

## ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: VARIATIONS IN INDIVIDUALS'  
SOCIAL MEDIA SELF-PRESENTATION  
ACROSS TIME, ACCOUNT, AND  
PLATFORM & HOW AUDIENCES  
PERCEIVE THE VARIATIONS

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Self-presentation refers to how people express themselves—through their physical appearances, behaviors, and attitudes—to shape how other people perceive them. Self-presentation has been one of the most important motivations for people to use social media since its earliest days. As social media platforms have become more popular, people have increasingly incorporated multiple platforms into their daily lives, presenting themselves in front of different audiences across these platforms and taking advantage of different platform features and affordances to help them shape their self-presentation.

The vast majority of social media research on self-presentation focuses on single platforms. In addition, while posters and audiences are both important parties in the process of self-presentation, most research emphasizes posters' voices in how they build up their online images while ignoring audiences' voices in how they perceive and respond to posters'

self-presentation. In this dissertation, I explore differences in individuals' social media self-presentation across three important dimensions in their social media space: time, account, and platform; and how their audiences perceive the differences in their self-presentation. This dissertation research consists of four studies with a combination of qualitative (e.g., interviews) and quantitative (e.g., survey) research methods. The results unpack how people's self-presentation is shaped and supported by affordances, features, and sociotechnical factors like norms within their personal social media ecosystems and how the relationship between posters and audiences is constantly fine-tuned in the process of self-presentation.

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SELF-PRESENTATION ACROSS TIME, ACCOUNT, AND  
PLATFORM & HOW AUDIENCES PERCEIVE THE VARIATIONS

by

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

In his canonical book, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Erving Goffman writes, “when an individual appears in the presence of others, there will usually be some reason for him to mobilize his activity so that it will convey an impression to others which it is in his interests to convey” (p. 3) [71]. This phenomenon is self-presentation, when people try to present their idealized image in front of others [71]. In the era of social media, people extend their space for self-presentation from offline to online [86]. Social media offers numerous features and affordances to enable engagement in nuanced forms of self-presentation that vary based on audience. People can carefully manage what they post to build and maintain their preferred online images in front of their audiences [136, 217]. This ability to engage in varied self-presentation and explore different aspects of one’s identity has become one of the most important motivations for social media use over time [23, 56, 115, 192, 217].

With the expansion of major social media platforms over the past decade, more people have become active users of multiple social media platforms. Recent survey data from the Pew Research Center shows that 73% of American adults use multiple social media platforms [32]. Different platforms may support different types of audiences or different types of interactions. For example, while Facebook has long been considered a

friend-focused platform, LinkedIn is designed for making professional connections. Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat allow for uni-directional connections, meaning a follower does not need to get approval before connecting to a public account. This also means that audiences on these platforms may include a wide range of people, e.g., strangers, celebrities, news organizations, and content creators who post interesting content.

Presenting one’s image across different accounts and different platforms can be complicated. First, social media users need to properly manage the audiences they interact with across platforms, and sometimes across multiple accounts on the same platform [144, 181]. On public platforms like Twitter, it is impossible to exhaustively control one’s audience (without setting the account to private), meaning that users are more likely to experience context collapse [136]. Second, social media users need to educate themselves about different affordances and norms on different platforms and types of accounts (e.g., Rinsta/“real” Instagram and Finsta/“fake” Instagram are two types of Instagram accounts) before properly presenting themselves in a socially desirable way [47, 181, 207]. Disclosures that might be normative on one platform or one type of account could be problematic on another.

With social media platforms being ubiquitous and many people having accounts that date back, five, ten, or fifteen years, the challenge of self-presentation on social media extends beyond presenting oneself at the moment to also include retrospectively managing previous content. Supported by platform designs that emphasize the present, social media users tend to focus on their current self-presentation and put less effort into managing their outdated posts and images [81]. Some platforms offer settings to retroactively make old posts private; however, this is not the norm across platforms. While the content itself does not change over time, how that content is interpreted can shift—sometimes significantly.

Teenagers who have posted crass or ignorant content may not appreciate it when these posts appear in a recruiter’s Google Search for them and are surfaced during a job interview. Features like Facebook’s “On This Day” also resurface old content, pushing people to face this self-presentational challenge [168].

My dissertation is divided into two sections to address social media self-presentation from different perspectives. In the first part, which includes three studies, I examine how social media users navigate the self-presentational tensions that emerge for users over time, within the same platform, and across multiple platforms. In Study 1, I focus on longtime WeChat Moments users and explore the temporal variation in their Moments self-presentation. This study was motivated by a WeChat feature that lets users make posts private after a short or moderate length of time. The trend towards managing multiple Instagram accounts among teens and young adults inspired Study 2. In this study, I focus on users who manage two Instagram accounts, Finsta (“fake” Instagram) and Rinsta (“real” Instagram), and explore how their self-presentation varies between the two accounts. In Study 3, I focus on users who are active on more than one social media platform to explore their rationales for cross-posting content to multiple platforms and how cross-posting connects to their self-presentation goals.

While these three studies focus on how individuals shape their self-presentation, it is important to remember that self-presentation does not exist without an audience [71]. On social media, posters evaluate their posts and make adjustments accordingly with an audience in mind (e.g., fine-tune privacy settings of posts, self-censor content) [52, 55, 124, 136]. A lot of research has focused on the roles the audience plays in shaping the poster’s social media behaviors (e.g., [198]); however, few studies consider how the audience responds

to that self-presentation and major changes in the poster's self-presentation. The second part of my dissertation, Study 4, provides insights into this understudied aspect of self-presentation from the perspective of the audience. Specifically, I focus on how audiences respond to a large shift in a poster's self-presentation. In this study, I use the case of influencers who post "no longer vegan/vegetarian" YouTube videos as an example of a drastic change in their self-presentation, and I explore how their audience responds to this change.

