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Flight Attendants' Digital Communication Strategies Through Self-Disclosure on TikTok: A Phenomenological Study

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how flight attendants from Sriwijaya Air Group use TikTok for self-disclosure. It aims to understand their motivations, the type of content shared, and its impact on social interactions, self-image, and the airline's public perception. Using a qualitative descriptive method with a phenomenological approach, this research involved five purposively selected informants. The data were analyzed using Joseph DeVito's self-disclosure theory and the Johari Window model. The findings reveal that self-disclosure is performed selectively and strategically. Flight attendants tend to share positive and professional content that aligns with work ethics, such as cabin activities or lighthearted moments in uniform. This practice functions more as a personal branding and impression management strategy rather than intimate emotional disclosure. TikTok serves as a digital stage for shaping a controlled professional identity, bridging the gap with the public while indirectly reinforcing the airline's humanistic image. In conclusion, self-disclosure among flight attendants is not a spontaneous act but a calculated communication to balance self-expression with the responsibility of institutional representation.

INTRODUCTION

The digital revolution has fundamentally transformed the structure and practices of human communication, shifting the epicenter of interaction from confined physical spaces to fluid and borderless virtual spaces. Social media, as a key artifact of this revolution, has evolved from its initial function as a tool for interpersonal connection to a complex ecosystem for identity construction, meaning negotiation, and self-representation on the global stage. Among the constellation of social media platforms, TikTok has emerged as a dominant cultural force. Its unique characteristics—centered on short videos, driven by viral music and audio, and curated by highly personalized algorithms—have given rise to a new communication vernacular that is fast-paced, visual, participatory, and performative.

TikTok's influence in the Indonesian context is monumental. A 2023 report from We Are Social ranked Indonesia as the country with the second-largest TikTok user base in the world, with over 106.5 million adult users. This figure not only reflects the app's popularity but also signals a seismic shift in how society consumes and produces

information. TikTok has transcended its role as a mere entertainment medium; it has become a significant public arena where individuals from various professional backgrounds—including those traditionally demanding high public image standards like flight attendants—find a space to express themselves, build community, and manage their public personas.

Academically, the phenomenon of self-disclosure on social media has been the subject of extensive research. Pioneering studies in this area often focus on early-generation platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. Toma & Hancock (2013), for example, convincingly demonstrated that Facebook use is driven by a psychological need for self-affirmation, where users seek validation of their self-concept through positive feedback. Kim & Song (2016), on the other hand, explored how celebrity self-disclosure on Twitter can foster parasocial relationships with followers, an illusion of intimacy mediated by the platform. Other influential literature, such as Papacharissi's (2010) seminal work and Treem & Leonardi's (2013) analysis of social media affordances , has shifted the focus from 'what' is disclosed to 'how' that disclosure is strategically managed as a form of self-presentation and personal branding.

Despite this rich corpus of literature, a significant and pressing gap remains: research focused on the digital communication practices of professional communities whose identities are closely tied to institutional imagery. Most existing research tends to analyze general users, young people, or autonomous digital public figures (such as influencers), who have relative freedom to construct their personal brands. There is a dearth of studies that specifically investigate how professionals—operating within a framework of ethical regulations, company policies, and public expectations—navigate the complex terrain of social media. The importance of self-representation in shaping public perceptions of a profession is emphasized by Trede et al. (2012), who argue that the development of professional identity requires a dialectical space for reflection and self-presentation.

Flight attendants, as frontliners and the most visible representatives of the aviation industry, hold a powerful symbolic role. Their image not only represents individual competence but also personifies the image, values, and service promise of the airline they serve. This places them in a uniquely communicative position. On the one hand, as modern individuals, they have a fundamental human need to express themselves, share experiences, and connect authentically in the digital space that has become an integral part of social life. On the other hand, they are bound by professional codes of ethics and company policies and are under constant scrutiny from a public that has high expectations for their professional image, which must always be friendly, controlled, and positive. This phenomenon creates an arena for intense identity negotiation on a highly public, visual, and potentially viral platform like TikTok.

