
The Process of Self-Disclosure in Female Roblox Players' Interpersonal Communication in Developing Online to Offline Cross-Gender Friendships

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to understand the process of self-disclosure in interpersonal communication between female Roblox players and their male friends, beginning in the digital space and developing into real-world friendships. This study uses a qualitative approach with a single case study design based on multiple units of analysis, in which the single case examined is the phenomenon of self-disclosure on the Roblox platform as a whole, with three pairs of informants (one female Roblox player and one male friend she met through the platform) serving as units of analysis. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and non-participant observation of personal conversations between informants, analyzed with the aid of NVivo. The findings reveal five main results: Roblox functions as a safe space constructed differently by each informant according to her psychological barriers; self-disclosure develops gradually from shallow to personal topics as trust increases; men tend to open up first, yet women initiate the move to a more private platform; face-to-face meetings function as a relational bridge that verifies trust built online; and the resulting friendships are unexpected. This study contributes to self-disclosure research by showing that digital self-disclosure is actively constructed by users according to their own psychological needs.

Keywords: case study; cross-gender friendship; interpersonal communication; roblox; self-disclosure

INTRODUCTION

The development of digital communication technology has fundamentally transformed how individuals build and maintain interpersonal relationships. If in the past introductions and friendship formation largely depended on physical encounters in conventional social spaces such as schools, workplaces, or neighborhoods, today online games, social media, and

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various other digital platforms have become new arenas where these relationships germinate. This shift carries significant consequences, particularly for individuals who have felt hindered in building relationships through conventional channels due to various psychological factors, such as social anxiety or lack of confidence. For this group, the digital space potentially serves as an alternative pathway that enables them to build interpersonal closeness without having to face the pressures they typically experience in face-to-face interactions.

Roblox, as one of the online game platforms with a massive and diverse user base, has become one of the digital spaces where this phenomenon can be clearly observed. Unlike general social media that centers on content exchange, Roblox offers real-time co-play experiences that create a more organic and sustained interaction context. This context is worth examining further, particularly regarding how women with psychological barriers in interacting with the opposite sex can utilize this space to build closeness that, in some cases, develops into face-to-face meetings in the real world. This phenomenon underlies this research: how the process of self-disclosure can occur more freely in digital spaces compared to face-to-face spaces, and simultaneously how such disclosure ultimately bridges relationships from online to offline.

Women's difficulties in interacting with the opposite sex have a fairly strong empirical basis. Azar (in Levpušček, 2004) noted that women tend to be more anxious than men when faced with situations of meeting the opposite sex. A cross-cultural study involving respondents from 18 countries found that interaction with the opposite sex is one of the social situations that most triggers anxiety, second only to situations of facing criticism or embarrassment, and women consistently reported higher anxiety levels than men across all countries and age groups studied (Lewandowski, 2024). This finding reinforces the earlier data from Azar (in Levpušček, 2004) cited above, while also showing that women's anxiety in interacting with the opposite sex is not a local or isolated symptom, but a pattern that is consistent across cultures and ages. Domestically, data from the Indonesian Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection shows that of children with low self-confidence, approximately 56% are girls, a condition also associated with cultural norms that limit girls' mobility outside the home (Tahniah, 2019).

This finding is further reinforced by a report from Tahniah (2019), which highlights that the confidence crisis among women is often triggered by a double standard in society, where women are expected to appear physically and behaviourally flawless, yet are given little room to express those imperfections. This report affirms that women's low self-confidence in social interaction is not merely an individual issue, but a reflection of unrealistic social expectations that women continuously experience across various contexts of life, including in interactions with the opposite sex. This condition is what then drives some women to seek safer alternative spaces, such as digital platforms, to build social relationships without the burden of physical judgment and social expectations.

Self-disclosure warrants dedicated attention in this study because it functions as the foundation of interpersonal trust: individuals feel safe disclosing themselves only when they can expect no rejection or misuse of that information, and it is this trust, built

cumulatively through consistent interaction, that subsequently enables the closeness through which relationships are able to communicate more openly and honestly (DeVito, 2013). Self-disclosure was chosen as the primary focus of this study because of its position as the most fundamental unit of analysis in the formation of interpersonal relationships. Unlike general interpersonal communication that encompasses many dimensions, self-disclosure is an observable mechanism whose stages can be concretely traced, from topics shared, timing of disclosure, to the responses received (Jourard, 1971; DeVito, 2013). Without understanding the detailed process of self-disclosure, it is difficult to explain how cross-gender friendships that begin merely from playing together can develop into real-world meetings.