Across these four studies, I have collected data from users who were active on a range of social media platforms and applied a mixed-methods approach. From these studies, I have found that social media users' self-presentation is multi-faceted and evolves over time. I have identified usability issues as participants described how they apply various platform features to achieve their self-presentation goals and came up with design implications to solve these usability issues. My dissertation also supports and extends previous research and highlights how audience plays an important role in shaping posters' self-presentation. Finally, my dissertation provides insights into a special type of social media users, content creators, and describes both the pressures they feel when presenting a public persona consumed by a huge number of viewers, as well as how they maximize the reach of their creative content by cross-posting to multiple platforms.

The dissertation will proceed as follows. In Chapter 2, I organize and synthesize existing research about self-presentation on social media, as this provides the theoretical background for the dissertation. Each of Chapters 3 to 6 provides details of one dissertation study. In Chapter 7, I provide key takeaways from my dissertation and offer insights into future work that can further build on these findings.

## Chapter 2: Related Work

Goffman’s dramaturgical approach is one of the best-known frameworks for understanding how people present themselves in front of others [71]. This approach was developed in 1950s and 1960s, focusing on synchronous self-presentation that is ephemeral and bound in space and time. In other words, the person who performs self-presentation, and the audiences who witness the performance, are present at the same time and the same place. The performance cannot be revisited after it is finished. Goffman distinguishes the “front stage,” where one is actively engaged in presenting an idealized version of the self in front of an audience, and the “back stage,” where the person can let their guard down and present their true self.

Goffman’s theory of self-presentation has been extended to the context of social media, where self-presentation may be synchronous or asynchronous and can be edited to varying degrees. For example, Hogan argues that asynchronous self-presentation is the norm on social media, when audiences usually view one’s self-presentation after it is finished (e.g., posts depicting one’s image will be viewed by the audiences after the posts are posted) [86]. When this social media data is persistent, an exhibition of user self-presentation across time is thus created [86,217]. The audience for this exhibition also extends across time and across contexts [136]. Different groups that are typically distinct in offline spaces (newly-

met people and long-time friends; offline and online-only connections) are collapsed into a single audience who have access to one’s social media self-presentation.

In this chapter, I review three factors that shape one’s self-presentation on social media: audiences, time, and affordances. In each study chapter (Chapters 3-6), I provide an additional discussion of related work that is specific to the given study and goes beyond the research covered in this chapter.

## 2.1 Audiences

Social media breaks the spatial and temporal barriers that characterize offline interpersonal relationships, where people need to be with each other at a certain time and place for social interactions. In offline contexts, people usually interact with a visible and somewhat homogeneous audience, while on social media, their audiences become significantly larger and more diverse. This creates both new opportunities and new challenges for engagement.

One of the most salient challenges social media users experience is context collapse, where audiences from different contexts are collapsed into a single group, typically denoted by a “friends” or “followers” label [136]. Due to the visibility and the publicity of some social media platforms, users worry that people outside their online social networks can also potentially see their content [52]. Researchers have considered a mix of positive and negative outcomes associated with context collapse. For example, Vitak found that Facebook users with larger and more diverse networks reported higher bridging social capital [197]. Similarly, Burke and colleagues found that the size of one’s Facebook network

is positively related to bridging and bonding social capital [28]. More recently, Burke and colleagues found that Facebook network size is positively correlated with the frequency of social comparison [27], which leads to worse mental health [7, 96].

Audiences shape social media users' self-presentation, just like in offline contexts. Research has found that the size and the composition of online social networks influence how people post. Social media users with larger and more diverse networks have higher need for impression management and are more conscious about their disclosures [70, 197]. They post more frequently and express more positive—and less negative—emotions to present themselves in a socially desirable way [70, 122]. When the composition of their social network changes, such as when they experience life transitions and meet new people, their self-presentation evolves as well [50, 79, 100, 168, 186]. For example, social media users transitioning to university maintain their “old” identity and stay connected with old friends; at the same time they also establish their “new” identity and socialize with new contacts [186]. People might also engage in retrospective impression management to delete or hide previous posts that do not align with their current self-presentation and current audiences [79, 168].

Unlike in the offline contexts where audiences are usually visible, social media users need to conceptualize an imagined audience with whom they communicate [124]. This imagined audience can be broad and abstract, or more specific and targeted [127, 136]. It usually deviates from the actual audience. Research has shown that social media content might be viewed by unintended audiences, leading to regret and inappropriate self-presentation [52, 136, 203]. For example, Duffy and colleagues found that despite relying on privacy settings to manage the audience for their social media content, people express

uncertainty about the visibility of their content and worry if the content will be exposed in public spaces [52]. Research has also shown that users underestimate the size of their actual audience on social media. For example, Bernstein and colleagues found that Facebook users consistently estimate the audience for their posts to be just 27% of the actual number [18]. The deviation of the imagined audience from the actual audience suggests that social media users need to be extremely careful when posting to avoid inappropriate self-presentation.

Social media users apply a lot of social and technical strategies to mitigate context collapse, avoiding unexpected self-presentation in front of wrong audiences and achieving desired self-presentational goals in front of right audiences. I discuss this in more detail in the following sections.

### 2.1.1 Audience Management

Social media users apply a range of strategies to manage the audience of their posts. Litt and colleagues have classified two types of audience management strategies, audience-reaching strategies and audience-limiting strategies [126]. To reach audiences, people use social strategies like posting at certain time because the imagined audience will be online during that time [126]. They also use technical strategies, using platform features like tagging to reach their targeted audiences [120, 126]. To exclude audiences, people primarily rely on social strategies [126]; for example, they may use social steganography by sharing inside jokes so only the targeted audience will understand [22, 126]. Other researchers have focused on the use of technical strategies like blocking or defriending to exclude and limit

the audience of certain post [112, 120, 198].

Audience management does not only happen at the post level. For example, WeChat Moments users can prevent audiences from viewing their old content and block audiences completely from viewing their content [120]. In addition, users can create multiple social media profiles, and segment audiences and corresponding self-presentation for each profile [52, 144, 198, 215]. For example, Snapchat users report low self-presentational concerns because they usually only interact with a small group of close friends [15].

