had never received special education about digital ethics at school. Discussions about privacy, information literacy, and digital footprints are still minimal, formal, and character-building. On the family side, only a few parents actively monitor their children's social media activities. Most students stated that their parents did not follow their Instagram accounts. This finding indicates an institutional void in understanding ethical and responsible information literacy. In fact, with the increasing risk of data misuse, defamation, or digital trauma, these skills are critical.

As young users, students may struggle to differentiate between appropriate and inappropriate content to share online, leading to oversharing as a normalized act. The consistent digital ethics education makes students more susceptible to peer influence, algorithmic manipulation, and the pursuit of online validation without considering long-term consequences (Archambault et al., 2024). In many cases, the failure to address these issues results in a digitally fluent generation but an ethically unprepared generation. Schools and families must work collaboratively to create structured, continuous, and age-appropriate programs that teach technical skills, ethical reasoning, privacy protection, and emotional intelligence in digital spaces.

Moreover, it is important to frame information literacy as an interdisciplinary competence that extends beyond classroom learning into everyday social interactions, including on platforms like Instagram. Teachers, counselors, and parents must be equipped with updated knowledge and tools to engage with youth in conversations about safe and ethical online participation. Only through a united effort can digital literacy evolve from a passive awareness to a proactive, critical, and reflective practice among young users.

### ***Recontextualization of information literacy in the Gen Z digital ecosystem***

The results of this study reinforce the view that information literacy cannot be separated from the social and emotional context of digital users, especially Gen Z. The ability to sort, filter, and verify information becomes crucial in a digital environment full of social pressure and a culture of speed. Information literacy is the technical ability to search for and access information and a critical understanding of what is worth sharing, to whom, and in what context. This is where information literacy intersects closely with digital ethics. The practice of oversharing among students shows the need for a new approach to digital literacy education, namely by strengthening:

- Awareness of the long-term impact of personal uploads,
- Understanding privacy rights and ethical boundaries in digital communication,
- Critical of the algorithmic culture that motivates excessive exposure.

### ***Thematic findings and direct answers from informants***

The thematic category in this research can be seen in the following table, which includes the responses from the informants of this research.

**Table 1.** *The thematic findings and informants' direct answers*

Thematic category	Theme description	Findings direct quotes	From informants
Types of oversharing	Emotional outbursts and personal problems	Students share personal experiences such as breakups, family conflicts, and academic stress.	"Sometimes I post my stories because I'm really tired at home and school." (I1)
Motivation oversharing	Social validation and emotional support	Many students want to get support from online friends to feel more heard.	"When I post my story, I usually get encouraging DMs." (I3)
Information literacy	Inability to sort sensitive information	Informants have not been able to distinguish the boundaries between public and private content.	"I feel like Instagram is just a place for me to tell stories, like a diary, even though many people see it." (I7)
Digital awareness	privacy Low reflection on digital footprint	Impulse uploads often occur without considering long-term risks such as defamation or data distribution.	"I only regretted it when someone captured and spread my story..." (I5)
Digital ethics	Normalizing oversharing as an online culture	Oversharing as an Online Culture Oversharing is considered part of the 'honest on social media' culture and is considered normal among Gen Z.	"I think everyone likes to share their feelings, so I don't think it's weird." (I4)
Role of environment	Lack of school and parental	<b>Intervention:</b> There is no discussion about digital ethics in class or parental supervision of their Instagram accounts.	"My parents don't know what's on my IG, the important thing is good grades." (I2)
Response after oversharing	Regret and shame after	Some students regretted the negative responses or overexposure when sharing digitally.	"I once posted while I was crying, then someone sent it to the class group. I was so embarrassed." (I6)
Digital social factors	Pressure to actively share and FOMO: there is an indirect	Push to continue to 'exist' and share something, not to feel left behind socially.	"If I don't update anything, I feel like I've disappeared from society." (I9)



### *Thematic visualization of oversharing narratives of Gen Z students*

Furthermore, the following figure presents the thematic visualization of Gen Z students' oversharing narratives.