It is important to note that social behavioral tendencies formed in digital spaces do not automatically disconnect from face-to-face behavior. Suler (2004), through the concept of the online disinhibition effect, explains that increased openness online can be temporary or become a more permanent interaction pattern, depending on how individuals integrate their digital experiences into their self-concept. In other words, the social behavioral characteristics a person displays online have the potential to become a reflection, even practice, for the same behavior when meeting face-to-face. This connection is one of the primary concerns of this research: the extent to which the comfort and openness built by female Roblox players online can carry over and influence how they interact face-to-face after offline meetings occur.

The selection of Roblox as the research object, compared to other online game platforms, is based on its structurally significant differences. Roblox hosts more than 40 million experiences created by its users, with 58% of its 79.5 million daily active users under 16 years old, making it one of the digital spaces with very high demographic diversity compared to closed-content-based platforms such as Mobile Legends or other competitive games (Choi, Choi, & Seering, 2025). Unlike conventional online games whose servers are generally formed through closed matchmaking systems based on player level or rank, Roblox servers are more open: any player, regardless of age, cultural background, or geographic region, can freely join the same experience. This structure increases the chance of encounters between players from diverse backgrounds, as occurred with the three pairs of informants in this study. In addition, Roblox provides a broader spectrum of interaction features than online games in general, including proximity-based voice chat (vocal conversation audible only to avatars in close proximity), text chat, and deeply customizable avatar-based interaction. This combination of open servers and rich interaction features is what makes Roblox a relevant medium for examining the process of cross-gender self-disclosure more richly than other online game platforms.

The connection between self-disclosure and interaction within online games is also supported by empirical findings. Research by Lo, Wang, and Fang (2005) examining physical interpersonal relationships and social anxiety in online game players found a link between interaction patterns within games and players' social anxiety levels. Game elements such as play groups, communication features, and co-play activities also encourage self-disclosure and reciprocity—two key elements in relationship formation—allowing players to develop

deep relationships (strong ties) from increasing the chance of encounters between players from diverse backgrounds.

Previous research has touched on several aspects relevant to this topic, though from different perspectives. Gabriela (2023) examined friendship formation in online game communities, Azizah et al. (2024) studied self-disclosure patterns of social media users in a more general context, and Salsabila et al. (2025) explored trust dynamics in online relationships. However, these studies have not specifically examined the process of self-disclosure by women with specific psychological barriers in cross-gender interaction within online games, nor how this process bridges relationships from digital to physical spaces. This gap is what this research seeks to fill, formulating the research question: how does the self-disclosure process unfold in the interpersonal communication of female Roblox players to build cross-gender friendships from online to offline?

This research has two primary objectives. First, to describe how Roblox functions as a space that facilitates self-disclosure for women with psychological barriers in interacting with the opposite sex, including the specific mechanisms that make this platform feel safer than face-to-face interaction. Second, to understand how the self-disclosure process that begins digitally ultimately bridges the relationship to face-to-face meetings in the real world, including the gender dynamics that play a role. These two objectives are important not only academically, to enrich the study of mediated interpersonal communication, but also practically, as input for women with similar psychological barriers and for stakeholders interested in designing more inclusive digital spaces for users.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Self-Disclosure, Social Penetration, and Face to Face Communication

Self-disclosure is defined by Jourard (1971) as the process of voluntarily revealing personal information about oneself to others. DeVito (2013) expanded this definition by emphasizing that self-disclosure is a form of communication involving risk, because the information disclosed is personal and has the potential to affect how a person is perceived by others. DeVito (2013) also identified several dimensions that form self-disclosure, including the amount of information disclosed (amount), the valence or positive-negative nature of the information (valence), the level of honesty and accuracy of disclosure (honesty), the intent behind disclosure (intent), and the context and timing when disclosure occurs (context). These dimensions are relevant for understanding why the self-disclosure process in the three informant pairs in this study unfolded with different patterns and speeds, even though they all started from the same platform.

Such self-disclosure does not appear instantly but develops following certain patterns and stages as intimacy between individuals increases. To explain this developmental pattern, this study uses Altman and Taylor's (1973) Social Penetration Theory, which describes self-disclosure as a layered process resembling an onion (onion metaphor), moving from the

breadth of topics discussed (breadth) to the depth of information disclosed (depth) as trust between individuals increases. In the early stages of a relationship, individuals tend to discuss broad yet shallow topics, such as interests and daily activities; as trust increases, the conversation topics narrow but become increasingly personal and risky to disclose. This process is reciprocal: self-disclosure from one party tends to trigger reciprocating disclosure from the other party (Altman & Taylor, 1973)—a dynamic clearly evident in all three informant pairs in this study.

