

The Stages of Self-Disclosure by Anonymous Chat Users in Telegram to Build Virtual Relationships

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Abstract. The development of technology creates the new form of interpersonal relation, which is known as virtual relationship. Building online relationship is widely used by people especially young people. The phenomenon of building virtual relationship tends to make friendship or girl/boyfriend through the feature of Telegram, *Anonymous Chat*. However, this feature also vulnerable to digital sexual harassment and data privacy because this feature is anonymous. This research is intended to describe and analyses the phenomenon of self-disclosure in building virtual relationship through anonymous chat feature in Telegram. This study employs descriptive approach with in-depth interview with five informants who have experienced virtual relationship through the media. The findings of the research show that all informants have experienced the stages of self-disclosure as it is explained by social penetration theory, starting from orientation to stable exchange. In the initial stage, informants tended to disclose general and secure information as a form of caution in an anonymous space. As interactions and trust developed, informants began to reveal more personal information, including emotional experiences and true identities, although still with selectivity. These findings suggest that anonymity does not always hinder self-disclosure, but rather can be a springboard for developing closeness if managed carefully and with positive communication. This study also found that self-disclosure with strangers is easier than with someone within one's social circle.

Keywords: Self-Disclosure, Virtual Relationships, Anonymous Chat, Telegram, Social Penetration Theory

1 Introduction

The development of digital technology has changed the way people interact and build social relationships. In everyday life, self-disclosure occurs not only through face-to-face communication but also through social media. The context of self-disclosure among social media users generally revolves around how people share personal information on various social media platforms, where people feel joyful to share their feelings [1]. Social media facilitates direct interaction and communication between users and it has a high usage rate in Indonesia, reaching 143 million users, or 50.2% of the population, in January 2025. So, it became a primary platform for communication, information, and entertainment [2].

Telegram is one of social media platforms that allows users to send instant messages that contain text, images, videos, and voice messages for free [3]. Telegram had 1 billion monthly active users in 2025. It increases drastically from 950 million in July 2024. This number is increasing daily and driving Telegram's growth [4]. This data shows that Telegram becomes a more popular and influential digital platform to people's lives. In the Telegram application, there are many Anonymous Chat features, one of which is called Anonymous Chat @chat bot which has 2 million active monthly users. Users of this feature can talk to other people in anonymous Telegram chats without knowing their name or gender. This feature can help them get to know other users who are reluctant to reveal their real identities [5]. This phenomenon is relevant to study because it exposes how digital anonymity influences the dynamics of forming virtual relationships through stages of self-disclosure, starting from the initial stage of disclosing information to the formation of familiarity and trust between users.

Virtual relationship is a modern form of interpersonal communication in which the imagination or visualization of the partner predominates over physical contact. Such relationships, unlike real ones, have greater psychological value [6]. The affinity of virtual relationships cannot be measured by distance, location, or any other physical parameters, but rather by psychological content [6].

With digital advancements, virtual relationship currently rises among today's youth [7]. Virtual relationship can be formed through Telegram's anonymous chat feature. A real phenomenon in content on the TikTok platform, searched for "Anonymous Chat Telegram Virtual Relationships," shows that interactions in anonymous spaces used safely, especially through self-disclosure, can be a means of building virtual relationships. This process involves repetition, meaningful message exchanges, communication intensity, and emotional closeness, where individuals can adapt their communication styles and interpret messages more deeply over time.

Social Penetration Theory, introduced by Irwin Altman and Dalmas Taylor in 1973, is defined as circular process that describes penetration as the thawing of tension in interpersonal relationships. This explains that relationships develop through certain stages [8]. Walther's (1996) Hyper personal Theory supports this research, using hyper personal to describe online relationships that can develop into closer and more intimate relationships than those formed when partners interact face-to-face in a physical space [9]

Several previous studies have discussed self-disclosure, as follows. The first research entitled "Self-Disclosure Stages of LINE Nearby Feature Users in the LINE App to Find Friends," explained LINE Nearby users' self-disclosure through four stages of social penetration, factors that influence self-disclosure, and Indonesia's collectivist culture [10]. Penelitian Kedua, yang berjudul "membahas efektivitas penggunaan fitur *Anonymous Chat* pada aplikasi Telegram sebagai sarana komunikasi dalam mencari jodoh" yang mengkaji The second research entitled "Discussing the Effectiveness of Using the Anonymous Chat Feature on the Telegram App as a Communication Tool for Finding a Partner," examined the effectiveness of Telegram's Anonymous Chat feature as a communication tool to find a partner using qualitative descriptive methods through questionnaires. The results showed that anonymity provides a sense of security, comfort, and facilitates introductions and expanding social networks [5]

Based on previous research, it can be seen that previous research on self-disclosure on the LINE Nearby platform focused on the stages of social penetration and cultural factors in finding friends, while other research focused on the effectiveness of Telegram's Anonymous Chat feature as a communication tool to find a partner. However, until now no one has researched the phenomenon of establishing relationships through the Self-Disclosure Stages of Anonymous Chat Telegram Users in Building Virtual Relationships, especially in Social Penetration Theory, the reasons for users to self-disclosure to strangers, and motivations in building virtual relationships are still limited. Therefore, this research proposes to fill this gap by analyzing the phenomenon of establishing relationships through the process of self-disclosure of Anonymous Chat Telegram users to build virtual relationships. Theoretically, this research is important because it expands the application of Social Penetration Theory and Hyper personal in the communication phenomena through Anonymous Chat Telegram on digital platforms, especially in understanding the phenomenon of self-disclosure stages. Practically, this research provides an understanding for users and developers of the Anonymous Chat Telegram platform on the self-disclosure process as a way to build relationships, manage privacy, and form social interactions in digital spaces, including the potential benefits and risks that can arise from the practice of self-disclosure in anonymous communication.