This is where the gap analysis, which serves as the primary justification for this research, lies. No in-depth study has specifically explored the communication strategies of flight attendants navigating the TikTok platform. How do they strategically curate the content they share from the broad spectrum of their life experiences? What invisible boundaries do they construct and maintain between the personal and professional

spheres? How do these self-disclosure practices simultaneously shape their digital identities as individuals and influence their broader corporate image? These crucial questions remain unanswered comprehensively. Therefore, this research offers novelty by providing a profound empirical contribution to the dynamics of digital communication among aviation professionals. It specifically frames self-disclosure not as an impulsive act of expression but as a conscious, strategic, and image-conscious communication practice conducted within the context of a platform with unique features and culture.

Thus, the main objective of this study is to answer these problems by revealing in depth and holistically how Sriwijaya Air Group flight attendants utilize TikTok as a medium for self-disclosure. In more detail, this study aims to (1) identify and describe in detail the forms of self-disclosure carried out by flight attendants on TikTok, including content themes, aesthetic styles, and constructed narratives; (2) understand the complex and often overlapping layers of motives that underlie their decisions to share such content; and (3) critically analyze the impact of these self-disclosure practices on their social interactions, self-image construction processes, and public perceptions of the institutional image of the airline where they work.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive design to gain a rich, contextual, and in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of flight attendant self-disclosure practices on the TikTok platform. A qualitative approach, as articulated by Creswell (2013) and Denzin & Lincoln (2011), is the most appropriate methodology when the research goal is to explore and understand the meanings attached by individuals or groups to a social or human issue. This approach allows researchers to delve into the complexities, nuances, and subjective experiences that are often unable to be captured by structured quantitative methods.

More specifically, this study adopted a phenomenological design. Phenomenology, as a philosophical and methodological tradition, seeks to understand the essence of a phenomenon as it is directly experienced, felt, and interpreted by research subjects (Moustakas, 1994). The goal is not to explain causally but rather to richly describe the structure of the informants' conscious experiences. In this context, phenomenology allows researchers to capture the "lifeworld" of flight attendants as they interact with and through TikTok and to unpack how they interpret the act of "opening up" in this ambiguous digital space.

The research subjects were selected through a purposive sampling technique, where informants were purposefully selected based on a set of predetermined criteria to ensure the relevance, richness, and variety of the data. These stringent selection criteria included (1) being an active flight attendant or stewardess in the Sriwijaya Air Group, to ensure a uniform institutional context as the background to their practice; (2) having a publicly accessible TikTok account, which is essential to enable digital observation; (3) actively and consistently uploading content related to their personal and professional

lives for at least the past year, to ensure a substantial digital footprint for analysis; and (4) exhibiting a variety of communication styles and content types, to capture a broader spectrum of practices, from purely entertainment to educational. Based on these criteria, five informants (four women, one man) were selected who volunteered to participate. Their identities are disguised with initials (GV, EW, RM, FA, and ES) to ensure anonymity and confidentiality, in line with ethical research principles.

Data collection was conducted through triangulation of three main techniques to increase the validity, credibility, and depth of the findings (Patton, 2002). First, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with each informant, both face-to-face and virtually. These interviews were conversational and flexible, allowing the researcher to ask follow-up questions (probing) to explore the informants' answers in more depth. The interview guide focused on key themes such as their initial motivations for using TikTok, the creative process and considerations behind content creation, their understanding of the boundaries between public persona and personal privacy, and their experiences in managing interactions with their audience.

Second, non-participatory digital observation, often referred to as digital ethnography (Kozinets, 2010), was conducted on the five informants' TikTok accounts over a three-month period. This observation included a systematic analysis of all available video content, the use of platform elements (sound, hashtags, effects, and duet/stitch features), the language and narrative style of captions, and an in-depth analysis of audience interaction patterns (comment sentiment, types of replies, and engagement levels). Third, documentation was conducted by archiving key videos, taking screenshots of profiles and significant interactions, and creating detailed digital field notes on textual and visual elements that represent their self-disclosure processes.

The data analysis for this study followed the interactive model developed by Miles and Huberman (1994), an approach that views analysis as three simultaneous and continuous streams of activity: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing/verification. In the data reduction stage, a very large data corpus (consisting of verbatim interview transcripts, observation notes, and digital archives) was sorted, focused, and simplified. Open coding (identifying concepts) and axial coding (connecting concepts into categories) were used to abstract the data into relevant themes. Next, in the data presentation stage, the coded and reduced information is presented in the form of a systematic descriptive and interpretive narrative, often supported by a thematic matrix to visualize patterns and relationships among informants. The final stage is conclusion drawing, in which the meaning of the discovered patterns is interpreted inductively, linked back to the existing theoretical framework, and continuously verified by returning to the raw data to ensure that the conclusions drawn are truly grounded in empirical evidence.