### 2.1.2 Self-Censorship of Content

To manage their audiences, social media users may engage in self-censorship [52, 175, 206]. They might apply the lowest common denominator approach, only posting content they think is appropriate for the broadest audience [70, 86, 198]. They might post content that is appropriate for the audiences with the strictest values and standards [132]. This tendency to self-censor sometimes means that users do not share any content on certain subjects. For example, Wang and Mark found that young adults refrain from commenting or sharing political and social news on Facebook out of impression management concerns [206]. Sometimes people do not realize the content is inappropriate when they post and regret posting it later, so they might delete or untag them from the post afterwards [49, 203].

### 2.1.3 Managing Offline-Online Connections

Social media users may control the connection between their online and offline identities so that how they present themselves online will not influence their offline life. For ex-

ample, Leavitt found that Reddit users create temporary technical identities using “throw-away” accounts to discuss personal or controversial issues [114]. Pavalanathan and colleagues also found that people use temporary throwaway accounts on Reddit when they talk about mental health to express negativity and avoid stigmatization [148]. A controlled experiment found that compared with using real names, people have more self-disclosures when remaining anonymous on social media [129].

#### 2.1.4 Responses to Self-Presentation

Self-presentation is a collaborative process [71, 87, 136], a give and take between the performer, who makes disclosures with the intent of shaping how the audience sees them, and then takes feedback from the audience to either adjust or reinforce certain aspects of their performance. In the social media literature, self-presentation is more often explored from the perspective of the performer, regarding how the performer navigates the imagined audiences and strategically manages audiences of their self-presentation. There is some research about how performers perceive their audiences’ responses, e.g., posters perceive social support from audiences’ likes [83]; and how the perception of audience responses shape the performer’s self-presentation, e.g., Instagram users have low self-presentation pressure and can post whatever they want on Stories, because audiences’ responses are only visible to themselves [192].

Self-presentation is rarely viewed from the perspective of the audience. There is some research about audiences’ responses in general, e.g., audiences respond to posters’ negative or traumatized self-disclosure and provide support [6, 142]. However, this research does not

specifically focus on how audiences respond to other people’s self-presentation.

## 2.2 Time

Social media users’ self-presentation can change over time; for example, as people transition from teenager to adult, their goals for using social media may shift to match changes in their lives. Below, I review work about identity transition and temporal context collapse, which contribute to our understanding of how social media users’ self-presentation evolves over time.

### 2.2.1 Identity Transitions over Time

Social media users tend to focus on their current self-presentation needs and exhibit their current identities online [81]. However, their identities can change over time [138] and may be archived by social media platforms, creating an inconsistency between their current self-presentation and their outdated self-presentation. For example, Schoenebeck and colleagues found that young adults viewed their past adolescent identities on Facebook as embarrassing [168]. Social media users’ self-presentation is likely to change during important life transition stages like the transition from high school to college [168, 186, 212] or graduating and starting a job [24, 50, 100]. Some people experience more intense life transitions like gender transitions. Haimson found that instead of announcing their new gender identity on social media platforms where they have a lot of offline connections, people use platforms like Tumblr as a space where they can largely remain anonymous, and be more open about their new gender identity [78].

## 2.2.2 Temporal Context Collapse

As mentioned in Section 2.1, social media users experience context collapse [136], whereby distinct audiences may be collapsed into a single group on social media. Recent studies have extended context collapse and introduced the idea of *temporal context collapse*. In other words, social media users not only navigate multiple audiences at the moment, but also multiple audiences across different time periods [25,168]. Temporal context collapse is especially challenging for long-time social media users who have accumulated a lot of data on social media platforms. There might be an inconsistency in their presented identities over time because of their own maturity and their life transitions (e.g., [79,168]).

This inconsistency is especially problematic when the old content is accessed by new audiences—who were not the target audience when the content was originally posted and do not have contextual information to interpret the content at present. The unexpected encounter of past identities, however, is supported by social media features. For example, platforms like Facebook have a Timeline feature so that users can navigate one’s social media history across time; features like Facebook’s “On This Day” can resurface old content to users’ current news feeds. Ayalon and colleagues found that when looking at past Facebook content, people are less willing to share it as the time since publishing it increases, because older content is viewed as less relevant to their current social networks and less representative of their current identities [9,10].

To address the temporal tension in self-presentation, users need to engage in retrospective impression management to manage old content and audiences who have access to this content [79,168,217]. For example, Schoenebeck and colleagues found that young

adults who view their past adolescent identities on Facebook as embarrassing delete or hide some of these early posts [168]. Haimson and colleagues found that people who experience gender transition often want to forget their past, so they edit social media content that is representative to their past identities and manage audiences who have access to the outdated self-presentation [79].

### 2.3 How Platform Affordances Shape Self-Presentation

In the context of information technology and social media, affordances are defined as “the mutuality of actor intentions and technology capabilities that provide the potential for a particular action” (p. 39) [131]. The affordance approach has been used to understand how social media platforms, with their various technical features, afford certain user needs [39, 47, 87, 131, 191].

The affordance approach has been used to understand differences in self-presentation across social media platforms [47, 180, 191]. For example, DeVito and colleagues found that social media users perceive substantial difference in affordances related to flexibility in presentation [47]. People think LinkedIn is for standardized, resume-formatted self-presentation while Tumblr is for creative, highly expressive self-presentation [47, 196]. There are two primary affordances that are related to the projects in the dissertation: visibility and ephemerality/persistence [62, 191], which will be discussed below.

### 2.3.1 Visibility

According to Treem and Leonardi [191], visibility refers to the extent to which social media technologies “enable people to easily and effortlessly see information about someone else” (p. 150). Features affording visibility including status updates, a list of “friends,” the user profile content, and so on [62, 191].