This study aims to describe and analyze the phenomenon of Self-Disclosure Stages of Anonymous Chat Telegram users to build virtual relationships from anonymous spaces. Based on Social Penetration Theory and Hyper personal Theory, this study explains the stages of self-disclosure, like comfort, trust, and privacy management. In addition to the reasons for users to self-disclosure to strangers, this study also explores the motivations of users to build virtual relationships. The results of the study are expected to provide insights for the development of the Anonymous Chat Telegram platform based on the phenomenon of users in communicating anonymously in a more secure manner and provide insights to users and those who want to use the features on the platform to build virtual relationships.

2 Literature Review

Social Penetration Theory, introduced by Irwin Altman and Dalmas Taylor in 1973, is defined as circular process that describes penetration as the easing of tension in interpersonal relationships. This explains that relationships develop through certain stages [8]. Altman and Taylor define interpersonal communication as a multi-layered onion. Each person has opinions, beliefs, prejudices, and feelings within them. As people get to know each other, some layers open up to reveal their inner feelings. This layer has a broad and deep space. This broad space consists of various topics within a variety of topics. The stages of the social penetration process are as follows:

- a. Orientation Stage: At this stage, a person begins with short, simple, and unimportant conversations [8].
- b. Emotional Exploration Stage: At this stage, people begin to reveal themselves, expressing personal attitudes on general topics [11].
- c. Emotional Exchange Stage: At this stage, people begin to talk about personal matters, providing reasons for the topics discussed [11].

d. Stable Exchange Stage: At this stage, the relationship has reached a level where personal matters can be shared [11].

A supporting theory, Walther's Hyper personal Theory, uses the term hyper personal to describe online relationships that can develop into closer and more intimate relationships than those formed when partners interact face-to-face in a physical space [9].

Self-disclosure is generally defined as the process of revealing significant information about oneself to others for a specific purpose. According to Irwin Altman & Dalmis Taylor (1973), self-disclosure leads to a non-intimate relationship moving toward an intimate one because the process allows individuals to get to know each other. Self-disclosure helps shape current and future relationships between two people because it provides intrinsic satisfaction [12]

Social media is a communication tool for various interaction purposes. Users have the opportunity to share information, exchange ideas, and produce content in various formats, such as videos, images, and other multimedia. Social media enables two-way communication like information exchange, collaboration, and building social relationships through text, visuals, and audiovisuals [13]

Telegram is an instant messaging service developed to address the limitations of WhatsApp. This application uses a cloud-based system supported by advanced technology. Through features such as end-to-end encryption, automatic message destruction mechanisms, and a distributed data center system across multiple locations, Telegram offers a higher level of security and privacy for its users [14]

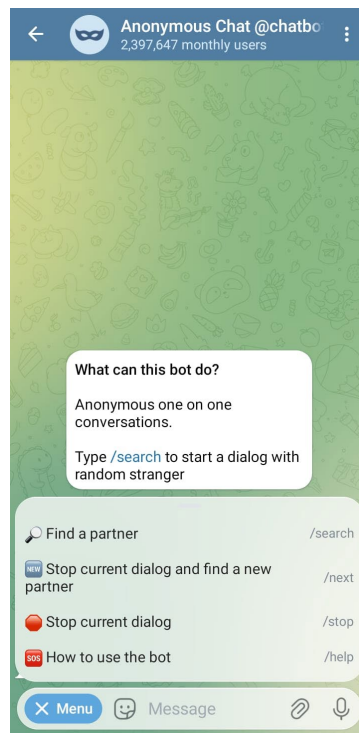


Figure 1. Anonymous Chat Features

Source: Telegram

Telegram has many anonymous chat features. For example, Anonymous Chat @chatbot, which has a large number of monthly active users, around 2 million. This feature allows users to chat anonymously without knowing their name or gender. This feature can help them get to know other users who are reluctant to reveal their true identities [5]. With this feature, users can interact with others without being bound by social norms or feelings, similar to a secret interaction. Users can interact with other users by sending a signal to the bot mediator with the message "/start." Users can decide to continue or end the conversation by sending a signal to the mediator with a message "/next" or "/stop" [15].

Virtual relationship is a modern form of interpersonal communication in which the imagination or visualization of the partner is more dominant than physical contact. This relationship is unlike real relationships and has greater psychological value [6]. The affinity of virtual relationships cannot be measured based on distance and location or any physical parameters, but rather can be measured based on psychological content [6].

