



FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND PRIVACY: THE PHENOMENON OF SOCIAL MEDIA USE OF GENERATION ALPHA

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Abstract

The development of digital technology has created a new space for the Alpha generation to express themselves freely through social media. As a generation born and raised in the digital era, they are not only proficient in using technology, but also make social media a part of their daily lives. This study aims to examine how the Alpha generation expresses themselves on social media, the extent to which they understand the importance of privacy, as well as the ethical challenges they face in the digital space. The method used is a phenomenological qualitative approach with data collection techniques through interviews, observations, and documentation of grade VII students at SMP Negeri 23 Malang. The results of the study show that the Alpha generation has a high tendency to express themselves openly on social media, but still has limited awareness of personal data protection. In addition, they are also vulnerable to the influence of negative content and consumptive lifestyles due to a lack of digital mentoring. Therefore, it is important for parents, educators, and policymakers to play an active role in providing education and shaping digital literacy from an early age in order to create a safe digital space and support the growth and development of the Alpha generation in a positive way.

Keywords: Generation Alpha; freedom of expression; social media

1. Introduction

The development of information technology and electronic media has developed very rapidly in recent years, bringing a significant influence in various aspects of life, including in the way of communication and freedom of expression. One form of the current development of information technology is by This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License. the emergence of social media as the main interaction platform, especially for the younger generation (Abdurrozak & Hilalludin Hilalludin, 2021). Social media is a digital platform that allows users to create, share, and interact with various types of content, in the form of text, images, videos, and others. Social media is designed to establish connections between individuals in a variety of contexts, without being bound by specific time, location, or topic limitations (Mayolaika et al., 2021). Kaplan and Heilin in (Zahara et al., 2023) argue that social media refers to a set of internet applications that are based on certain ideologies and technologies that drive the creation and exchange of content by users.

The development of social media not only facilitates communication, but also provides space for individuals, especially the Alpha generation, to express themselves freely. However, this freedom of expression is often faced with challenges, especially related to privacy. The Alpha generation, which is a generation born between 2010 and 2025, is an active user on social media platforms today. The Alpha generation is referred to as supercharged digital *natives* because of their ability to be very fluent in using digital technology (McCrinkle, 2021). Children of this generation will develop with a different way of playing, learning and interacting compared to children born from the previous generation, because they are born in the midst of the rapid advancement of the digital world where technology has reached a high level of intelligence and the boundaries between the physical and digital environments are increasingly fusing (Fadhilah & Rikardi, 2025).

As the use of social media by the Alpha generation increases, various issues arise related to the balance between freedom of expression and privacy protection. Many young users do not fully understand the risks associated with personal data and the long-term impact of the information they share online (Kusumaningrum & Susilo, 2022). This raises concerns about the

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potential misuse of personal data and security disturbances that can negatively impact children's psychological and social development. Therefore, it is important to identify how the Alpha generation uses social media and how they view freedom of expression and privacy in the digital context.

This study aims to analyze the phenomenon of freedom of expression and privacy in social media users in the alpha generation. The goal is to describe social media usage patterns, their understanding of privacy, as well as how they manage the boundaries between freedom of expression and the protection of personal data. In addition, this study also seeks to provide recommendations for parents, educators, and policymakers in creating a safe digital environment and supporting the positive development of the Alpha generation.

By focusing on the Alpha generation, this study fills a gap in the still limited literature on this generation's interaction with social media. Given the highly dynamic development of technology, a deep understanding of this phenomenon is urgently needed to adjust digital education strategies and child protection policies (Nurhadi & Rizki, 2023). Therefore, this research not only contributes to academic studies, but also to practical implementation in social media management among the younger generation.

2. Method

This study uses a qualitative research method in the form of a phenomenological approach to explore the phenomenon of freedom of expression and privacy among the Alpha generation in the use of social media. The design of this study was chosen because phenomenology allows researchers to understand students' subjective experiences in interacting with social media, as well as how they interpret freedom of expression and privacy in those contexts. The form of research is also chosen based on the characteristics of a phenomenon or problem. It includes the manifestation, quality, context, place of the phenomenon or problem that arises, and the perceived perspective. However, this study did not look objectively at the frequency, range, and chain of cause and effect of problems (Lejap, et al. 2025). According to Sugiyono (2019), qualitative research methods are research methods based on philosophy, which are used to research in scientific conditions (experiments) where researchers as instruments, data collection techniques and qualitative analyses emphasize more on meaning. The researcher creates a broad picture and studies vocabulary, provides a detailed report on the native speaker's perspective, and conducts research in a predefined natural environment.