Social media platforms provide users with features to manage and control visibility of their social media data. DeVito and colleagues have identified two types of self-presentation related affordances about visibility on social media: audience transparency, the “awareness of who is actually in the audience for persona-linked content,” and visibility control, the “determination of what content linked to their persona is visible to others” (p. 743) [47]. Platforms afford audience transparency through features like listing viewers of certain social media data, which helps users have a clear understanding of their audiences and avoid unintended self-presentation [47]. For example, Snapchat affords a high level of audience transparency because of its one-to-one messaging nature [47]. Snapchat will notify the sender of a Snap if the Snap is screenshot by the recipient, and the sender can confront the recipient and prevent the distribution of the screenshot to third parties who are not supposed to see it [31, 47, 211]. Platforms afford visibility control through features like privacy settings [47]. For example, people perceive Facebook to have high visibility control because of its various privacy settings [47]. Despite that, these advanced privacy settings are rarely used by Facebook users [125]; even when users have a specific limited audience in mind, they tend to post to their whole networks instead of using privacy settings [126].

### 2.3.2 Ephemerality vs. Persistence

Many social media platforms afford persistence, which Treem and Leonardi define as content that “remains accessible in the same form as the original display after the actor has finished his or her presentation” (p. 155) [191]. The notion of persistence can be applied to a range of objects, including platforms in general, or features like photo catalogs, displays of users’ past activity [62, 191].

DeVito and colleagues distinguished two types of persistence afforded by social media platforms: content persistence, “the extent to which a platform affords the continued availability of content over time,” and identity persistence or “the extent to which a platform affords the identification of content with an individual persona over time” (p. 742) [47]. Platforms afford content persistence through features supporting the searchability of social media content [47]. When social media users perceive that their content can be searched and then available to an unknown audience, they can feel a loss of control [133]. As a consequence, they may change their posting and self-presentation behaviors.

Twitter is viewed as a social media platform affording a high level of content persistence because of its public nature [47]. The publicness of content and ease with which people can search for older tweets helps explain Twitter users’ impression management effort. Research suggests that users balance the personal/public information, self-censor to avoid certain topics, while still maintaining their authenticity on Twitter [136].

Platforms afford identity persistence through features like linking an online persona to a real-world identity [47]. People are less likely to freely express themselves on a platform, when their online self-presentation is directly connected to their offline identities. For

example, LinkedIn affords a high level of identity persistence [47], such that people only use it to share their professional identities [196].

Persistent social media platforms record users' evolving self-presentation as users mature [168], take on different roles in their life [50, 100], and experience changes like gender transitions [79]. Users experience the tension of long-term exhibition of their self-presentation and experience temporal context collapse, when multiple audiences across time are grouped together and have access to someone's social media data throughout time [25, 168, 217]. They also develop strategies to deal with this tension, as discussed in Section 2.2.

Persistence should be viewed as a matter of degree, with full retention of content over time on one end of the spectrum and ephemerality of content on the other end [62, 211]. Some social media platforms afford ephemerality, such that content is erased after a short period of time. Ephemerality may relieve users' self-presentation concerns. For example, Snapchat users do not need to worry about the long-term exhibition of their self-presentation because their posts are short-lasting [15, 211]. They report having smaller and more homogeneous social networks with close ties on the platform [15, 151, 211], which could also explain their reduced self-presentation concerns and their more enjoyable interactions compared with other communication channels [15]. Researchers have found evidence suggesting that the degree of ephemerality matters when looking at Snapchat Stories (where content lasts for 24 hours) and Snapchat Chat (where content lasts for at most 10 seconds). Users report they share mundane and daily experiences and ugly faces when using Snapchat Chat [15, 151, 211], while on Snapchat Stories, they post noteworthy content and avoid selfies [139]. Following Snapchat's success in adopting this new ephemeral commu-

nication channel, Instagram, Facebook, and several other platforms incorporated similar features to their products. Research has also extended to understand self-presentation on these channels [109, 192]. For example, Kreling and colleagues compared Instagram users' self-presentation between Stories, where content disappears after 24 hours, and Posts, where content remains persistent. They found that people are authentic in both channels, with authenticity on Stories slightly higher than that on Posts [109].

## 2.4 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I reviewed work on how audiences, time, and affordances shape social media users' self-presentation. These factors are interrelated and the salience of audience, time, and affordances to self-presentation studies will vary based on both the platform and the underlying research questions of the studies.

In the following chapters, I share details for each of the four studies in my dissertation. The first three studies explore how social media users, as the performer of their self-presentation, navigate self-presentation across time, within platform, and across platforms. The fourth study is from the perspective of audiences and explores how they respond to a drastic identity change by social media influencers.

In Chapter 3, I present a study of temporal variation in social media self-presentation. I explore this problem by looking at a popular Chinese social media platform, WeChat Moments, to understand how Moments users apply a feature that enables persistence and ephemerality at the same time to support their evolving self-presentation in front of a changing social network. This study is built upon the work reviewed in this chapter,

especially Sections [2.2](#) and [2.3.2](#).

In Chapter 4, I present a study of within-platform variations in self-presentation between two types of Instagram accounts: Rinsta (“real” Instagram) and Finsta (“fake” Instagram). This study builds primarily on studies I described in Section [2.1](#).

In Chapter 5, I present a study of across-platform variations in self-presentation. Specifically, I focus on cross-posting experiences from social media users who are active on multiple platforms and examine how they consider their self-presentation while cross-posting. This study mainly builds on the research I discussed in Sections [2.1](#) and [2.3](#).

In Chapter 6, I present a study of how audiences respond to changes in Youtubers’ online identity from veg\*n to non-veg\*n. This study fills a gap in self-presentation research by focusing on audience responses to self-presentation, rather than how presenters think about their audience. It also connects to and extends research on temporal transitions in self-presentation, which I described in Section [2.2.1](#).