Self-disclosure in face-to-face communication has different characteristics from self-disclosure in digital spaces. In face-to-face interaction, self-disclosure occurs alongside the presence of nonverbal cues such as eye contact, facial expressions, and body language, which directly affect how personal messages are received by the conversation partner (Jourard, 1971). Physical presence also presents pressure in the form of unavoidable visual assessment, unlike digital communication that provides time lag and control over self-representation (Turkle, 2011). Face-to-face self-disclosure is also synchronous and cannot be repeated (DeVito, 2013): once personal information is disclosed, individuals cannot edit or retract it as in text-based communication. These characteristics make face-to-face communication a context that is structurally more demanding of psychological readiness compared to digital communication, while also explaining why offline meetings in this study served as a trust verification point that no digital space could replace.

Interpersonal Communication, and Friendship Relationships

Self-disclosure in this study cannot be separated from the broader framework of interpersonal communication. DeVito (2013) defines interpersonal communication as communication that occurs between individuals who know each other as persons, not merely as social role performers, involving openness, empathy, trust, and intimacy that develops over time. Aligned with this view, Miller and Steinberg (1975) state that interpersonal communication is communication that occurs within an interpersonal relationship, where messages are conveyed based on personal knowledge about the conversation partner, not solely based on social roles. The relationships formed among the three informant pairs in this study reflect this shift: from merely fellow Roblox players acting as teammates, to individuals who know each other personally.

The relationships formed ultimately culminate in friendship, which according to Setiadi (2017) is a relationship between two people who help each other, share feelings, information, and time, trust each other, respect each other, and support each other physically, ego-wise, and socially to achieve closeness. Santrock (2014) identifies six functions of friendship: companionship, stimulation, physical support, ego support, social comparison, and intimacy. These six functions were consistently identified in the relationships of the three informant pairs, from companionship through co-play activities to ego support through crisis moments as elaborated in the results and discussion section.

Interactivity in Digital Communication on Roblox

Roblox is an online game platform that allows users to create and play virtual worlds (experiences) created by other users simultaneously, with persistent virtual worlds that continue to exist and develop even when a player is not actively playing, enabling players to establish repeated interactions with the same individuals over a period of time.

Player interactions on Roblox are also explained through Rafaeli's (1988) concept of interactivity, defined as the extent to which messages in a communication sequence are interrelated, particularly how far later messages respond to previous ones; Rafaeli classified interactivity into non-reactive, reactive, and interactive, with the level rising along with responsiveness to prior messages (McQuail, 2004). McMillan and Hwang (2002) add that interactivity involves three overlapping constructs—communication direction, user control, and time—so interactive media allow two-way communication, user-controlled navigation, and efficient information access, meaning interactivity encompasses not just the presence of responses but individual control over the manner, timing, and depth of engagement (Richard & Lynn, 2008). In multiplayer games like Roblox, McMillan (in Boer, 2013) divides interactivity into user-to-user, user-to-system, and user-to-document forms, of which user-to-user interactivity—players' messages or topics receiving responses or reactions from a partner—is most relevant here. Wohn (2019) adds that co-play environments create more equal communication among players than general social interaction, since playing places players in relatively equal positions regardless of their real-world backgrounds—relevant to why all six informants could build closeness unburdened by background differences that might have been barriers offline.

This link was directly reflected in the data: CA explained that "*the more we interacted and responded to each other while playing, comfort and trust developed too*" (Informant 1, CA), while NP recalled that RD's attentive, never-dismissive responses let her gradually "*say things that might be hard to say directly*" (Informant 3, NP)—evidence that interactivity actively drove disclosure forward rather than merely accompanying it. Features such as voice chat, text chat, customizable avatars, co-play activities within the same map, and away-from-keyboard (AFK) options become structural elements that open space for various forms of interaction, from shallow to deep, while also being key features that were interpreted differently by each informant in this study as elaborated in the results and discussion section.

METHODOLOGY

Approach and Research Design

To avoid any ambiguity on this point, it is stated explicitly here: this research is a single-case study, not a multiple-case comparative study. The three informant pairs function as embedded units of analysis situated within one overarching case, rather than as three separate cases being compared against one another; this design and its rationale are elaborated further below. This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach, which seeks to

describe social phenomena through words rather than numbers, aiming to summarize conditions occurring in various social situations within the society being studied (Bungin, 2007). This approach was chosen because the research emphasizes subjective experiences and meanings formed by individuals in the communication process, which cannot be adequately captured through quantitative approaches. Within this qualitative approach, the research uses a case study design (Yin, 2014), the most appropriate strategy when the research question is in the form of "how," the researcher has no control over the behavior of the subjects studied, and the research focus is a contemporary phenomenon whose boundaries with its surrounding context cannot be clearly separated (Yin, 2014). These three conditions are relevant here: the problem is framed as "how the self-disclosure process unfolds," the researcher cannot and does not attempt to control how informants interact on Roblox or in real life, and the phenomenon studied—cross-gender friendships originating from online games—is contemporary and inseparable from its surrounding socio-technological context (gender norms, youth digital culture, platform characteristics).