Several previous studies and findings also reveal that self-disclosure can build interpersonal relationships. Subsequent research has also examined anonymous Telegram chats for various purposes. These studies served as a foundation and reference to strengthen this research, especially self-disclosure. The first study is "Self-

Disclosure Stages of LINE Nearby Feature Users in the LINE App to Find Friends." It used Social Penetration Theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973) to explain the self-disclosure process of LINE Nearby users. Self-disclosure occurs through four stages: Orientation, Emotional Exploration, Emotional Exchange, and Stable Exchange, ranging from basic to highly personal information. The factors influencing self-disclosure include trust, social motivation, and privacy management [10]

The second study is "Social Penetration in Finding a Partner on the Online Dating App Bumble." It uses Social Penetration Theory and examines how online users of the dating app Bumble experience a gradual social penetration process, characterized by increased self-disclosure, more relaxed conversations, and sharing of personal experiences from the affective exchange stage to stable exchange. Although intimacy and comfort begin to develop, participants have not yet progressed to a relationship or serious commitment, as Bumble is primarily used as a means of making friends, sharing stories, and expanding relationships, and still considering the safety aspect of self-disclosure [16]

The third study is "The Effectiveness of Using the Anonymous Chat Feature on the Telegram App as a Communication Tool for Finding a Partner." It used a qualitative descriptive method with collecting data through questionnaires from anonymous chat users. The results show that the anonymity feature provides users with a sense of security and comfort in communication, facilitates the introduction process, and helps expand social networks without having to reveal personal identities. This study confirms that anonymous chat on Telegram is considered quite effective as an interpersonal communication medium to find a partner in the digital era [5]

The fourth study is Uncovering the "Anonymity of Self-Disclosure Experiences in Anonymous Telegram Chat". It uses a phenomenological approach from a psychological perspective. This study highlights the motivations for using anonymity as a means of emotional catharsis and expanding social relationships. It also describes the psychological experiences of users who feel free and secure, while still maintaining boundaries when sharing personal information. The results show that anonymity supports open expression and identity exploration, but is also accompanied by an awareness of social and privacy risks in digital spaces. This study focuses on the subjective experience and psychological impact of self-disclosure, without specifically examining the communication stages or the process of forming virtual relationships between users. [17]

Based on the previous research cited above, there is a research gap in the study of self-disclosure in the context of communication on anonymous Telegram chats, particularly regarding the stages of self-disclosure. While several studies have addressed self-disclosure, they generally focus directly on openness without examining how the stages of self-disclosure occur; one such research gap is evident in the study titled "Unveiling Anonymity: An Exploration of Self-Disclosure Experiences in Telegram Anonymous Chats" [17]. Nevertheless, studies that specifically examine user phenomena in relation to the stages of self-disclosure through Telegram's anonymous chat feature—based on Social Penetration Theory, the dynamics of anonymous communication, and the Hyperpersonal Theory approach within the context of virtual relationship formation—remain relatively limited. Consequently, this research uses these studies as a foundation and reference to strengthen the analysis of the self-disclosure process among users of Telegram's anonymous chat. These two theories are linked by a concept that views anonymity as a situation that influences how people communicate, self-disclosure as the primary act, and virtual relationships as the result of those interactions. Thus, combining these two ideas helps research not only describe what is happening but also explain how anonymity can encourage people to share more about themselves, which in turn helps build more meaningful relationships in virtual spaces.

3 Research Methods

This study employs a qualitative approach using descriptive phenomenology. This approach was chosen because the study focuses on understanding and describing the real-life experiences of individuals within a specific social context. A qualitative design with a phenomenological approach aimed at understanding individuals' subjective experiences in self-disclosure through Telegram's anonymous chat feature. This approach was chosen because it allows the researcher to delve deeply into how informants interpret the communication processes they undergo, including the dynamics and stages of self-disclosure that occur naturally during interactions. The phenomenological design is considered appropriate for capturing the dynamic stages of self-disclosure because it focuses not only on the final outcome but also on the evolving process of experience over time. In this context, the researcher seeks to uncover and describe in depth the experiences of users of Telegram's Anonymous Chat feature as they navigate the stages of self-disclosure in building virtual relationships. The phenomenological approach provides an opportunity to deeply understand the phenomenon of self-disclosure through Telegram's Anonymous Chat feature in the context of building virtual relationships.

Self-disclosure is the process by which an individual shares personal information with others during an interaction [12]. Operationally, self-disclosure can be identified through several indicators, including the depth of the information shared, the breadth of topics, the frequency of sharing personal information, and the level of honesty in communication. This construct is analyzed based on the content of conversations that took place and the results of informant interviews that can illustrate patterns of individual openness.

In this study, anonymity is understood as a condition in which an individual's identity is not fully known in digital interactions. The anonymity feature on Telegram allows users to chat with others anonymously without knowing their names or genders. This feature can help them connect with other users who are reluctant to reveal their true identities [5]. This construct is measured through the perception of identity confidentiality, namely the extent to which users feel safe because the system's features guarantee the absence of initial identity. Anonymity here acts as a "prerequisite" that lowers social inhibition, yet it is not static because users may gradually reveal their identities.

Virtual relationships are a form of social connection established through online interactions without direct physical presence. Operationally, virtual relationships are measured by the intensity of interaction, the level of emotional closeness, interpersonal trust, and the continuity of the relationship over a specific period of time [6]. This measurement is conducted by analyzing the history of interactions and the informants' subjective experiences obtained through interviews.