The primary theoretical framework framing this analysis is Joseph DeVito's (2016) self-disclosure theory, which defines self-disclosure as a communication process in which information about oneself usually kept confidential and unlikely to be known to othersis communicated to others. Dimensions of self-disclosure such as honesty, depth, breadth, and relevance serve as the primary analytical lens. Furthermore, Luft and

Ingham's (1955) Johari Window model is used as a heuristic analytical tool to map the dynamics of openness and privacy, specifically in distinguishing information that is intentionally displayed (Open Area), that is consciously hidden (Hidden Area), that is unknown to oneself but visible to others (Blind Spot), and that is unknown to anyone (Unknown Area). Perspectives from digital communication studies, particularly those on platform affordances (Treem & Leonardi, 2013) and professional identity (Trede et al., 2012), are also integrated to enrich and contextualize the analysis.

The table below summarizes the dynamics of digital communication carried out by cabin crew in the context of work and professional identity, with a reflective and responsible approach .

Table 1. Research Findings

Research purposes	Key Findings	Explanation of Findings
Understanding how flight attendants and stewards use TikTok as a platform for self-disclosure in their daily lives	Self-disclosure is done selectively and strategically	Flight attendants only share general content, such as work activities, cabin atmosphere, tourist attractions, and light entertainment. Sensitive information is kept hidden (Johari Window). TikTok is used to express oneself without revealing deeply personal details.
Identifying the motivations behind the decision to share personal content on TikTok	Three main motivations: self-expression, personal branding, and social connection	Most respondents use TikTok for entertainment and positive expression. Some aim to build their personal brand or become Instagram celebrities. TikTok is also used to share stories with friends and family.
Exploring the impact of TikTok usage on social interactions, self-image, and corporate image.	Interpersonal impact is low but significant on self-image and institution	Social connections through TikTok are superficial and rarely develop into real interactions. However, the platform supports the development of a professional identity as friendly, creative, and adaptable cabin crew. All respondents demonstrated an awareness of digital ethics and maintaining the company's image by refraining from posting negative content.

The findings table presented above illustrates the main results of the study on how flight attendants use TikTok as a medium for self-disclosure and its impact on their professional identity and image. This table contains three main research focuses: (1) the use of TikTok in everyday life by cabin crew, (2) the motivations behind the decision to

share personal content, and (3) the impact of TikTok use on social interactions, self-image, and the company.

The first finding shows that the self-disclosure practices of flight attendants are selective and strategic. Respondents chose to share only general and positive content, such as work activities in the cabin, the flight atmosphere, moments of togetherness among the crew, and tourist attractions visited during transit. More personal or sensitive information is kept private and not disclosed publicly. This pattern aligns with the Johari Window concept, specifically the hidden self, where individuals recognize the limits of information shared publicly to maintain professionalism.

The second finding relates to motivation. Three main motives emerged from interviews with respondents: the need for self-expression, the drive to build *a personal brand,* and the desire to build social connections. TikTok became a fun medium for sharing stories or work experiences while also developing a self-image as a humanistic, fun, and modern flight attendant. Some respondents also saw TikTok as an opportunity to expand their digital influence (likely an Instagram celebrity) or strengthen informal relationships with family and friends through social media.

Meanwhile, the third finding highlights the impact of TikTok use. While interpersonal impact is low because social interactions rarely extend into the real world, TikTok is highly effective in strengthening professional identity. Respondents recognize the importance of maintaining digital ethics and the institution's reputation. They consistently avoid posts that could harm the company, demonstrating a high level of communication awareness in maintaining the institution's image.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The results of this study can be positioned within the perspective of service profession-based digital communication because digital performativity becomes a symbolic instrument to strengthen the legitimacy of professional identity. This aligns with the concept proposed by Marwick and Boyd (2011) regarding the networked self and context collapse, where individuals must mediate various overlapping audiences on social media through strategic self-presentation. In this context, flight attendants who engage in self-disclosure on TikTok not only convey personal expression but also implicitly construct institutional communication messages. The digital narrative constructed through videos of crew togetherness, light aviation education, and healthy lifestyles represents a new form of individual-based corporate communication. This concept is referred to by Kietzmann et al. (2011) as a personalized institutional narrative in digital reputation architecture.