In terms of the number of cases studied, this research uses a single case study design with multiple units of analysis, or embedded single-case design (Yin, 2014). The single case in this research is the phenomenon of self-disclosure in interpersonal communication of female Roblox players to build cross-gender friendships from online to offline. Although there are three pairs of informants, each with different characteristics and barriers, they are all within the same case context: the self-disclosure process occurring on the Roblox platform. In other words, the case studied is the overall communication phenomenon on Roblox, not each informant pair as a separate case.

The differences in barriers among the three female informants (CA, NP, LU) serve as units of analysis within that single case, rather than as a basis for dividing the research into several cases. This embedded single-case design allows the researcher to explore variation in experiences from several different informants while remaining within the same case, so that the resulting findings remain focused on the central phenomenon being studied (Yin, 2014). The design was selected because the research focus is not comparing informant pairs as different cases, but rather understanding in depth how the self-disclosure process unfolds on Roblox, with variations in informant experiences enriching understanding of that case. The case study method also maintains the complexity and particularity of each unit of analysis, rather than reducing them to variables separated from their context, so that the unique dynamics of each informant pair—such as the disclosure leap phenomenon in NI or the slow burn pattern in NP-RD—remain visible and can be interpreted as part of a unified phenomenon.

Research Informants

Table 1. Informant Profiles

Pair	Informant (Initials)	Gender	Age	Roblox Play Duration	Initial Characteristics/Barriers
1	1 (CA)	Female	20	4 years	Tendency to be reserved, rarely initiates direct acquaintance with males
	2 (RA)	Male	20	2 years	Friend known by CA through Roblox
2	3 (NP)	Female	22	7 months	Cautious and lacks confidence in briefing opposite sex
	4 (RD)	Male	20	6 months	Friend known by NP through Roblox
3	5 (LU)	Female	23	10 months	Uncomfortable with direct acquaintance, careful in giving trust
	6 (NI)	Male	29	11 months	Friend known by LU through Roblox, open personality

Source: Authors' own elaboration (2026)

In brief, the six informants have diverse backgrounds. CA is a 20-year-old female with no fixed occupation yet and has been shy since childhood; her partner, RA, is a sixth-semester university student with an outgoing personality who actively approached CA when he noticed she often kept to herself in their roleplay group. NP is a final-year university student who also serves as a division head in a volunteer organization; her partner, RD, currently working, is known as a patient and unhurried person who built NP's trust through consistent small gestures of attention. LU is a 23-year-old female working as a Research and Development Lead at an artificial intelligence company and carefully maintains her professional image; her partner, NI, working in marketing, is known as an open and straightforward person who often becomes a confidant for friends.

Data Collection Techniques

The informant search process was conducted through TikTok social media. The researcher uploaded a video on a personal TikTok account inviting potential informants and stating the required criteria; the video received an enormous response, with total views exceeding 280,000 and approximately 1,800 comments, leading many potential informants to reach out through comments and direct messages. The researcher then screened respondents with a series of pre-interview questions to verify they truly met the criteria, including confirming that male informants were indeed the friendship partners of the specified female informants, ultimately arriving at three pairs of informants who met all research criteria.

Data collection then continued through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted online via Zoom Meeting, using a prepared guide as a reference while informants remained free to elaborate. In total, three sessions were carried out between May 13–14, 2026, each lasting fifty minutes to nearly two hours; each pair was interviewed together so both parties

could spontaneously complement each other's answers and the researcher could observe their interaction directly. The researcher also conducted non-participant observation of personal Discord chat recordings the informants were willing to share, used to verify and enrich interview statements, including the moment of sharing Spotify links that became the starting point for platform migration in the LU-NI pair. All shared records were obtained with the informants' full consent and handled with attention to their privacy. Secondary data came from relevant articles, journals, and books, used to enrich interpretation of the primary field data.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldana—data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification—with the aid of NVivo software. In the condensation stage, the researcher selected all interview transcripts and personal chat excerpts from the six informants, then coded statements related to the self-disclosure process, interaction barriers, and relational dynamics into an NVivo coding matrix, including nodes such as barriers, dimensions of self-disclosure, Roblox interactivity, platform migration, and trust factors. The coded data was then abstracted into inductive categories emerging from the data itself rather than categories derived directly from theory names, preserving the integrity of the qualitative findings. This abstraction process formed the five main findings presented in the results and discussion section.