The research procedure is divided into three stages, namely the planning and preparation stage, the research implementation stage, and the research results proving stage. (1) The planning and preparation stage is the initial stage carried out to prepare research by reading books, journals, articles, news sources, and readings that are directly related to the phenomenon of "social media use of the alpha generation", then preparing instruments and practical research needs. (2) The implementation stage of data collection will be carried out at SMP Negeri 23 Malang in May 2025. The research sample consisted of 7 grade VII students who met the respondent criteria, namely Alpha generation students born between 2011-2012, had at least one Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp, and YouTube account, and were active social media users for at least 4 hours per day. The data collection technique was carried out through in-depth interviews using structured interview guidelines to obtain more detailed information from respondents. The researcher also obtained data using observations of students and documentation as evidence. (3) The stage of proving research results includes the process of writing and preparing research results reports in the form of scientific papers, namely articles.

The data analysis technique in this study uses the Miles and Huberman model. The data analysis in this model contains activities, namely data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification (Sugiyono, 2019). First, at the data reduction stage, the data is reduced by summarizing and focusing the interview results with answers that match the questions and removing answers that do not match the questions during the interview. Second, at the data display stage (data presentation) is to present data that has been reduced in the form of a table. Third, the conclusion drawing/verification stage of the research results.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Results

The results of the study were obtained through the observation stage of the phenomenon by the researcher, then interviews with the respondents, and documentation as evidence. From interviews that have been conducted using 15 questions, researchers found a form of freedom of expression in the phenomenon of social media use in the alpha generation. The forms of freedom of expression and privacy in the phenomenon of social media use in *the alpha* generation are grouped into the following topics:

Table 1.1

No.	Topic	Statement
1.	Intensity and Social Media Use Patterns	<p>Based on interviews that have been conducted with 7 resource persons of grade VII students, most of them use social media every day with a duration of time varying between 3-10 hours, with a break at any time. The most widely used platform is TikTok, followed by <i>Instagram</i> and <i>WhatsApp</i>. A student with the initials C stated:</p> <p><i>"Tiktok, because I think tiktok is entertainment for me when there is free time"</i>, followed by a statement from the student with the initials N.</p> <p><i>"What I often use is tiktok, because if you download TikTok from the first time you download it, you are immediately addicted, so I always take the initiative to open the tiktok application. The content is interesting, and there are usually short dramas, so I like to watch."</i></p> <p>This habit shows that social media has become a routine in daily life. They use social media for various purposes such as entertainment media, following trends, communication, and used to find references for study purposes and schoolwork.</p>

2. Freedom of Expression in Social Media	<p>Based on the interviews that have been conducted, respondents feel that freedom of expression on social media is important, but it cannot be separated from various considerations and limitations. The majority of students feel quite free to express themselves through uploading content/trends on TikTok, sharing personal moments, or commenting on other people's uploads. However, this freedom is not without obstacles. Most students also admitted that they had doubts about uploading content because they were afraid of getting negative responses or comments from others. Students with the initials R state: <i>"Yes, I feel free, as long as the post does not harm others"</i>, continued a statement from a student with the initials J about his doubts in uploading photos. <i>"Ever, every time I wanted to post a photo, I was afraid that if someone didn't like me I would make bad comments about myself"</i></p> <p>Students' perceptions of social media as a safe space for opinions are also diverse. They consider social media not to be a completely safe space for free speech. Although technically possible, socially they feel vulnerable to blasphemy, or excessive dissent. Students with the initials N argue: <i>"If it is on social media, although we can freely express our opinions, but I don't think so, because when someone else sees our comments, we are afraid that someone will agree and misunderstand, but in real life we can explain more clearly what the meaning of our words is"</i>. Students with the initials K give a balanced view: <i>"I think social media provides space for opinions but is not completely safe,... But on the other hand, there are also many risks such as negative comments, misunderstandings and even cyber bullying."</i></p> <p>Then, in responding to other people's opinions on social media, the majority of students showed an open attitude. They consider that everyone has the right to express their opinions, as long as they are not delivered in a rude way or detrimental to others.</p>
3. Privacy and Security on Social Media	<p>Overall, students have shown a high awareness of the importance of privacy on social media. They understand that personal information that is spread can carry risks such as data misuse, bullying/cyberbullying, and even unlimited information can invite strangers. The student with the initials K said: <i>"If we are not careful, personal information such as location and personal data is often misused."</i></p>