Reflections on these findings demonstrate a high level of ethical awareness among the informants. They consider not only engagement or popularity but also their long-term reputation as part of an institution. As Giddens (1991) explains, modern individuals actively manage their self-narratives to ensure identity continuity in a rapidly changing

society. TikTok, in this case, becomes both a space for actualization and a performative repository of professional imagery.

The implications of these findings emphasize the importance of institutional support for individual digital communication strategies within organizations. Aviation institutions and other public service institutions can take a more proactive role in providing professional, value-based digital communication guidelines without restricting personal expression. Collaboration between individuals and institutions will foster a healthy, credible, and sustainable digital communication ecosystem.

An in-depth analysis of a qualitative data corpus consisting of in-depth interview transcripts, extensive digital observation notes, and content archives reveals a complex and consistent set of patterns regarding flight attendants' self-disclosure practices on TikTok. These findings not only confirm initial hypotheses about the strategic nature of self-disclosure but also reveal deeper nuances about how professional identities are negotiated in a dynamic and often unpredictable digital ecosystem. The main findings can be categorized into four interrelated and overlapping central themes: (1) Curating a Positive Persona: The Art of Controlled Self-Disclosure; (2) Professionalism as Key Content: Personal Branding Strategies and the Demystification of the Profession; (3) Layered Motivations: The Spectrum from Entertainment and Connection to Symbolic Capital Accumulation; and (4) Invisible Gatekeepers: Ethical Consciousness and Institutional Representation as Internal Censors.

Curating a Positive Persona: The Art of Controlled Self-Disclosure

The most prominent, fundamental, and universal theme across the five informants was the practice of highly selective and carefully controlled self-disclosure. The content shared was consistently curated to project a positive, energetic, professional, and likable self-image. They consciously and systematically filtered out or completely excluded aspects of their lives that were deemed negative, controversial, too personal, or inconsistent with the ideal image of a flight attendant. This constituted a form of ongoing "presentational labor."

Informant FA, for example, explicitly articulated this strategy in an interview. She stated, *"I'll never post if I'm really tired after a long flight or if I'm having personal issues. What my followers see is only the fun, the happy. That's part of my 'uniform,' even on social media. Maintaining the mood of passengers is our job, so on TikTok, we maintain the mood of our followers."* This quote is particularly insightful because she consciously equates emotional management in the digital space with *the emotional labor* that is a core part of her profession. A look at FA's account strongly confirms this: her feed is a curated mosaic of cheerfulness. Her videos feature her smiling broadly as she greets passengers at the door, videos of her transitioning from casual wear to her uniform with a cheerful expression, and aviation "life hacks" delivered in a light and helpful tone. None of the content hints at fatigue, the stress of an erratic schedule, or personal hardships.

Similar to FA, informant GV, who has a more substantial following, views her TikTok account as a "performance stage" or "digital showcase." She said, *"Think of it as a shop window. Only the best, most interesting things are displayed. Complaints, tiredness, or*

sensitive work-related issues, such as a small conflict with a friend, are kept for close friends, not for public consumption. A single slip of the tongue can go viral, which is scary." Content analysis of GV's account reveals a higher level of production and polish. Her videos are neatly edited, use trendy music, and often feature her and her fellow flight attendants in seemingly ideal work settings—full of camaraderie, laughter, and professionalism. It's a narrative deliberately constructed to fulfill the audience's fantasy of the life of a flight attendant.

Informant ES provided a complementary perspective, focusing on "impact" and "responsibility." She explained, *"I think carefully before posting. If I post something sad or complain about work, people will think being a flight attendant is unpleasant and stressful. That can damage the overall image of the profession, and the image of the airline will also be affected. So it's better to post something inspiring, something that makes people want to fly with us, something positive."* This curation practice, for ES, is an ethical act rooted in an awareness of her role as a representative. She consciously positions herself as the guardian of the profession's image, a responsibility she carries even in her personal space.

Professionalism as Core Content: Personal Branding Strategies and the Demystification of Professions

A second, very strong theme is the use of professional identity and its symbols as the core of the shared content. Uniforms, aircraft environments (cabin, galley, and cockpit), and work routines serve not only as backdrops but also as central elements actively exploited to construct narratives, engage audiences, and ultimately, serve as personal branding strategies.