In the data display stage, the abstraction results were arranged into horizontalizing tables so statements from the six informants could be systematically compared based on the same indicators, for example barrier types, root problems, and safe space mechanisms. The final stage, conclusion drawing and verification, compared patterns among the three units of analysis to identify consistent and varying elements within the single case studied. Data validity was strengthened through triangulation (Famiza, 2021): theoretical triangulation, comparing field findings with relevant theoretical frameworks (self-disclosure, social penetration, SCOT, and online disinhibition effect) to avoid bias toward a single perspective, and source triangulation, comparing interview statements with observation of personal conversations between informants

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Roblox as a Safe Space Constructed Differently

The three female informants consistently described Roblox as a space that felt safer than face-to-face interaction for initiating acquaintance with the opposite sex, though the types of barriers they experienced differed. *"For me it's quite difficult. Especially because people's first impression when meeting directly is usually about physical appearance"* (Informant 1, CA). For CA, visual assessment of physical appearance was the primary source of anxiety that appeared even before conversation began. NP described her barrier as a lack of experience: *"Since childhood I've never had friends who are guys. Being friends with girls I can still manage, but with guys there's nothing like that"* (Informant 3, NP). LU explained

her barrier as anxiety about making the wrong first impression: "*Afraid to approach first. Afraid to give the wrong first impression*" (Informant 5, LU).

Further exploration of the root causes behind these three types of barriers revealed two different categories. CA and NP fell into the trauma-based category, where barriers stem from traumatic past experiences. CA revealed that she had been a victim of verbal bullying in childhood without fully realizing it at the time, while NP associated her barriers with pressure as the first-born daughter and family issues that culminated in being bullied by friends. This finding aligns with Voncken et al. (2020), who found that individuals with negative social experiences in the past tend to reduce their level of self-disclosure as a form of self-protection. Unlike both, LU fell into the anxiety-based category; her barriers did not stem from external factors or specific trauma, but purely from fear of negative evaluation of the image she presented to others.

When asked why Roblox felt safer, each informant gave reasons aligned with their respective barrier types, forming the core of the research finding. CA explained that "*if we get to know each other on Roblox, we don't need to assess physical appearance first,*" adding that "*avatars make me more confident, free to express without fear of being judged*" (Informant 1, CA). For CA, Roblox felt safe because it eliminated the physical assessment mechanism that was the source of her anxiety. NP interpreted Roblox's safety differently: "*Every person interacting on Roblox is not seen personally directly, we are avatars. Social background, education is unknown*" (Informant 3, NP). She also added that "*the avatar can be the desired form. I have a big body, but the avatar makes me imagine my ideal self,*" showing that avatar anonymity for NP served a dual function: hiding her social identity while also representing the ideal self she aspired to. LU, consistent with her anxiety-based barrier about making the wrong impression, found safety in technical features that gave her control: "*If uncomfortable, we can pretend to be AFK. We can be more secure,*" adding, "*We can be ourselves or even someone else. We don't have to play pretend*" (Informant 5, LU).

This variation in meaning-making of identical features is better explained through the SCOT approach than by views that treat the medium as automatically determining user experience uniformly. Avatar features, anonymity, and AFK options are technical structures Roblox provides equally to all users (possibility space), yet the three female informants actively constructed different meanings from them according to their own psychological needs: CA constructed the absence of physical display as removing assessment pressure, NP constructed anonymity as an identity hider and ideal self-representation container, and LU constructed AFK as a control mechanism over her engagement. Roblox does not create a sense of safety through a single mechanism applying to everyone, but provides a possibility space interpreted differently by each user group (interpretive flexibility, Pinch & Bijker, 1984).

This condition aligns with research by Vella, Klarkowski, Turkay, and Johnson (2020), which found that gender identity concealment by female players is a strategy to avoid negative experiences such as misogynistic targeting and stereotype threat, often experienced in online games—confirming NP's habit of deliberately separating her Roblox identity from her real life as a form of self-protection. Kurniawati's (2026) study on self-disclosure among

young adults forming relationships on Roblox similarly highlighted that the platform allows users to display their ideal self through avatars, significantly reducing social anxiety and increasing courage to initiate interaction, especially for users with a history of negative social experiences—reinforcing data that for NP, the avatar is not merely a means of expression, but a representation of the ideal self she aspires to. Roblox also provides what can be called a neutral entry point, a communication entry point that is neutral because all interactions depart from co-play activities rather than a deliberate intention to get acquainted—none of the informants opened conversations by explicitly introducing themselves. This allows communication to grow without the social pressure that was typically the greatest challenge for the three female informants.