## Chapter 3: Temporal Variation in Self-Presentation

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### 3.1 Introduction

In most online systems, the digital traces users leave behind are saved by default, whether it is a message sent through Facebook’s Messenger or every edit made on a Google Doc. On most social media platforms, persistence and visibility of content are also the norm [191]—content about and by users is easy to find, and this visibility lingers over time because of archival features. These affordances aid users in self-presentation through social media: visibility allows users to highlight the parts of their identity they want their audience to see, while persistence lets them manage that self-presentation over time [217]. However, these affordances—and persistence in particular—also create challenges for self-presentation when long-forgotten posts that conflict with or deviate from users’ current self-presentation are resurfaced unexpectedly [79, 168].

Some social media platforms afford ephemerality instead of persistence. For example,

on Snapchat, a “Snap” is deleted automatically shortly after it is viewed (e.g., 10 seconds). This ephemerality of content may mitigate users’ concerns about the long-term exhibition of their self-presentation [15,211]. However, these reduced concerns come at a price, including the loss of media (e.g., photographs), meaning (e.g., sentimental posts), and context (e.g., details that give meaning to long-standing interactions) when using ephemeral communication tools [31]. Ephemeral social media has also been associated with less social support [15] and may force users to exhaustively attend to the content before it disappears [15,167].

Researchers have suggested that neither absolute ephemerality nor absolute persistence is desired on social media platforms [31,211]. Absolute ephemerality is not ideal because there is always some fleeting content users try to save. Users may violate platform norms and take screenshots to prevent content from fading away [15,31,211]. Absolute persistence is undesirable because as social media data ages, users’ sharing preferences for that data evolve [9,10,14]. However, persistent social media platforms rarely enable easy changes in sharing configurations of past content. If social media platforms can support both ephemerality and persistence at the same time, users might have better experiences sharing personal content because of fewer long-term exhibition concerns.

WeChat Moments, a popular social media platform in China, supports both ephemerality and persistence at the same time. This is facilitated through the platform’s Time Limit setting, which gives users more control over when content will disappear from audiences’ view while still being accessible to posters themselves. This feature is very popular among Moments users – it is the most frequently used feature among all the features of the platform, with more than 100 million users as of January 2019 [185]. The popularity of this setting suggests that users find value in the coexistence of ephemerality and persistence.

In this study, I explore the tensions between ephemerality and persistence by evaluating how Moments users' self-presentation goals and strategies evolve over time. The findings are based on interviews with 16 WeChat Moments users who are international students at University of Maryland to answer the following research questions:

- **RQ1: How do WeChat Moments users' self-presentation evolve over time?**
- **RQ2: How does the Time Limit setting support Moments users' evolving self-presentation?**

The findings suggest that as WeChat Moments users mature and their social networks expand, they develop an increasing awareness of how their posts shape their online identity to other users. Consequently, their self-presentation shifts and their posting habits change. They use the Time Limit setting to manage inconsistencies between their old and current self-presentation, and they exert significant effort to control and curate their online identity through various Moments features. The Time Limit setting helps them display their desired version of self while removing older content from public view and keeping a record for themselves.

The inconsistency between older and current self-presentation leads us to consider its context. In the discussion, we highlight the characteristics of social media platforms where this inconsistency is especially problematic. Inspired by how the Time Limit setting helps Moments users manage their evolving self-presentation, we provide design implications for social media platforms so they can implement similar or more advanced features to support their users. Additionally, with a focus on self-presentation, we discuss the value of the coexistence of ephemerality and persistence on social media platforms and the boundary

between public regions and personal regions in one’s social media data.

### 3.2 WeChat Moments & the Time Limit Setting

WeChat is one of the most popular mobile apps in China, with more than one billion monthly active users in September 2018 [184]. WeChat supports multiple functions, including instant messaging and mobile payment. “Moments” is the social media function on WeChat. Like many other popular social media platforms, Moments allows users to post, read other users’ posts, like and comment on posts, and maintain a profile page. Moments is a semi-closed social media platform where most of interactions happen between connected contacts.<sup>1</sup> Importantly, Moments provides users with fine-grained control over the audience for their posts [120], with options to control at the contact level, the post level, and the temporal level. These are discussed below.

The feature *Hide My Posts* supports contact-level control. When a user adds contacts to his *Hide My Posts* list, those contacts will not have access to any of the user’s posts. When these contacts go to the user’s profile page, they will see a line and an empty post list.

The features *Share to/Don’t Share* support post-level control, allowing users to manage the audience for each post. If users post without specifying audience of the post, then all contacts except those on the *Hide My Posts* list can view the post. Specifically, for each post, users can grant selected contacts access to it with *Share to* or exclude contacts from accessing it with *Don’t Share*. Users can manage access to a post for individual contacts,

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<sup>1</sup>Moments includes an option that allows users to make up to 10 of their most recent posts visible to strangers who are not on their contact lists.

or create labels for groups and manage access through the labels. If users have not labeled contacts they select or exclude for a post, they will be prompted to create a label for these contacts to simplify future audience management. Users can add, edit, or delete labels any time they want, but access to published posts will not change when related labels are changed. For example, if a post is published with *Share to* contacts with the label “Friend,” a contact added to the “Friend” label after the publication of the post will not be able to access this post. Likewise, for posts published with the option *Don't Share* with contacts labeled as “Family,” a contact added to the “Family” label after the post is published will still be able to view this post.

Another post-level control is that users can change the visibility of published posts. Users can set published posts to “Private,” so the original audience of the post cannot see it anymore and only posters can see it.

Users can only set posts with pictures to “Private,” they cannot set text-only posts or posts forwarding links to “Private.”

The feature *Viewable by Friends* (referred to as *Time Limit* in the rest of the paper) supports temporal-level control. With this feature, users can select an expiry time limit for their posts. Posts older than the selected time limit are hidden from all audiences. Currently, users can choose between three time limit options (last three days, last month, and last six months) and the default setting (all posts viewable). If a user chooses a time limit option, contacts who visit their profile page will see the notice “Only [Time Limit] of Moments are viewable” under the viewable posts. Time Limit is a novel feature compared to those on many other social media platforms because it allows social media content to be ephemeral to audiences but persistent to posters at the same time.