Informant RM, a flight attendant, cleverly capitalizes on the public's charm and curiosity about his profession. One of his most popular video series is "Point of View (POV): You're being served by a flight attendant on a flight to Bali," in which he acts out the act of being very friendly, complete with his signature smile and professional gestures. In an interview, RM frankly admitted, *"People are curious about the lives of cabin crew. What they do behind the scenes. So I give them what they want to see, but a filtered version. Uniformed content definitely gets higher engagement. It's entertainment, but honestly, it also builds personal branding. Who knows, maybe there will be other opportunities later, right? Being a host or something."* This dual motive of entertainment for the audience and career investment for himself is very clear in his strategy.

Observations on the account of EW, a senior flight attendant with years of flying experience, reveal a different pattern but with a similar end goal: strengthening her professional image. Her content tends to be more educational and informative. She often creates short videos that "demystify" her profession, for example by explaining safety procedures in detail but easily understood, giving tips for overcoming jet lag, or showing the contents of her suitcase while preparing for a long-haul flight. She rarely follows viral dance trends, instead focusing on content that positions her as an experienced, competent, and trustworthy professional. *"I want people to see that being a flight attendant isn't just about looks, smiling, and traveling. It's a serious profession that requires*

knowledge, skills, and significant responsibility. So there's more respect," she said. This is a form of *personal branding* that focuses on authority and competence, not just visual popularity.

For all informants, their professional identity is their primary "capital" or "asset" on TikTok. They understand that the general audience has a keen interest in the glamorous and often mysterious world of aviation. By sharing controlled glimpses of this world, they not only satisfy their audience's curiosity but also simultaneously strengthen their position and value as "insiders" with unique access and knowledge.

Layered Motivations: The Spectrum from Entertainment to Connection to Symbolic Capital Accumulation

The motivations behind informants' use of TikTok are complex, multi-layered, and not monolithic. They range from a basic need for entertainment to more instrumental aspirations for recognition and profit.

On the surface, all informants agreed that TikTok is a fun platform and an effective way to fill free time between unpredictable flight schedules. FA called it *"a stress reliever and a way to stay creative."* However, a deeper dive through interviews revealed other, more strategic motivations.

For GV, whose account is the closest to "micro-celebrity" status, the motivation for social recognition and economic potential is very explicit. *"It's not hypocritical, right? If you have a lot of followers, you can become an Instagram celebrity, and there are opportunities for endorsements for travel products and cosmetics. That also motivates me to create good and consistent content. So it's like a fun side hustle,"* he said openly. This suggests that TikTok is seen as a platform for accumulating "symbolic capital" (in sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's terms)—such as popularity and influence—with the potential to be converted into economic capital.

The motivation for social connection is also present, but with clear boundaries and qualifications. EW stated that TikTok serves as a *"bridge of communication with old friends and distant relatives, letting them know I'm doing well and healthy."* However, he and other informants draw a clear demarcation between connections with "known audiences" (inner circles) and interactions with "public audiences" (general followers). Interactions with the public in the comments section are kept professional and friendly but tend to be superficial. RM described his strategy, *"I reply to comments that are funny, positive, or asking about tips for being a flight attendant. If there are any that are strange, body-shaming, or too personal, I just ignore them or sometimes delete them. There have to be limits, and I have to maintain my energy."* Thus, social interaction on TikTok is more performative and aimed at impression management rather than building deep, reciprocal interpersonal relationships with a mass audience.

Invisible Gatekeepers: Ethical Consciousness and Institutional Representation as Internal Censors

Although the informants stated that there were no specific and detailed written rules from their companies regarding personal social media use, they all demonstrated a very

high level of ethical awareness and institutional responsibility. They internally function as "gatekeepers" *for* the image of their profession and company, a role they voluntarily undertake.

Informant FA recounted a formative experience, *"I once had a friend, not from this airline, who posted a video of him joking around in the galley that seemed a bit unprofessional, throwing snacks around. Even though his intention was just to have fun, the video went viral and received a lot of negative criticism. He was even sanctioned. Since seeing that case, I've become much more careful. We carry the airline's name on our uniforms. One small mistake can become a big one if it goes viral."* This experience of others serves as a "cautionary tale" *that* forms a strong internal censorship, where freedom of expression is always negotiated with the calculation of potential risks to the institutional image.