The Gradually Developing Self-Disclosure Process

The self-disclosure process in all three informant pairs unfolded gradually, moving from shallow topics such as gameplay conversations to increasingly personal topics as trust increased, consistent with the breadth-to-depth pattern explained by Social Penetration Theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973). This study identified three different peak disclosure moments for each female informant—points where deepest topic disclosure finally occurred. The first was crisis, an emotionally low condition that drives someone to seek a listener. CA recounted: *"I chose to tell him about that when I was really down. At that time, I really needed to be listened to. At that moment I felt only he could be a listener"* (Informant 1, CA). The second was an offline meeting, a direct meeting that became a point of high trust enabling deepest disclosure, as experienced by NP, who saved her personal stories to share when meeting directly: *"Feelings, personal matters, experiences that not everyone knows about—that was actually later when we met... I only talked about my background when we met, and the previous disclaimer about being closed off was indeed intentional on my part"* (Informant 3, NP). The third was status transition, a change in relationship status that automatically changed the boundaries of what was considered appropriate to disclose, as LU succinctly stated: *"Because eventually we started dating"* (Informant 5, LU).

These three moments show that the boundary of self-disclosure is not solely determined by the passage of time, but by marker events (crisis, medium migration, and relational labels) that actively push individuals past the next layer of openness. This study also found that self-disclosure is not one-way: the response given by the conversation partner after receiving personal disclosure greatly determines whether the disclosure process continues or stops. Changes in speaking style, increased quantity of stories, and migration of communication channels became sufficient signals for male informants to realize that trust was being built, even when these signals were not heavy topic disclosure. NI, for example, observed that LU, who could usually share stories in group voice where many people could listen, at certain moments chose to contact him privately through direct messages when wanting to share about her family problems—a migration from public to private channels that became a clear indicator to NI that LU was placing special trust in him, regardless of content. RA similarly noticed CA becoming comfortable with him as her speaking style changed from short and passive to more active, even starting to make light jokes leading to more personal

topics. RD built NP's trust not through deep personal questions but through consistent small gestures of attention; NP recalled it as significant when RD noticed her coughing on the group Discord server and personally messaged to ask about her condition—a small gesture that made her feel he was more than just an ordinary playmate.

This absence of explicit relational expectations was also found to play an important role in research by Vella, Klarkowski, Turkay, and Johnson (2020), which found that the most meaningful friendships often emerge unexpectedly when players focus on co-play activities rather than on the goal of forming relationships. Game features that support collaboration and informal communication indirectly create environments where self-disclosure occurs naturally without the pressure of relational expectations—a similar condition also found to apply to Roblox in this study, and consistent with Gabriela's (2023) finding that self-disclosure in Friends with Benefits relationships on Telegram is gradual and triggered by growing safety and comfort rather than expectation about where the relationship will lead.

The Role of Gender in Disclosure Initiative and Platform Migration

One paradoxical finding is that although men tended to be first to show personal openness, women were consistently the initiators of platform migration from Roblox to Discord. All three female informants (CA, NP, and LU) were the first to propose the migration. CA stated: *"For communication outside Roblox, we met first. We met, gathered first at that time. Then I moved our chat to Discord after that meeting"* (Informant 1, CA). NP explained: *"As for who first suggested it, I was the one who asked first. But he was the first to chat"* (Informant 3, NP). LU recounted her migration moment, triggered by a shared interest in music: *"I was the first one, if I'm not mistaken, to send a Spotify link. As for moving to Discord, I was invited to their Discord"* (Informant 5, LU).

This platform migration can be read as active meaning construction by the three female informants regarding available communication channels: they interpreted Discord as a more private space than Roblox, and by taking this initiative, indirectly declared readiness to bring the relationship into a space they interpreted as deeper. This pattern confirms that although men disclosed themselves earlier personally, women held control over the direction and speed of relationship development toward the next level of intimacy—a finding that challenges the common assumption that the party who opens up first automatically becomes the one more in control of the relationship's direction.

One interesting variation of this gender pattern was found in the LU-NI pair, which in this study is called the disclosure leap phenomenon. Unlike the gradual pattern experienced by the other two pairs, NI showed a tendency to be directly and deeply open from the beginning of the acquaintance, skipping stages usually traversed gradually by others in building trust. NI himself described LU's openness pattern as climbing stairs one by one, while he directly jumped from level one to level five as soon as he felt comfortable with someone. This awareness of different rhythms led NI to choose to be patient and give LU space to open up at her own pace, rather than forcing equal reciprocity—a strategy that ultimately strengthened rather than damaged trust between them.