Research data was collected through in-depth online interviews conducted via Zoom with five informants aged 20–35, selected using purposive sampling; this selection aimed to obtain in-depth data aligned with the research focus. The informants were active users of Telegram's Anonymous Chat feature. Informants were selected based on specific criteria, such as a level of activity that fosters virtual relationships and a minimum usage duration of one month. The data will be analyzed using the Miles and Huberman interactive model, through the processes of data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions. This study does not focus on the authenticity of personal identities, but rather on the consistency of the experiences conveyed by the participants. Relevant data were collected during the virtual self-disclosure stages on Telegram's Anonymous Chat platform. The simplified data was organized into narrative descriptions to illustrate patterns of self-disclosure and the dynamics of interactions between informants. The researchers interpreted the meaning of the findings to answer the research questions and verified them through triangulation to ensure the research results [18]. Given that the platform is anonymous, this study ensures the credibility and reliability of the data through several validation techniques. First, data triangulation was performed by combining observations of conversations, in-depth interviews, and documentation to obtain a consistent understanding. Second, member validation was conducted by reconfirming the interview results with participants to ensure the accuracy of the meanings conveyed. Third, the researcher compiled an audit trail in the form of documentation of the systematic data collection and analysis process so that it could be traced back. Furthermore, the focus of the research was not on verifying individual identities, but rather on the consistency of experiences and patterns of information emerging from participants who built relationships through self-disclosure

4 Results and Discussion

4.1 The Stages of Self-Disclosure by Anonymous Chat Telegram Users in Building Virtual Relationships

The informants described the process of building virtual relationships through four stages of Social Penetration according to Irwin Altman & Dalmas Taylor: orientation, emotional exploration, emotional exchange, and stable exchange. These four stages will be used to analyze the phenomenon of building virtual relationships through self-disclosure among users of the Anonymous Chat Telegram feature. The four stages of social penetration are as follows:

A. Orientation

In this orientation stage, a small part of an individual is known to others. Communication only reflects general information such as personal identity. Both parties starting a new relationship will try to avoid behavior that could cause conflict in order to have a chance to continue the relationship [19]. Based on the research findings, informants initially find friends by pressing the start button. After pressing the start button in the Anonymous Chat feature, they will be connected to the other person. Once connected, a conversation will begin [20].

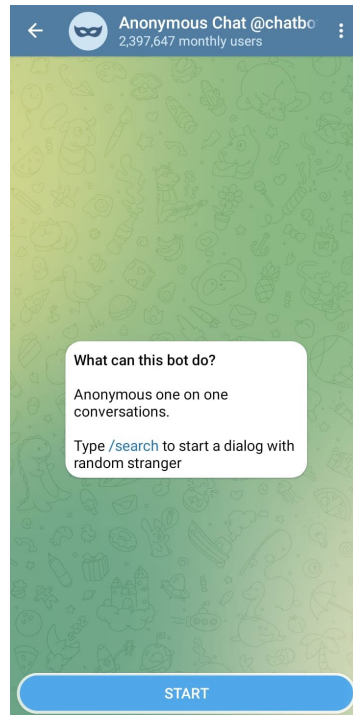


Figure 2. Anonymous Chat Initial Display Features
Source: Telegram



Figure 3. Connect with Interlocutor Display Features
Source: Telegram

Based on the results of interviews with informants [21], during the Orientation stage, a portion of the information shared during initial interactions in the Anonymous Chat with a similar pattern, such as gender, nickname, age, address, activities, and academic background or specific interests.

Informants stated that they judge the conversation partners based on their interpretation of the message, the presence of feedback, style, tone of voice, and word choice. Furthermore, the continuity of responses and how the other person responds to the conversation are also important factors in understanding the meaning of the message [21].

Related to Irwin Altman & Dalmis Taylor's Social Penetration Theory, the Orientation stage is still external to the personality. At this stage, individuals begin to share basic information with partners, but opinions or responses are still clichéd, merely polite, conforming to general norms [22]. During the orientation stage, informants tend to be cautious and limit the disclosure of more personal information. The initial process of forming a relationship begins with the first impression during introduction, where interactions develop through communication and gradual information exchange, until a connection is created between individuals finally [16]. A research conducted by [23] revealed that during the orientation stage there is also a selection process for potential dates called the swiping system in online dating applications. [24] revealed that there were several negative treatments in the anonymous space experienced by the informant, even though in reality this feature can also provide benefits for its users.

Based on the research findings, the orientation stage among Anonymous Chat Telegram users is characterized by limited self-disclosure that remains at the outermost layer of personality, where informants only share general information such as gender, nickname, age, address, and background of certain activities or interests. This pattern is carried out as a form of caution to build an initial impression, assess the response and attitude of the interlocutor, and avoid potential conflict or negative experiences in anonymous communication spaces. This finding is in line with Altman and Taylor's Social Penetration Theory, which explains that in the orientation stage, communication is normative, shallow, and tends to be small talk as an initial selection process before the relationship develops further. Unpleasant experiences, such as verbal abuse, also strengthen informants' selective attitudes in reading, interpreting, and responding to messages, so that the orientation stage functions as an initial evaluation phase in determining to continue virtual relationships.