### 3.3 Related Work

Below, we describe ephemerality and persistence on social media in general, then focus on how users' self-presentation interplays with the temporality of social media platforms.

#### 3.3.1 Ephemerality and Persistence on Social Media

Many social media platforms afford persistence, which Treem and Leonardi define as content that “remains accessible in the same form as the original display after the actor has finished his or her presentation” (p. 18) [191]. Social media platforms affording persistence help users preserve the archival value in user data [72, 168, 199, 217], reminisce [14, 149], and reflect on the past [169]. For example, Sosik and colleagues have found that Facebook users use the See Friendship page, which shows recent Facebook activity between two users, to reflect on their friendship with others [169].

However, the persistence of social media content is not always seen as beneficial. For example, users may later regret what they have posted, yet this content remains visible on platforms and reaches a broad audience [174]. In addition, persistence leads social media users to be reminded of and remember events that they may want to forget [9, 137]. Painful memories people try to forget (e.g., breakups, death of a loved one) can be resurfaced by features like Facebook's “On This Day” [166, 201]); in cases like this, persistence of content over time may have negative effects on one's well-being.

Persistence should be viewed as a matter of degree, with ephemerality at the other end of the spectrum [62]. Researchers have argued for the value of ephemerality [12, 137], where social media content is erased or made less visible after a period of time. Researchers have

suggested various design ideas to implement ephemerality, including assigning information an expiration date, after which the information is deleted [137], and a matchstick-like video recording and storage device that burns itself after being used [38]. In recent years, some social media platforms have embraced these design ideas. Snapchat is the first platform that affords ephemerality by deleting content automatically within a short time of being viewed by the recipient (e.g., 10 seconds). Researchers have found that Snapchat users perceive interactions on Snapchat as more enjoyable than on other social media platforms [15, 151]; the reason for this might be that Snapchat users have smaller social networks consisting of closer ties [15, 151, 211]. Following Snapchat’s success in adopting this new ephemeral communication channel, Instagram, Facebook, and several other platforms incorporated similar features to their products. Research has also extended to understand self-presentation on these channels [109, 192]. For example, Kreling and colleagues have compared people’s Instagram self-presentation between Stories, where content will disappear after 24 hours, and Posts, where content remains persistent, and found that people are authentic in both channels with authenticity on Stories slightly higher than that on Posts [109].

However, ephemerality may also create problems for users. Importantly, content that lacks persistence may cause a loss of meaning and context, making it more difficult for users to establish common ground or keep up with conversations over time [31, 167]. In addition, users may not want their content to go away completely because of the various values (e.g., archival value) in posts [14, 123, 149, 169, 216, 217]. One workaround to this loss of content is to purposefully take screenshots of content on ephemeral platforms to keep a persistent copy of the content [15, 31, 211]; however, such practices may violate platform norms and might anger users who share content with the expectation of it being deleted [211].

### 3.3.2 Self-Presentation on Social Media

Goffman’s theory of self-presentation is widely used to explain how people present their idealized images in front of other people [71]. Goffman’s dramaturgical approach, developed in the 1960s, focuses on synchronous self-presentation, where the performer and his audience interact in person and in real time. Hogan [86] argues that in the context of social media, asynchronous self-presentation is the norm as audiences consume posts after they are published. An exhibition of user self-presentation across time is thus created. Following Goffman’s dramaturgical approach and Hogan’s exhibitional approach, Zhao and colleagues [217] found that Facebook users experience both a performance region where they create content for their current self-presentation needs, and an exhibition region where they manage content for long-term self-presentation needs. Social media content moves from the performance region to the exhibition region as it “expires” from people’s attention [217].

Most social media platforms focus on the present. For example, Facebook pushes the latest content to users’ newsfeeds, and Twitter prompts users to share “what’s happening” in their lives. Users also tend to focus on their current self-presentation needs and put less effort into managing their self-presentation across time [81]. One of the biggest challenges social media users face is context collapse, in which multiple audiences are grouped together in their social network [136] and by default content is broadcast to this broad audience despite the fact that individuals may want to present different selves to different audiences [71]. Users develop strategies at different levels to manage context collapse [198]. At the network level, users create different accounts across various social media platforms for different audiences and regulate the boundary between social networks [48, 112, 198, 200].

At the audience level, users apply fine-grained privacy configurations to control different audiences’ access to different content [101, 112, 120, 198]. At the post level, users self-censor what they post [112, 173], such as applying the lowest common denominator approach, only posting content they think is appropriate for the broadest audience [86, 198, 200].

### 3.3.2.1 Online Self-Presentation over Time: Temporal Context Collapse

Persistent social media platforms record users’ evolving self-presentation as users mature [168], take on different roles in their life [50, 100], and experience changes like gender transitions [79]. At the same time, users’ social networks also evolve. Users experience context collapse both at the moment and across time. We refer to the context collapse across time as *temporal context collapse*, where multiple audiences across time are grouped together and have access to someone’s social media data throughout time [25, 168, 217].

On persistent social media platforms, social media data is labeled with timestamps, which makes it clear to one’s audience what content is recent—and thus reflective of one’s current self—and what content is old, reflecting one’s past self [217]. However, users may still experience unwanted presentation when their contacts view old and embarrassing content and when features like “On This Day” resurface the content to their current social network, which is usually a larger and more diverse network than when the content was first posted [79, 168].

While one early Facebook study found that users were less willing to act on possible temporal boundary intrusions [193], more recent research has found that users develop many strategies to reconcile temporal tensions. Schoenebeck and colleagues [168] found

that young adults engage in retrospective impression management practices like curating past content; at the same time, they usually do not delete content in order to maintain historical integrity of their online self-presentation. Haimson and colleagues [79] found that after gender transitions, transgender people often edit their past self-presentation—including their photos, names, and gender markers—and curate their social networks so they can disclose or not disclose their gender transitions appropriately to the right audiences. LGBTQ+ people may shift their self-presentation strategies repeatedly as their identity-related concerns change over time [48].