Face to Face Meeting as a Relational Bridge

Face-to-face meetings for the three informant pairs functioned as a crucial point bridging relationships from digital to physical spaces. All informants acknowledged that self-disclosure already established online served as a relational bridge that accelerated adaptation when they first met directly, although with varying levels of awkwardness. CA explained: *"Definitely much more confident. More familiar for building conversation, because previously we already had many topics discussed during online communication. So, it felt flowing"* (Informant 1, CA). NP emphasized that her knowledge of RD's character through online communication made it easier to adapt when meeting directly: *"Because we'd already chatted online for a long time, I knew his personality, so adapting to become close again in person was not too difficult"* (Informant 3, NP). LU expressed something similar: *"Helpful, of course helpful. Because we know each other, so we already had a picture... so for interaction, we already knew what to do"* (Informant 5, LU).

From the male perspective, RA and RD acknowledged awkwardness at the first meeting, yet still felt the adaptation process was easier thanks to the foundation built online. RD expressed: *"Very awkward. Distant. But because we already knew each other online, it wasn't hard to get to know each other again and adaptation was easier. Still very awkward at first meeting though"* (Informant 4, RD). NI, meanwhile, felt no awkwardness at all, partly because his first meeting with LU took place in a group setting with other Roblox friends rather than one-on-one: *"For the first meeting, it wasn't one on one. It was still like meeting with Roblox friends there too... from there I already knew... felt like there was no awkwardness anymore"* (Informant 6, NI). Differences in awkwardness levels were likely influenced by the intensity of online communication before the meeting as well as each informant's personality, but from the perspective of Social Penetration Theory, offline meetings for all informants were not the beginning of relationships but rather a continuation of the penetration process already begun in the digital realm.

Beyond functioning as a relational bridge, face-to-face meetings had two different primary functions for different informants: intimacy booster and disclosure enabler. For CA, offline meetings functioned as an intimacy booster: *"We started talking a lot about life after meeting up... we talked more about our daily lives with each other"* (Informant 1, CA). Before the meeting, CA and RA were already quite close online, but the meeting significantly increased their closeness level, transforming the relationship from merely playmates to closer friends—a process DeVito (2013) called relational escalation, relationship development to a deeper level after passing meaningful moments. For NP, offline meetings instead functioned as a disclosure enabler; as previously mentioned, NP consciously saved her personal stories to share when meeting directly, and only told her background after their meeting in Bandung: *"Feelings, personal matters, experiences that not everyone knows about—that was actually later when we met... I only talked about my background when we met, and the previous disclaimer about being closed off was indeed intentional on my part"* (Informant 3, NP). For NP, offline meetings were not merely a moment of closeness but a trust verification point—evidence that the relationship deserved a deep level of openness.

This study also identified three variations of the online disinhibition effect (Suler, 2004) in how comfort built online carried over to face-to-face meetings. The first was consistent openness, where comfort built digitally fully carried over without much change, as expressed by NP: *"No difference between online or direct, because his reactions in chat and how he speaks directly are the same"* (Informant 3, NP). The second was openness that decreased or became awkward face-to-face despite openness online, as experienced by CA: *"On Roblox he was flirting, when we met, he was like a chicken just slaughtered, didn't speak at all"* (Informant 2, RA)—showing that digital openness does not always transition smoothly offline. The third was openness that increased after meeting, as experienced by NI with LU: *"LU is careful speaking online. But when offline, more open. Already met, means already trust"* (Informant 6, NI). Read together, CA's pattern reflects classic disinhibition (more open online than offline), NP's a low or consistent disinhibition (equally open in both settings), and LU's, per NI's account, a reversed disinhibition (more open offline than online)—affirming SCOT's premise that the same medium is interpreted and acted upon differently according to each user's psychological needs (Pinch & Bijker, 1984). These variations show that the same medium does not create uniform psychological effects on post-meeting behavior, but is interpreted differently by each individual according to their own needs and conditions.

Unexpected Relationship Patterns

The final finding shows that the friendships formed among the three pairs emerged unexpectedly from co-play activities, not following a uniform linear pattern. The first was natural in the CA-RA pair, developing organically without a clear turning point: their acquaintance began on a Roblox roleplay map, where RA, noticing CA tended to keep to herself, actively kept inviting her to talk until she gradually felt comfortable, aided by voice chat and play creating a relaxed atmosphere in which, as CA put it, "nervousness won't show." The second was slow burn in the NP-RD pair, developing slowly with several withdrawal phases before finally deepening after face-to-face meetings, reflecting NP's caution consistent with her trauma-based barriers. The third was faster and more intense in the LU-NI pair, marked by the disclosure leap phenomenon that NI managed with patience despite being out of sync with LU's more cautious rhythm, their closeness also nurtured by shared survival-game sessions that later carried over onto Discord.