**Figure 1.** *Gen Z's oversharing narratives*

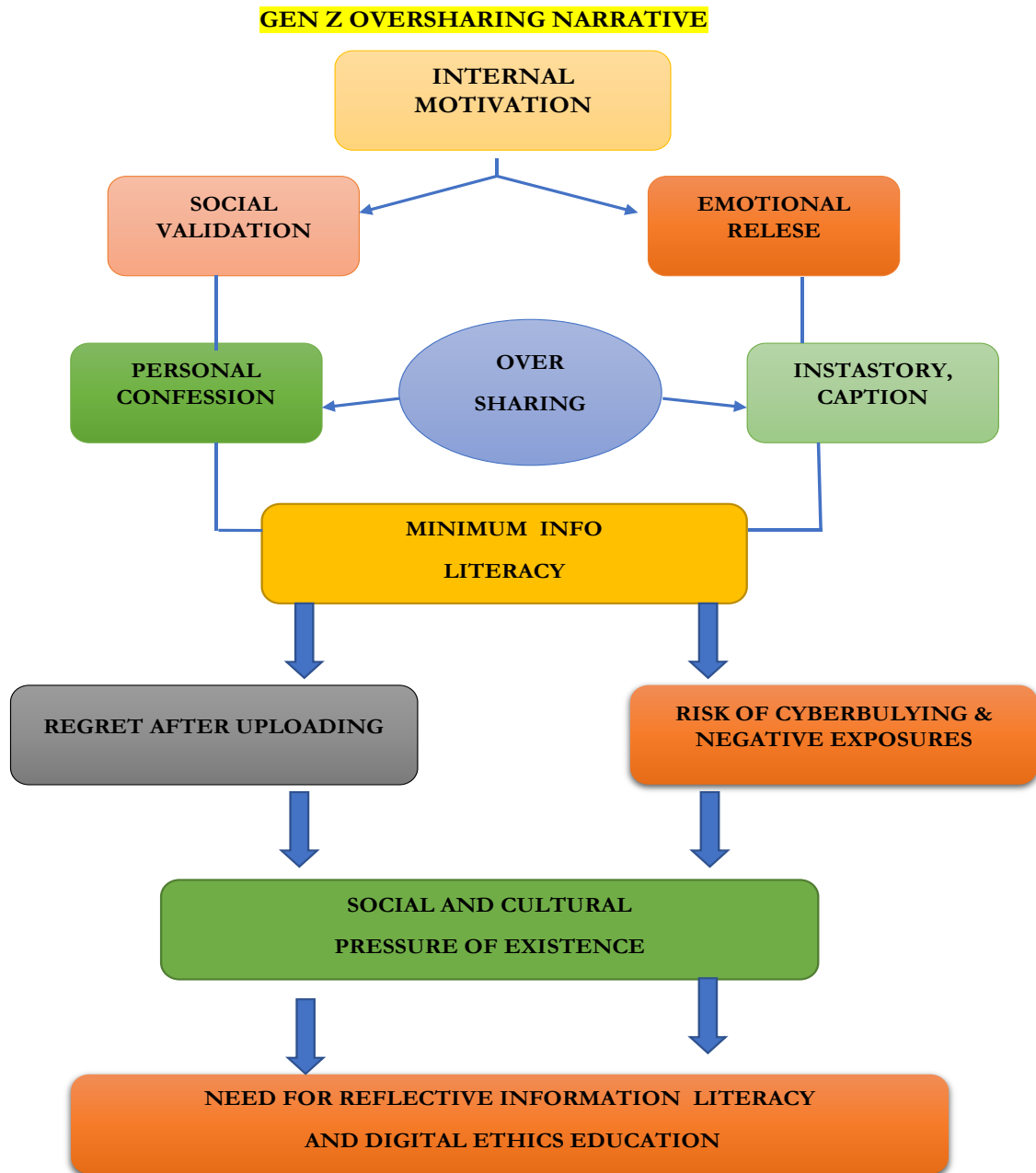


Figure 1 above illustrates the psychological and digital behaviours associated with oversharing among Gen Z in social media use. Internal motivations, such as needing to release emotions and pursuing social validation, give rise to oversharing. Emotional release often involves expressing intense personal feelings through digital media, sometimes directly. Social validation, on the other hand, refers to the desire for recognition, acceptance, or approval through likes, comments, and shares. These two drivers have been described as driving various oversharing practices, such as personal confessions and using Instagram Stories, texts, or other short-form narrative features that allow users to broadcast their inner thoughts or experiences.

However, the model emphasizes that these behaviors often occur in the context of low information literacy. Gen Z users may lack the critical skills to evaluate the risks and consequences of sharing certain content online. This deficit can lead to two immediate risks: regret after posting and exposure to cyberbullying or other forms of negative digital interactions. Regret typically arises after realizing that a post was too personal or was misinterpreted, while cyberbullying and negative digital reactions reflect the hostile or judgmental responses users may encounter from others online.

The model further identifies an external contributing factor: social and cultural pressure. The phrase refers to the pervasive need among Gen Z to “be there” digitally—to maintain an active presence, build a personal brand, and remain visible to their peers. This pressure can exacerbate the cycle of oversharing as individuals continually seek connection, relevance, and affirmation through their online personas.

Ultimately, the Gen Z Oversharing Narrative Model leads to an important conclusion: the need for reflective information literacy and digital ethics education. Reflective literacy involves critically assessing one’s motivations, audiences, and potential digital footprint before posting. Digital ethics education includes understanding online responsibility, privacy issues, and the implications of content longevity. Together, these educational goals can equip young users with the awareness and tools necessary to engage more responsibly and safely in the digital environment.

#### **Notes:**

- a. There is a direct relationship between minimal information literacy, low awareness of digital ethics, and high socio-emotional drive, which together are the leading causes of oversharing practices.
- b. Psychosocial dynamics: The social media ecosystem, which provides incentives such as likes, views, and sympathy, not only encourages impulsive oversharing but also drives it.
- c. Urgent needs: Strengthening information literacy must touch on emotional and moral aspects, not just technical ones.

## Conclusions

This study shows that the practice of oversharing personal outpourings by Gen Z students on Instagram is an increasingly prominent digital phenomenon, triggered by the need for social validation and emotional outlets. While some students understand the significance of digital privacy and security, they have not fully internalized this knowledge. Lack of information literacy, especially in sorting appropriate content to share in digital public spaces, makes students vulnerable to social and psychological risks, such as defamation, stigma, or privacy violations. This phenomenon is exacerbated by the weak understanding of digital ethics in schools and families, which have not provided adequate provisions for students in building digital awareness and responsibility. Thus, oversharing is not just an impulsive act but reflects the limitations of information literacy and the blurring of ethical boundaries in the use of social media.

This research is limited to the scope of Gen Z students in urban areas, focusing on one social media platform, Instagram. Further research can expand the reach of respondents in various regions and examine cross-platforms (TikTok, Twitter, Threads, etc.), including the influence of algorithms on the tendency to overshare.

## Disclosure Statement

The author stated that this research was conducted independently and in accordance with the principles of research ethics. There is no potential conflict of interest reported by the author.

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