	<p>Even some students also experience unpleasant experiences on social media, in the form of <i>stalking</i>, negative comments, and suspicious interactions with strangers. Students with the initials N shared their personal experiences, <i>"I used to chat with an Indian I didn't know, at first it was good, but after a long time he asked for constant video calls and spam... I was scared and I was scared to death."</i></p> <p>In regulating who can see their content, student responses vary widely. Some admit that they have enabled <i>the private account</i> feature or filtered comments. However, some others admitted that they did not limit access to posts too much, but were still careful with the content. The students also have a proposal, namely additional rules that emphasize comfort, protection and filtering out negative comments.</p>
4. Social Impact and Psychological	<p>The majority of students stated that social media had more positive impact on them. Educational content, funny videos, and real-life inspiration are the main reasons students feel benefited by social media. The student with the initials K revealed: <i>"Social media has more positive impacts... I can connect with friends, get informed, and inspired. However, I realized that there were negative impacts such as being easily distracted and sometimes feeling less confident because I often compared myself to others."</i></p> <p>The student with the initials N added, <i>"If it's positive, I can get a lot of motivation, there are also many teachers who make educational content on TikTok, so if I don't understand the material at school, I can see their content"</i></p> <p>However, awareness of the negative impact also remains, some students mentioned the negative impact of using social media such as forgetting time, laziness, and social pressure due to the standard of living displayed on social media.</p> <p>Most students also admitted that they once felt like the figure they saw on <i>Instagram</i>, <i>TikTok</i>, or <i>YouTube</i>. It arises from a sense of admiration for the lifestyle, creativity, or achievements of their favorite creators' content.</p>
5. Content Identification and Preferences	<p>Students show a wide range of content preferences, ranging from light entertainment to content related to personal goals and inspiration. Many of them choose content creators not just for entertainment, but also because of its relevance to their dreams, lifestyles, and future desires. For example, from the student with the initials N stating: <i>"Jalin Siu... Because I saw him working, the editing was cool, the content was really effortless. I want to be like him, even if I have to be prepared for it."</i></p> <p>The student with the initials K added, <i>"My favorite account is vibi'daily on youtube, because the content is very entertaining, especially the daily content which is light but full of funny stories and small inspirations"</i></p> <p>So that in this case, students not only consume content passively, but also make it a motivation in forming their identity and the direction of personal interests.</p>

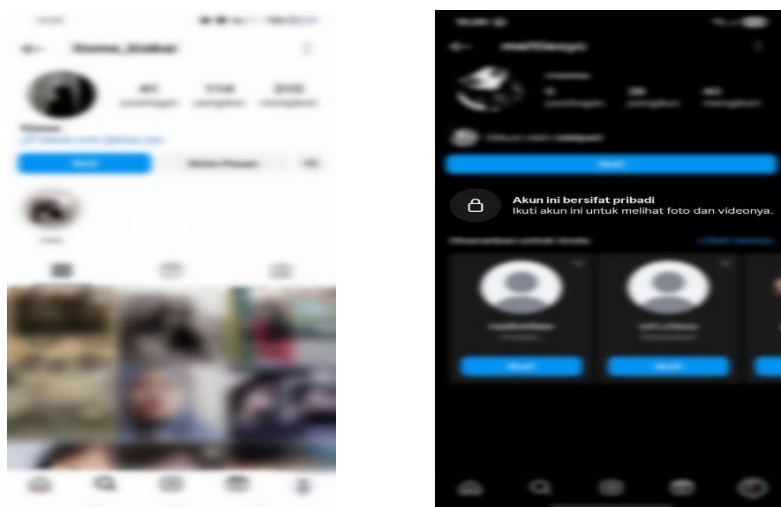


Figure 1.1 Social Media Resource Persons

3.2 Discussion

3.2.1 Forms of Expression of Generation Alpha on Social Media

According to Iswatiningsih, et al. (2024), the Alpha Generation is a generation that is very familiar with the internet. A generation that is very familiar with digital technology, as well as a generation that claims to be very smart compared to previous generations. It is no wonder why the majority of children today who are still teenagers are able or understand using *mobile phones* easily, either to play or communicate (Cindana & Sutarini, 2022). The Alpha generation, who grew up with digital technology from an early age, showed various forms of freedom of expression on social media. They actively upload photos, videos, and opinions through social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube. Many of them are used to using social media as a means to show their interests, hobbies, and opinions on social issues (Budi & Ula, 2024).

Based on the results of the study, most Gen Alpha respondents tend to feel comfortable expressing themselves openly in the digital space. This shows that social media has become the main medium in channeling the formation of their identity, especially those in adolescence. They also tend to have high curiosity, so they are easily adaptive to the technological features contained in social media. Most like the filter features, *sound effects*, *gifts* and cute emojis that support their freedom of expression on social media. Generation Alpha who use digital language to mark their affiliation with specific social groups, express cultural values, and keep up with social media trends. Many teenagers try to follow trends on social media, ranging from lifestyle to *style* (Iswatiningsih, 2024).