B. Emotional Exploration

The emotional exploration stage follows the Orientation stage, where this virtual relationship develops into deeper openness, fostering emotional closeness, individual perspectives, and personal experiences initially [16]. Based on the result of interviews, this stage generally progresses intensively after the orientation stage, which involves selecting a conversation partner. At this stage, informants share personal and emotional stories, telling their conversation partners about hobbies, college, activities, favorite foods, and even politics. They can communicate positively to create memorable topics [20]. Informants stated that this broad openness stems from shared experiences, a sense of compatibility in conversation, and a positive and consistent response from the conversation partner. Trust grows because the conversation partner listens well, responds politely, and does not judge. This makes informants feel understood and free to open up further [20]. At this stage, one informant also began sharing opinions with the other person about national politics. The differences of opinion that arose generally did not hinder communication and instead brought them closer emotionally as long as those expressing opinions were relaxed and respectful of one another [25].

Anonymous chat features such as voice notes, text messages, emojis, and image sharing facilitated a more rapid rapport. The informant explained that at this stage the features provided in Anonymous Chat also supported smooth communication [21]. Based on Irwin Altman & Dalmis Taylor's Penetration Theory, the emotional exploration stage reflects a greater depth and breadth of self-disclosure than the orientation stage. The informant entered the private realm, as the theory suggests, where personal information is shared more openly. This stage, similar to a normal friendship, involves individuals communicating more broadly, demonstrating a level of spontaneity as comfort grows, allowing for a more fluid and candid flow of communication [22]. It is in line with previous research [26] this stage involves an exchange of interests, making communication more comfortable and relaxed. Informants also begin to build trust by demonstrating and recognizing each other's interests.

Overall, the exploration phase, along with the research findings above, aligns with the theoretical study that shows an increase in the depth and breadth of self-disclosure from the orientation phase. Based on the result of the interview, it shows that informants began sharing more personal and emotional experiences, such as stories from their childhood, dynamics during college, daily activities, and even politics. This indicates a shift from general information exchange to discussions that touch on personal aspects of an individual's life. Virtual relationships are perceived as more intimate friendships, serving as a space for sharing stories but not yet directed towards a more serious relationship, but still depending on the goals and dynamics of each individual. This self-disclosure is also encouraged by the positive, consistent, and non-judgmental responses of the interlocutor, fostering trust and comfort. These findings indicate that interactions develop into closer, emotionally intimate relationships.

C. Emotional Exchange

This stage involves a very close and warm exchange of interactions, a process of forming a virtual relationship. This stage not only increases in depth but also is accompanied by emotional closeness, empathy, and personal support. At this stage, they can communicate casually without any burden. This stage also leads to closer friendships, camaraderie, or even more intimate relationships [16].

The developments of this stage are marked by the assessment that the other person feels quite comfortable, well-behaved, and does not exhibit negative behavior, thus it can be more intimate communication. Based on interviews, at this stage, informants begin to reveal some of their true identities, but remain cautious. The information shared is still limited, including Telegram usernames, which can be used to switch to a private chat by tapping on the username to connect directly with the other person [20].

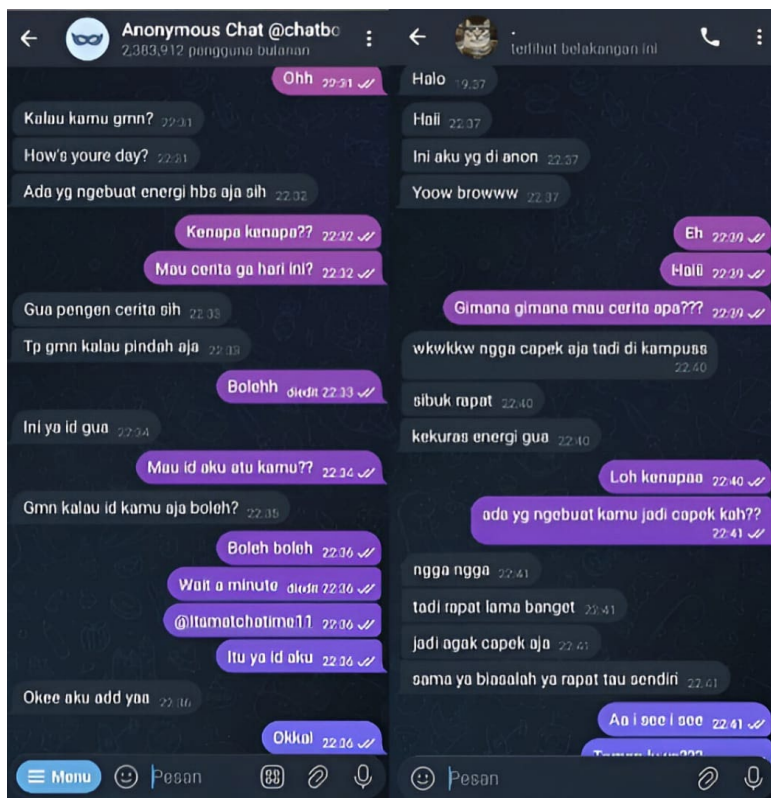


Figure 6. Transition from Anonymous Chat to Private Telegram Chat
Source: Telegram

At this stage informants not only move to private Telegram chat, but also follow each other's social media accounts, such as Instagram and TikTok, at different intervals to prevent falsification of personal data such as name, gender, and other information. This is also done to avoid fraud and to foster closer relationships [20].