ES added a deep reflection on her mental process before uploading content. *"Every time I want to post, I always think twice, even three times. I ask myself, "Is this appropriate for passengers to see? Does this reflect the company's values? If a director saw this video, what would their reaction be?' If the answer is doubt, it's better not to post at all. Better safe than sorry,"* she explained. These reflective questions demonstrate the careful and multi-perspective decision-making process behind each post. They think not only of themselves but also of a diverse "imaginary audience," which includes passengers, colleagues, company management, and the wider public.

This awareness creates an interesting paradox: on the one hand, TikTok provides a seemingly limitless space for freedom of expression. On the other hand, for these professionals, this space is filled with a set of unwritten rules that are stricter than formal regulations, born from the internalization of professional values and an awareness of their role as representatives. They skillfully maintain a delicate balance between being authentic and expressive individuals and being effective unofficial "digital ambassadors" for their airlines.

The findings of this study make a significant and nuanced contribution to our understanding of the intersections between digital communication, professional identity, and platform culture. The self-disclosure practices of flight attendants on TikTok, as detailed in the research findings, are not naive or impulsive acts of self-disclosure. Rather, they constitute a highly orchestrated, strategic, and performative form of "identity work." The following discussion will explore these findings in more depth by connecting them to relevant theoretical frameworks and situating them in dialogue with existing academic literature.

Reinterpreting Self-Disclosure: From Social Penetration to Strategic Impression Management

Classic self-disclosure theories such as Altman & Taylor's (1973) Social Penetration Model depict self-disclosure as a gradual and reciprocal process of achieving relational intimacy, like peeling back the layers of an onion to reach the core. However, the findings of this study strongly demonstrate the limitations of this model in explaining communication practices on public and performative social media platforms like TikTok.

The flight attendants' self-disclosure is not driven by the goal of deepening intimate relationships with a mass audience. Rather, it functions as a sophisticated impression management strategy, a digital manifestation of Erving Goffman's (1959) concept of "self-presentation," now applied to the context of public networks. They are not "peeling an onion," but rather "building a compelling and controlled showcase."

Within the Johari Window framework (Luft & Ingham, 1955), flight attendants actively and strategically expand their Open Area. However, the information they include in this area is not a disclosure with depth but rather a controlled breadth. They share many snippets of information about their work lives, but this information is superficial and curated. They consciously keep their Hidden Area, which contains vulnerabilities, negative emotions, conflicts, and personal details, tightly closed from public view. Thus, self-disclosure on TikTok functions not as a pathway to intimacy but as a tool for constructing and maintaining an idealized public persona. This confirms DeVito's (2016) argument that self-disclosure is always contextual and purpose-driven. In this context, the goal is personal branding and image risk mitigation, not the formation of relational bonds.

Digital Emotional Labor and the Blurring of Professional-Personal Boundaries

The concept of "emotional labor," first introduced by Arlie Hochschild (1983) to describe how workers in the service industry must manage and display specific emotions as part of their jobs, finds extraordinary relevance in the digital context. The findings of this study indicate that flight attendants engage in extended emotional labor not only at 35,000 feet, but also in the digital space of TikTok. The requirement to consistently appear cheerful, positive, patient, and friendly in their videos is an extension of their professional demands into what should be a personal realm. The "customer smile" has now transformed into the "follower smile."

The implication is a significant boundary blurring between the professional and personal spheres. Their professional identities are no longer confined to wearing their uniforms during work hours. Through TikTok, these identities are maintained, displayed, and even reinforced 24/7. This process supports Trede et al.'s (2012) argument that professional identity development is an ongoing, reflective, and increasingly mediated process. TikTok becomes a digital "front stage" where they actively shape and negotiate who they are as professionals. By sharing educational content (such as EW) or entertaining yet professional content (such as RM), they not only display their identities but also actively construct them for their audience. They effectively control the public narrative of what it means to be a flight attendant in the 21st century.