Generation Alpha also likes to show their interests and hobbies by customizing the content they see on social media. They tend to follow the social media accounts of famous artists or *content creators* that attract their attention to a particular field or talent. Not infrequently, this also gives the Alpha gene motivation to develop or have hopes to be able to match the talents or interests pursued by famous artists or stars that they follow on social media accounts (Nasrullah et al., 2023). The Alpha generation also has a high interest in new things. By imitating the artists or video content they see, they can easily try to participate in making their daily vlog content or videos that they can upload and disseminate to the cybercommunity.

3.2.2 Awareness of Privacy and Personal Data Protection

Awareness of personal data security is one of the most important parts of using social media. In today's digital era, personal data has become a very valuable asset and vulnerable to various threats, so it is important for every individual to understand the risks that arise from negligence in maintaining privacy, such as data theft and misuse of personal data (Rozikin &

Kamalia, 2025). Despite being active on social media, the awareness of the Alpha generation on the importance of maintaining privacy is still relatively low. Many of them do not fully understand the risks that can arise from sharing personal information openly, such as full names, locations, and daily activities. Some of them are not even aware of the account privacy settings available on the platforms they use. Sometimes they just understand the use but don't really understand about personal data protection on social media. The role of parents and digital mentoring is crucial in this regard, as Gen Alpha is still in the developmental stage and does not yet have full control over their own digital security (Ramadani, et al. 2023).

The alpha generation who are active with the digital world are sometimes unaware of the dangers that lurk in using social media. The many cases of fraud, online loans, and information theft involving platforms and the online world show how important privacy and personal data protection are that Alpha genes need to learn. You need to be wise in managing your social media, such as not sharing personal data on social media, changing *passwords if you feel it is no longer safe, actively checking your profile and personal page on social media.*

However, based on the results of interviews that have been conducted, Generation Alpha has shown a high level of awareness of the importance of maintaining privacy and protecting personal data on social media. Most respondents have been aware of the potential risks that can arise from negligence in maintaining privacy.

3.2.3 The Positive and Negative Impacts of Freedom of Expression

Based on research conducted by Nabila and Muhammad Irwan, it is shown that social media has a significant impact on freedom of expression, both positive and negative (Zahara et al., 2023). Seen from the positive side, social media makes it easier for individuals to express themselves and earn income through selling online, so that it becomes viral and famous. Meanwhile, the negative side is that social media can manipulate public opinion through algorithms that present certain information, as well as become a place of insults, harassment, and threats for those who have controversial views. In line with the opinion of Anne Weber in (Herlina, 2022), she emphasizes the importance of balance because freedom of expression can be a threat to the right to respect the privacy of individuals or groups.

Freedom of expression through social media has a significant positive and negative impact on the Alpha generation. They can experience positive benefits from social media such as getting access to find information easily, educational content, getting sources of motivation and inspiration, and social connectivity. However, on the other hand, there are also negative impacts that are also felt such as potential misunderstandings, threats, hoax news, and disruptions to time and productivity. In some cases, freedom of expression can also cause conflict if it is not balanced with awareness of digital communication ethics.

3.2.4 Ethical and Regulatory Challenges in the Digital World

In this digital era, the alpha generation has such a big challenge related to self-understanding and regulation. It is necessary to apply a wise attitude in sorting and selecting information on social media, as well as in its use in order to minimize the potential adverse impact that will be received (Swandhina & Maulana, 2022). The first challenge is Individualism. They spend more time with devices and the internet than interacting directly in the real world. They usually spend their own time doing online activities. Individualistic and self-centered traits can emerge over time. They are not sensitive, empathetic, or caring about others. However, a sense of empathy and togetherness is very important to build children in socializing and having good character.

The second challenge is consumptive. Advertising and digital commercial content always accompany alpha gen children from an early age, which easily influences their consumptive behavior. Children of the Alpha generation are easily lulled by the seduction of advertising to buy or own certain goods and services. These materialistic values and consumptive lifestyles can damage alpha character if not controlled from the start. Nevertheless, the third challenge, the decline in morality values, is inevitable from the Alpha generation. The big challenge is exposure to digital commercial content. Digital content is widespread on the internet and is unlimited. Sometimes, that non-educational content is more engaging and more accessible to children (Ain, et al. 2021). They can easily and freely access pornographic and

violent content through their social media. This condition is very concerning and is a real challenge to the formation of the moral character of the alpha generation. Ethical values and noble morals can be gradually eroded if we do not stop and inform our children early.