The absence of explicit relational expectations became the common thread explaining why these three patterns could develop without distortion from external pressure. DeVito (2013) notes that the most meaningful interpersonal communication occurs in contexts free from hidden agendas and fixed relational expectations—no impression to maintain, no developmental pace to meet. In such conditions, self-disclosure grows following each party's comfort rhythm, as occurred organically among the three informant pairs. These patterns confirm that although all three units of analysis showed self-disclosure culminating in offline meetings as the core pattern of the single case studied, meaningful variations existed in how the process unfolded for each pair, confirming the relevance of the embedded single-case design used (Yin, 2014).

General Discussion: Comparison Between Units of Analysis

Direct comparison between the three units of analysis confirms the logic of the embedded single-case design underlying this research (Yin, 2014): they are three units of analysis within one single case, not three separate cases. All three showed consistent core patterns—Roblox as a neutral, safe entry point; gradual self-disclosure; women as initiators of platform migration; and face-to-face meetings as a relational bridge—alongside the meaningful variations in barrier type, peak disclosure moment, and disclosure rhythm summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Comparison of Patterns Among the Three Informant Pairs

Aspect	CA-RA	NP-RD	LU-NI
Female informant's barrier type	Trauma-based (physical assessment)	Trauma-based (social identity)	Anxiety-based (first impression)
Safe space mechanism	Absence of physical display	Anonymity & ideal self-representation	Control via AFK feature
Peak disclosure moment	Crisis (emotional support)	<i>Offline meeting</i>	Status transition (romantic relationship)
Disclosure rhythm	Natural/organic	Slowburn (gradual with withdrawal)	Disclosure leap (fast & intense)
Post-offline disinhibition variation	Consistent	Increased	Adjustment

Source: Authors' own elaboration (2026)

These variations show that although all three departed from the same platform, reciprocity mechanisms, and similar social penetration stages, the specific pathways toward deep trust depended heavily on the type of psychological barrier carried by each female informant from the beginning, as well as her male partner's personality in responding to those needs. This strengthens the SCOT argument that Roblox, as a single technological artifact, cannot be understood as having uniform effects; its effects can only be fully understood when analyzed together with the specific social groups using it and the needs they bring into that interaction.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the self-disclosure process in interpersonal communication among female Roblox players with psychological barriers in interacting with the opposite sex unfolds as a gradual, multi-layered negotiation of trust and intimacy, mediated by strategic communication choices rather than by the platform itself. Roblox serves as a starting point that reduces initial social pressures, allowing self-disclosure to develop following the breadth-to-depth pattern of Social Penetration Theory, driven by

specific relational markers. The findings reveal that women, despite men opening up verbally first, consistently exercise interpersonal agency by controlling the migration to more private communication channels—a move that signals readiness for deeper intimacy. Face-to-face meetings function as a critical relational bridge, serving both as a trust verification mechanism and as a catalyst that either boosts intimacy or enables new layers of disclosure. Theoretically, this research offers three primary contributions. First, it extends Social Penetration Theory by specifying three distinct relational triggers—crisis, offline meetings, and status transitions—showing that interpersonal closeness deepens not merely as a function of time, but through meaningful relational events that push individuals past their comfort zones. Second, it challenges conventional assumptions about reciprocity and control: although male partners were more verbally open early on, female informants held decisive relational power by controlling platform migration, showing that the party who discloses first verbally does not necessarily drive the relationship's trajectory. Third, it highlights that self-disclosure in cross-gender digital friendships is an actively managed resource, co-constructed through low-stakes co-play, deliberate channel selection, and offline encounters used to validate relational commitment.

Practically, these findings suggest that individuals with social anxiety or trauma-based barriers can benefit from digital platforms offering graduated communication channels—from public group play to private messaging to offline meetings—that let them manage the pace of self-disclosure according to their own readiness. For communication practitioners and educators, understanding these relational triggers can also inform social skills programs that help individuals recognize and navigate pivotal transitional moments such as crisis support or relational re-labeling.

This research has several limitations. It is based on only three informant pairs, limiting generalizability; relies on self-reported interview data, which may introduce recall bias; and involves only young Indonesian adults, so findings may not fully represent other age groups or cultural contexts. Future research could broaden the participant pool, incorporate longitudinal observation of digital conversations, examine same-gender friendships or cases where women disclose first, and track friendships over time to see whether digitally built intimacy is sustained after offline integration.

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