Social media platforms affording ephemerality may relieve users' self-presentation concerns. For example, Snapchat users do not need to worry about the long-term exhibition of their self-presentation because their posts are short-lasting [15, 211]. They report having smaller and more homogeneous social networks with close ties on the platform [15, 151, 211], which could also explain their reduced self-presentation concerns and their more enjoyable interactions compared with other communication channels [15]. Xu and colleagues [211] note that temporality should be viewed as a matter of degree instead of a binary, with ephemerality at one end and persistence at the other. Researchers have found evidence suggesting that the degree of ephemerality matters when looking at Snapchat Stories (where content lasts for 24 hours) and Snapchat Chat (where content lasts for at most 10 seconds). Users report they share mundane and daily experiences and ugly faces when using Snapchat Chat [15, 151, 211], while on Snapchat Stories, they post noteworthy content and avoid selfies [139].

With this prior research in mind, in this study we set out to understand how WeChat Moments users' self-presentation evolves over time and how they apply the Time Limit

setting to support their evolving self-presentation.

### 3.4 Method

I conducted interviews to explore the varied reasons why WeChat users use (or don't use) the platform's temporality features. Following approval from the university's Institutional Review Board, I conducted two rounds of interviews with current WeChat users. For context, the Time Limit setting was initially launched in January 2017 with the six-month option and the default option to display all posts; the three-day option was added in March 2017. During the first round of interviews (late October 2018 to early November 2018), I recruited 10 participants (P1-P10). In May 2019, WeChat Moments added a new Time Limit option of one month, which fell between the existing options. In order to determine if this new option changed how users applied and felt about the feature, I conducted an additional six interviews (P11-P16) during August 2019.

Participants were recruited from University of Maryland via on-campus posters<sup>2</sup> and WeChat group chat. I targeted university students because they are more likely to be active social media users. Participants were required to be current WeChat Moments users who had been using Moments for more than a year and knew about the Time Limit setting. I conducted all semi-structured interviews in Mandarin Chinese, my mother tongue. I used the same interview protocol for both rounds of data collection. Questions included participants' general use of Moments, their posting behaviors across time, their perceptions of this setting, and their reasons for using or not using this setting (see details in Appendix

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<sup>2</sup>Chinese students comprise the largest subset of international students among undergraduates and graduate students at this university.

A). As a Moments user myself, I utilized my familiarity with the platform to ask follow-up questions (e.g., when participants' responses were ambiguous). In the second round of interviews, I also asked participants about their opinions of the new Time Limit option.

Interviews lasted between 21-47 minutes ( $M=35$ ). I gave each participant a US\$15 Amazon Gift Card to compensate them for their time. In total, there were ten female and six male participants, ranging in age from 18-31. Full demographic information for the participants and their use of Moments and the Time Limit setting is presented in Table 3.1.

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim in Chinese. I read through the transcripts multiple times to become familiar with the data, then imported the data in NVivo to do qualitative coding. I performed open coding iteratively through multiple rounds to identify emergent themes [177]. Following this round of coding, I met with Dr. Vitak to further discuss the codes and excerpts. After open coding, I completed axial coding to examine the relationship between themes and refined the codes [177]. I was aware of the potential bias from my role as a Moments user. I translated and included many quotes so participants could speak for themselves. For readability, I also include summarizations and interpretations, which were double-checked by Dr. Vitak and Dr. Tausczik, who were not Moments users and have expertise in studying online communities, social media affordances, and self-presentation.

<b>ID</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Years on Moments</b>	<b>Contacts</b>	<b>Posting Freq.</b>	<b>TL Option</b>
P1	F	22	4	1081	daily	6m
P2	F	23	5	447	weekly	all
P3	F	22	7	287	monthly	6m
P4	F	27	5	543	monthly	6m
P5	F	22	5	462	weekly	6m
P6	M	24	5	391	monthly	6m
P7	M	22	5	944	monthly	all
P8	F	18	6	191	weekly	3d
P9	F	31	7	345	weekly	all
P10	M	24	4	212	monthly	3d
P11	M	24	5	386	weekly	6m
P12	M	26	7	1204	monthly	1m
P13	F	26	6	708	weekly	1m
P14	F	22	5	953	weekly	6m
P15	F	23	7	763	monthly	3d
P16	M	21	3	573	weekly	3d

Table 3.1: Participants’ demographic information and their use of Moments and its Time Limit (TL) setting.

### 3.5 Results

Participants generally started using WeChat Moments in adolescence or early adulthood. Thus, they had been using Moments for a long time (range: 3-7 years). Their Moments posts captured their growth as individuals and their changing and expanding social networks as they grew older. Many participants reported large networks on Moments (range: 191-1204 contacts).

Below, we first describe participants’ changing self-presentation on the platform over time, which was closely tied to their own maturation and their changing audience. Then we describe participants’ rationales for using or not using the Time Limit setting and how this decision was associated with their self-presentation goals on the platform.

### 3.5.1 RQ1: Participants' Evolving Self-Presentation Over Time

Like many other social media platforms, Moments prioritizes users' latest content. Users can retrieve their contacts' latest posts at the top of their newsfeeds. Their own posts are also listed in a reverse chronological order on their profile pages. Not surprisingly, our participants posted with a focus on their current self-presentation goals. They were also cognizant that their self-presentation evolved over time, and they engaged in retrospective impression management on their old posts to reconcile inconsistencies in their self-presentation.

#### 3.5.1.1 Evolution of Posting Behaviors

Participants described changes in how they used Moments. Participants said they were more cautious about what to post, how to post, and with whom to share posts.