At this stage, informants begin to reveal emotional experiences related to college, random stories, friendships, past relationships, and even family. This information represents the deepest layer of an individual's identity because it concerns their individual privacy. The informant stated that the stories shared at this stage make communication meaningful and strengthen a sense of closeness with the other person [20].

According to the informant, a sense of security in forming a relationship arises because the relationship is built by both parties, trust each other, feel comfortable, non-judgmental, and is able to maintain confidentiality. Some informants also found it easier to share stories with strangers because they were not tied to the daily social environment and the minimal risk of social judgment, the presence of trust, the absence of judgment on the interlocutor, making them open, especially if the interlocutor lacks social ties in the real world because there is still a fear of telling stories with friends in the real world. Informants felt a close emotional closeness, felt by a feeling of calm when communicating, waiting for messages from the interlocutor, and feeling a strong emotional presence even though the relationship only took place virtually. Relationship is not just an exchange of messages, but a space of mutual understanding and support for each other. As communication progresses, emotional closeness can form even if it is only virtual. The interlocutor who responds to mutual understanding and support makes him wait to reply to messages [20]. [27] said that there is a sense of trust in the relationship of sharing stories because we have similarities in the academic field at this stage and we also often study together online and share volunteer or webinar information.

Empathy plays a crucial role in strengthening virtual relationships during the emotional exchange stage. Informants stated that empathy, demonstrated through responsiveness, mutual understanding, and non-judgment, are key factors in creating a closer relationship. Emotional support also occurs in virtual spaces, including words of encouragement, reassuring advice, small gestures, and reassurance that the other person is not alone in facing a problem. This support provides a sense of appreciation and emotional companionship [20].

Some informants also noted that the development of interactions at this stage can be seen by indicating the use of more personal and intimate language, such as a softer tone of voice and a more intimate communication style, and frequent communication via voice and video calls. These changes in language style were perceived by informants as significantly impacting the development of the relationship, as they created a good communication atmosphere and encouraged the development of the relationship. One informant stated that the use of more personal language, such as tone of voice, made the conversation feel warm and intimate, and they frequently engaged in voice and video calls [20]. If it is associated with the Social Penetration Theory of Irwin Altman & Dalmas Taylor, the stage of emotional exchange of deep layer penetration shows a commitment between the two parties where the relationship has already had comfort, and intimate personal expression has been obtained through words, phrases, or behavior [22]. [28] explained that at this stage both parties have begun to actively ask and answer questions, so that a sense of comfort begins to form between individuals before becoming a couple.

Overall, the results of the above research and theoretical studies, the stages of emotional exchange experienced by informants through Anonymous Chat Telegram are in line with Irwin Altman & Dalmas Taylor's Social Penetration Theory. The results show that informants show self-disclosure at the deepest level by sharing sensitive emotional experiences such as sharing stories from college, random, friendship, past relationships to family relationships, as well as making a transition from Anonymous Chat to private chat Telegram or connecting with each other through social media. This indicates a closer relationship due to increased trust and commitment. In Computer Mediated Communication media, there is also empathy, emotional support, and the use of more personal and intimate language. This strengthen relationships that take place virtually. These findings show that relationships are no longer just an exchange of messages, but develop into a space for mutual understanding and support.

D. Stable Exchange

This is the highest stage, where individuals express thoughts, feelings, and behaviors more openly, resulting in increased spontaneity and uniqueness, strengthening the relationship [22]. The findings show that virtual relationships built by Anonymous Chat users demonstrate the deepest self-disclosure and a stable relationship, fostering mutual understanding. This is reflected in the consistent disclosure of past traumas, such as anxiety, depression, and low points in life, as well as a strong emotional attachment to ongoing communication with the other person [20]. After gradually building a closer relationship, trust grows, and this goes beyond simply following each other on Instagram, but over time, this stage also shifts to WhatsApp and Line [21]. At this stage, the relationships built by the informants virtually begin to take on a more distinct meaning, similar to virtual dating, but dating requires a long-term interaction [21]. Besides dating, informants at this stage also interpret it as a friendship. However, one informant interprets the relationship as a virtual friendship, not just friendship, but a space for sharing and emotional support, where the other person is seen as someone capable of providing understanding and empathetic responses, much like an informal counselor. Because the other person always listens well, the informant feels valued and less alone. The informant acknowledged that virtual communication becomes an emotional dependency and a daily necessity [20].

[27] stated that a sense of trust exists in the relationship because we often share stories about our respective privacy and we have similarities in academics. At this stage, we also often study together online and share volunteer information or webinars [25]. stated gifts are also given to each other as small tokens of attention to their partner to make them feel loved and as tangible evidence of their love language.

According to Irwin Altman & Dalmas Taylor's Social Penetration Theory, this stage demonstrates the depth of a relationship, reaching a high level of self-disclosure, where individuals are willing to share personal experiences, deep emotions, and sensitive psychological states. This theory argues that at this stage, relationships achieve stability with full openness and trust, and individuals feel safe sharing personal information [10]. [10] noted that this stage is the peak of self-disclosure, where users no longer hesitate to share deeply personal stories or experiences because a close and trusting relationship has been established. These findings align with previous research [17] which showed that using anonymous chat feature on Telegram positively provides a variety of significant benefits. Anonymous chat is not only used to overcome boredom and satisfy curiosity, but also serves as a means of expanding social relationships and opening up opportunities for new experiences.