Another challenge in the use of social media by the Alpha generation is how to balance the right to expression with the protection of privacy. According to Hidayat, et al. (2023), the lack of a mature understanding of digital ethics has led to various problems, such as unwitting violations of other people's privacy. In addition, the regulations and policies of social media platforms are still not fully able to accommodate the needs and protection of children of the age of users. Therefore, a joint effort from families, schools, and the government is needed in forming adequate digital literacy from an early age.

According to Sakoan (2024), currently children, including the alpha generation, are very familiar with various digital platforms such as *Youtube*, *podcasts* and social media. This condition can actually be used to convey positive content for the formation of their character. Providing digital content that is educational and age-appropriate for children, such as learning videos, digital books, educational games, and others. But it uses *parental control* apps to restrict content. With the right use, digital technology can actually support the growth and development of alpha generation children to be more optimal. Therefore, parents have an important role in the process of monitoring children to be more careful about the adverse effects caused by social media which can also affect children's moral behavior and character.

3.2.5 Implications with Guidance and Counseling

Based on the results of the interview, it can be seen that social media has become part of their daily lives, in fact they use social media up to 10 hours a day. According to Morf and Rhodewalt in (Saripah et al., 2023), social media provides a forum for its users to express themselves, form and maintain their desired self-image, and voluntarily share personal information. They use social media as entertainment, a source of information, a place of expression, as well as a social space that shapes their identity. However, the use of social media is also accompanied by challenges such as social pressure, anxiety about negative comments, doubts in expression, and potential privacy disturbances. This shows that Guidance and Counseling (GC) services in schools need to be actively transformed to follow the digital reality of students. GC teachers or counselors must raise digital issues as part of the topic of Counseling Guidance services in schools, such as:

a. Providing Classical Guidance Services with the Theme of Digital Literacy

GC teachers or counselors can provide material on social media ethics, time management, privacy protection, as well as issues regarding hoaxes and the dangers of *oversharing* on social media. This material can be packaged in an attractive form with various techniques or approaches that exist in guidance and counseling.

b. Psychological Counseling

In the interview results, there are students who still experience fear of judgments or negative comments from others that often appear in social interactions, including in social media. Problems like this can be handled by providing interventions in the form of individual or group counseling services so that students can grow confidence, assertive communication, and emotional management. So in this case, counseling is not only focused on handling trauma, but also aims to build a more inclusive social media culture, by instilling empathy and positive communication skills as the basis for *the alpha generation* in undergoing the complexity of interactions in the digital world (Harahap & Sampurna, 2024).

c. Digital Literacy as an Advanced Program for Guidance and Counseling

GC teachers or counselors also need to hold digital literacy programs that are carried out periodically in collaboration with ICT teachers and homeroom teachers. Students can be invited to create a social media code of conduct, create positive content, or digital campaigns that can be published in the school environment.

d. The Utilization of Social Media as a Means of Guidance and Counseling

To get closer to students, GC teachers can take advantage of platforms on social media such as creating school guidance and counseling Instagram accounts and can share content such as

motivational content, study tips, emotional management, or inspirational stories. This makes guidance and counseling services feel closer and more relevant for alpha generation students.

e. The Role of Guidance and Counseling as a Link between Parents and Schools Some students have experienced bad experiences on social media such as negative comments, suspicious messages, etc. So GC teachers can provide education to parents by holding seminars, leaflets, or meetings with parents who discuss the importance of digital assistance at home and the use of parental control.

4. Conclusion

The phenomenon of freedom of expression and privacy in the use of social media by the Alpha generation reflects a new dynamic in today's digital life. This generation that grew up in a high-tech environment showed an incredible ability to adapt to social media features and use them as a means to form an identity, show interest, and express themselves creatively. However, behind these sophisticated digital capabilities, there are still significant challenges in terms of awareness of the importance of personal data protection and digital ethics. Although most of the Alpha generation has shown signs of privacy awareness, it still requires strong mentoring from parents, educators, and the surrounding environment for them to be able to use social media wisely and responsibly. With Understanding the forms of expression that emerge, the level of privacy awareness, and the ethical challenges faced by this generation, this research emphasizes the importance of comprehensive digital literacy and collaboration between families, schools, and policymakers. Efforts to create a safe, healthy, and educational digital environment are strategic steps to equip the Alpha generation to be not only technologically capable, but also morally and socially resilient in the face of the ever-evolving digital era.

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