The Influence of Platform Architecture and Algorithmic "Hardness"

No analysis would be complete without considering the role of the platform itself in shaping communication practices. TikTok's affordances—particularly visibility (content can spread widely quickly), persistence (content is saved and retrievable), and editability (the ability to curate performance before posting)—significantly shape the type of self-disclosure that occurs. However, even more powerful is the influence of the "For You

Page" (FYP) algorithm, which some have called "algorithm violence." This algorithm tends to prioritize and disseminate content that has high engagement, is short-form, is positive, and aligns with current trends.

These algorithmic tendencies indirectly "force" or strongly encourage flight attendants to create content that fits these criteria if they want to gain visibility. This creates an algorithmic feedback loop: they create upbeat and positive content because that's what the algorithm "likes," and the algorithm promotes their content because it fits the desired pattern, which in turn reinforces their strategy. TikTok's trend culture also provides a safe framework for expression. By participating in dance trends or audio challenges, they can show their personal and creative side without having to reveal sensitive personal information. These trends serve as social "scripts" that allow them to appear authentic within predetermined boundaries, a form of structured self-disclosure where the platform itself provides a format for safe, low-risk disclosure.

Theoretical and Practical Implications
This strategic self-disclosure practice has significant dual implications. Theoretically, this study makes several contributions. First, it challenges the universality of intimacy-oriented models of self-disclosure and proposes that in the context of public social media, models oriented toward impression management and personal branding may be more relevant. Second, it extends the concept of emotional labor into the digital realm, demonstrating how the emotional demands of professions can transcend boundaries of space and time through technological mediation. Third, it provides an empirical case study of how individuals negotiate their identities not only with human audiences but also with non-human audiences (algorithms), which are increasingly becoming a determining factor in contemporary communication.

Practically and managerially, these findings offer valuable insights. For institutions like airlines, there's a significant opportunity to view employees who are active on social media not as a risk to be tightly controlled but as a valuable strategic communications asset. They are "micro-influencers" and the most authentic brand ambassadors. The positive narratives they share about their work have the potential to be a far more effective and credible form of public relations than expensive, formal advertising campaigns. Rather than enacting repressive and restrictive policies, companies can develop a more collaborative approach, for example, by holding workshops on digital literacy, personal branding ethics, and how to create engaging yet safe and professional content. Empowering employees to become savvy brand advocates is a far more sustainable strategy in the digital age.

For professional individuals, this practice is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it's an investment in "symbolic capital" and personal branding that can unlock future career and economic opportunities. On the other hand, it comes with the burden of constantly managing and monitoring their online personas—an additional, unpaid, and never-ending burden that can potentially lead to digital burnout.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the self-disclosure practices employed by flight attendants on TikTok are not spontaneous and transparent acts of expression but rather a highly strategic, controlled, and calculated form of image communication. Contrary to the common perception of a culture of impulsive disclosure on social media, flight attendants demonstrate a high degree of awareness in curating their narratives, carefully separating an idealized public persona from a complex personal reality. TikTok, in this context, serves not as a window into their souls but as a digital stage for presenting and reinforcing a positive, friendly, and competent professional identity. This practice functionally serves a dual, mutually beneficial purpose: as an effective personal branding strategy for the individuals and, simultaneously, as an organic public relations tool that reinforces the humanistic image of the airline they represent. Thus, the personal is strategically leveraged to represent the professional.

Theoretically, this study's primary contribution is to recontextualize self-disclosure theory within the performative and algorithmic landscape of modern social media. This research asserts that in analyzing professional communication in digital spaces, the focus must shift from models oriented toward interpersonal intimacy to models centered on impression management, identity negotiation, and interactions with platform architecture. Practically, this research provides crucial insights for organizations to shift from a control paradigm to an empowerment paradigm in employee social media policies, viewing them as the most authentic potential brand ambassadors.

Despite providing significant findings, this study suffers from limitations inherent in qualitative studies, particularly regarding generalizability. The focus on five informants from a single airline group in Indonesia means these findings need further testing in a broader context. Therefore, future research is strongly encouraged to conduct comparative studies, for example involving participants from different types of airlines (low-cost vs. full-service) or from different national cultural contexts, to test whether these strategic self-disclosure patterns are universal or strongly influenced by corporate and local cultures. Furthermore, a mixed-methods approach, combining in-depth qualitative analysis with large-scale quantitative content analysis, could provide a more comprehensive picture of this phenomenon. This research paves the way for further exploration of the increasingly complex intersections between digital communication, identity work, and institutional image in the inexorably networked era.

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