Overall, at this stage, informants demonstrated the deepest and most consistent self-disclosure, characterized by mutual communication, disclosure of past trauma, sensitive emotional states, and a strong emotional attachment to continue communication. The relationships built were no longer temporary, but were clearly defined as virtual friendships, virtual courtships, or virtual intimate relationships that provided a sense of security, trust, and emotional support. These findings align with the concept of the stable exchange stage in theory, where

relationships achieve a level of stability through full openness, strong trust, and a sense of security in sharing the most intimate personal experiences.

Based on the interview results, the five informants had entered the stage of self-disclosure at the social penetration stage. The information provided varied according to the self-disclosure stage. In the Orientation stage, informants tended to be very cautious by only sharing general information due to previous negative experiences in anonymous spaces, so the orientation stage functioned as an initial selection process for interlocutors. As communication progressed, the relationship developed into the emotional exploration stage through increased self-disclosure, sharing of personal experiences, and growing trust due to positive and non-judgmental responses. In the emotional exchange stage, the relationship became closer and warmer with empathy, emotional support, the use of more personal language, and a shift to private chat and social media as a form of strengthening trust. In the stable exchange stage, self-disclosure reached the deepest and most consistent level, marked by the exchange of WhatsApp and Line messages and the disclosure of sensitive emotional experiences, strong emotional attachments, and the meaning of the relationship as a virtual friendship, a stable virtual courtship that provides a sense of security, trust, and emotional support. In this study, Social Penetration Theory is not only applied to explain the process of self-disclosure but is also adapted to account for the anonymous context of digital communication. Specifically, this study demonstrates that the process of social penetration in anonymous settings does not always occur gradually and linearly as described in classical theory, but can occur more rapidly and non-sequentially. Anonymity allows individuals to bypass the initial superficial stages and directly reveal more personal information without having to go through a lengthy process of building intimacy. This study enhances Social Penetration Theory by showing that how open a person is depends not only on how close the relationship is, but also on how safe they feel due to anonymity. In this context, anonymity functions as a situational factor that encourages individuals to be more open in self-expression. This study adds to the theory by showing that sharing personal information in online spaces where people remain anonymous can be more easily adapted. This is influenced by how conversations unfold and is not strictly bound by conventional ways of developing relationships.

4.2 Reasons for Self-Disclosure to Strangers

4.2.1 Trust

Informants do not immediately disclose themselves in the initial stages of communication. Trust is built gradually through consistent interactions, polite, non-pushy responses from the other person, and a non-judgmental attitude. These attitudes make the informant feel safe and respected, encouraging them to open up further. [20] Trust is formed because the other person demonstrates consistency in communication, a non-judgmental attitude, and the ability to respond with empathy, so the informant feels safe and respected during the interaction.

4.2.2 Emotional Needs as a Confidant

The need for someone to share stories is the primary reason for informants to engage in self-disclosure. Informants feel more comfortable to express personal feelings and experiences because the other person acts as an empathetic listener without making negative judgments. [20] explained that closeness with frequent interactions makes one feel comfortable and open gradually. This is the reason that someone needs a friend to talk or share and does not judge. The absence of this in real life makes the informant more open without fear of being judged.

4.2.3 Positive Reciprocity

Informants' self-disclosure develops through reciprocity in communication. When the other person demonstrates the same openness and provides positive and empathetic feedback, the informant is encouraged to continue the communication to a deeper level. [20] Reciprocity in self-disclosure accelerates the formation of emotional closeness and increases the informant's courage to reveal themselves further, as both parties demonstrate openness in the communication process.

Various research findings also indicate that self-disclosure is not only personal but also strategic in building social networks. These findings, as explained by Altman & Taylor's Social Penetration Theory, suggest that relationships can range from very unfamiliar, close to intimate, intimate, and even very intimate. These relationships are based on the interests or needs of individuals in relation to each other [8] These findings align with previous research [29] which suggests that self-disclosure develops through specific stages and serves a specific purpose in building relationships. Based on the research results, there are three reasons: trust, emotional need to confide in others, and positive reciprocity. These findings indicate that self-disclosure doesn't occur

instantly but rather develops with the intensity of communication, which aligns with Social Penetration Theory, that states that relationships develop gradually and have specific goals in building them.

4.3 Motivation for Building Virtual Relationships

The findings revealed that relationships have emotional meaning, a sense of appreciation, and consistent support in daily life, even though the online relationship is a real and influential person in their daily lives.

4.3.1 Need for Emotional Support

Maintaining virtual relationship offers ongoing emotional support. Besides being a friend, the person they're talking to also provides a form of virtual therapy where you can express your ideas and emotions without fear of criticism. The person providing the information feels heard, valued, and less lonely because the presence of the person they're talking to helps maintain a meaningful connection, even if it's just a friendship. [20] stated that relationships feel important, even if they're just friendship. This friendship provides support similar to virtual counseling, and they acknowledge having a place to express their thoughts and feelings without fear of judgment.

4.3.2 Obtaining Instrumental Support and Academic Collaboration

Building virtual relationships is important because of the comfort, consistency, and positive feedback. Even though the relationship is only friendship, they always help each other. Furthermore, this relationship is also characterized by shared online learning activities that strengthen a sense of mutual support. [30] stated that the relationship is important because of the consistent presence in providing support, not only in emotional aspects but also in terms of practical needs. The shared field encourages collaborative interactions, such as online learning activities. Through this relationship, informants experience real benefits in the learning process, so that the virtual relationship functions not only as a friendly relationship but also as a source of relevant and ongoing instrumental support.

4.3.3 Seeking Interpersonal Compatibility

Virtual relationships are seen as a valuable form of connection because they provide a feeling of being heard and appreciated, while simultaneously reducing feelings of loneliness. From the initial stage, these interactions are undertaken with the goal of identifying compatibility with other individuals. Through intense communication and gradually developing openness, informants believe they can understand emotional compatibility and shared perspectives, enabling the relationship to go beyond mere superficial interactions. [27] stated that relationships are important because they provide a feeling of being heard, appreciated, and reduce feelings of loneliness. From the beginning of the interaction, these relationships are built on the basis of seeking compatibility, which becomes the foundation for comfort and sustainability. This sense of compatibility encourages informants to continue communicating and interpret the relationship as meaningful, even if it occurs virtually.

4.3.4 Overcoming Geographical Boundaries

Digital media is utilized as the primary means of communication due to geographical separation that limits face-to-face interaction. [21] stated that distance makes digital communication the primary means for maintaining relationships. Through virtual communication, informants are able to build and maintain closeness despite the inability to interact face-to-face. This demonstrates that geographical limitations do not completely hinder the formation of closeness, as digital media acts as a bridge in establishing interpersonal relationships.

This aligns with Social Penetration Theory, which states that humans consider every relationship and interaction with others based on the type of reward they receive. If the interaction proceeds smoothly and positively, the relationship is viewed as beneficial. This finding is also supported by previous research [29] which found that deeper self-disclosure in online network interactions can foster more intimate communication, thus achieving our goals in online interactions, from finding partners through online applications, finding friends in virtual learning, to seeking social support and improving mood in facing challenges.

Based on the research results, Anonymous Chat Telegram users interpret it as a relationship that has real emotional meaning, characterized by a feeling of being appreciated, heard, and consistent support in everyday life. This condition is in line with the Social Penetration Theory through intense communication, positive reciprocity, and a growing sense of security, virtual relationships are able to fulfill the needs for emotional support, instrumental, the search for interpersonal compatibility, and overcome geographical limitations as a sign that self-disclosure has benefits [8]. [5] said that anonymous chat is effective in expanding social networks and helping in

finding a partner. Thus, even though it takes place online, the relationship reaches a level of depth and stability that makes it meaningful and influential in the daily lives of informants.

5 Conclusion

Overall, this study successfully answered the research problem formulation and objectives on the phenomenon of self-disclosure stages among Anonymous Chat Telegram users in building virtual relationships through the Social Penetration Theory, which consists of four stages: orientation, emotional exploration, emotional exchange, and stable exchange. During the orientation stage, informants tended to limit self-disclosure to general and secure information as a form of caution. This attitude was influenced by previous negative experiences in anonymous space, such as frequent sexual harassment, commonly known as cybersex, and the vulnerability to data falsification. Therefore, the orientation stage served as an initial screening mechanism for conversation partners. Next, the relationship progressed to the emotional exploration stage, characterized by increased self-disclosure, sharing of personal experiences, and the emergence of trust due to the positive and non-judgmental responses of the interlocutor. During the emotional exchange stage, the relationship grew closer and warmer through empathy, emotional support, the use of more personal language, and the shift in communication to private chats and social media as a form of strengthening trust. At its peak, at the stable exchange stage, self-disclosure reaches its deepest and most consistent level, marked by the disclosure of sensitive emotional experiences, strong emotional attachments, and the interpretation of the relationship as a virtual friendship, virtual dating, or stable virtual intimacy.

The informants' reasons for self-disclosure to their conversation partners included trust, the need for a confidant, the emotional need to share their feelings, and positive reciprocity. The drivers for building virtual relationships included the need for emotional support, gaining instrumental support for academic collaboration, seeking interpersonal compatibility, and overcoming geographical barriers. The findings indicate that the self-disclosure phenomenon among Anonymous Chat Telegram users in building virtual relationships occurs gradually, in accordance with Social Penetration Theory, thus strengthening the theory's relevance in the context of digital media-based communication. The novelty of this study lies not only in the Telegram app users but also in the finding that the process of self-disclosure within the context of the anonymous chat feature still occurs gradually, as described by Social Penetration Theory. The process of self-disclosure does not occur instantly; it is influenced by trust management, early caution, and consistent and empathetic interaction quality. Practically, the findings provide an understanding that virtual relationships can develop into meaningful and supportive relationships if built through positive communication, mutual respect, and awareness in maintaining the boundaries of self-disclosure through the Anonymous chat feature. However, this study also confirms that virtual relationships built through this feature provide caution to users or those who want to use this feature because of the vulnerability to cybersex and data falsification.

This study has limitations. One is the limited number of informants, which means it only focuses on their experiences, not all Anonymous Chat Telegram users. Second, the study focused solely on Telegram, so the findings may not be generalizable to anonymous chat on other platforms. Future researchers are advised to examine the long-term impact of anonymous virtual relationships, particularly on emotional well-being, identity formation, and the sustainability of real-world relationships.

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