**From posting everything to focusing on positive posts.** Many participants reported that when they first used Moments, they posted everything happening in their life, but now that they were older they consciously self-censored what to post. This change was related in part to participants' maturity. As they matured, they were more aware of people around them and less self-centered, which led them to consider the impact of their posts on others and how others would view them based on their posts. This change was also related to participants' expanding social networks. When participants first used Moments, their social networks were small and consisted of strong ties. As they expanded and diversified their social networks, they faced the challenge of context collapse [136, 197]. The increasing

difficulty in managing their self-presentation across various contexts led them to self-censor what to post and restrict what they did share.

Participants described their prior oversharing habits as “immature,” “silly,” or “childish.” Instead of posting everything, including mundane life details like they did before, our participants described that they now focused on the positive parts of their life and avoided emotional, negative, or potentially controversial content. Other studies have also found that social media users’ avoid this type of content (e.g., Facebook users view posting negative content as a norm violation [138]). Our results extend these other studies by highlighting the fact that the habit of avoiding this content is not the default, but is acquired as social media users mature and gain experience on the platform.

Participants posted personal achievements (e.g., exams passed, graduation) consistently across time. But *how* they wrote about these events changed. They described toning down these posts because they did not want other people to think that they were showing off. This is consistent with prior research about Facebook users’ disclosure concerns that were related to interpersonal risks [199]. For example, P16 said, “*Previously when I visited a university to work on research projects, I posted explicitly that ‘I did research at [university]. CS here is good.’ But now I won’t do that. I will post more implicitly, like ‘summer in [city where a university is located]’... I was bragging before. Now I want to be low-key.*”

Avoidance of overly emotional, negative, or controversial content became a normalized practice for our participants because of their increasing awareness of how they could be negatively viewed from these posts. For example, emotional posts might conflict with their desired self-presentation. P3 reported that, “*I posted posts with too many overjoyed ‘haha’ and posts about me dissing something. I don’t post them anymore... They might have*

*some [negative] influence because I have my colleagues and future colleagues as my contacts. I should look more professional.”* Participants also thought negative posts might spread negativity to other people, which was perceived as unwelcome in social scenarios. P4 said, *“I don’t like contacting with whiners or pessimists because I don’t want to be more negative. One should not impose on others what he himself does not desire.”* Potentially controversial posts were also avoided because of the potential negative influence on interpersonal relationships. For example, P10 avoided posting statements that defended a controversial public figure because of the possibility of irritating others who hated the person.

**From long-winded to polished and concise.** Another change in self-presentation over time can be found in *how* participants crafted their posts. They tried to deliver edited and concise information instead of stream-of-consciousness posts.

Many participants said they did not want to *“talk too much”* when they posted now, while in their old posts they used more words and/or more pictures to describe their experiences and feelings in detail. Participants felt that too much information was not appreciated in social scenarios, perhaps bothering their audiences in the era of information overload. It could also be perceived as *“showing off”*, considering the posts were likely to be positive life snippets. For example, P2 posted more words and more pictures in her old posts but now she said, *“I like to post 3 or 4 pictures per post. I think 9 pictures [the maximum of pictures a post can include] are too many. It’s like I am showing off or something. I don’t like that.”*

Participants describing putting more efforts into carefully curating content to deliver an aesthetic sense to audiences. P5 said, *“I didn’t know Photoshop then... I’ll add filters*

*to the pictures. I'll also design the layout of pictures, which to put in the first line, in the center... I think pictures I post should be well-designed and beautiful – people like to read posts like this.*” This increased attention to detail suggests that participants were highly concerned about how other users consumed and reacted to their posts.

**From posting publicly to selective posting.** When participants first used Moments, their social networks were largely homogeneous, consisting of their peers and classmates. They did not yet feel the tension of context collapse, so they usually posted to all their contacts. As their social networks diversified, they became more cautious about audience management.

Participants wanted to avoid posts that might be viewed as inappropriate, so they restricted who could see content. For example, P3, a video game live streamer, excluded her “family and the elder” label from posts about live streaming her games. She said, *“My comfort zone is where they [family members and the elder] do not know about me being a video game live streamer. They will think that I am wasting my time [if they know].”* Likewise, participants wanted to purposefully deliver certain information about themselves to certain audiences. For example, they might stress educational or professional experiences to current or future employers. P5 said, *“I have many contacts who I met at work. I will post something like ‘I have been learning business analytics recently’ every now and then. They have to know that I am learning this.”*

### 3.5.1.2 Retrospective Impression Management

Participants managed their impressions retrospectively because they were aware that others might form an impression of them based on all their posts and not just from the latest post pushed to newsfeed. Participants reported checking others' profile pages, especially when they first became contacts; thus participants reported inferring that other people, especially new contacts, would also check their profile pages. They thought glancing at each other's profile page was a good way to increase mutual understanding and form first impressions when first meeting people. P14 said, *"When I add new contacts, we always check each other's profile page... I think the profile page is a good channel for me to know other people, so I hope they can know me from my profile page."*

Participants managed old posts that were not consistent with their current self-presentation goals, echoing similar findings from research with Facebook users [9]. For example, many participants reported deleting or setting to private old posts they now viewed as too silly, childish, or emotional in order to build a positive self-presentation.

Participants also engaged in management of their old posts that shared too much information to avoid an overall *"too wordy," "not brief,"* or *"talkative"* presentation on their profile pages, which was consistent with the posting strategy of being more concise. Many controlled the number of posts displayed to audiences. P1 said, *"I limit myself to display only one post per day on my timeline. I would compare posts posted within the same day, keep only one, and set others to private"* because *"others would feel more comfortable [viewing my profile page] if I am not verbose."* P7 assumed that other people would spend a fixed and limited amount of time viewing his profile page so he did not want to *"use up*

*the space.*” He deleted a lot of content not produced by him (e.g., shared links) so he could *“display the most about me [within limited space].”*

These impression management behaviors happened repeatedly throughout participants’ time on Moments. Participants’ standards for what to manage evolved to accommodate their changing self-presentation goals as mentioned above (e.g., more positive and more concise). Their standards also evolved because they wanted to make sure their displayed images were appropriate to their broadening audiences. For example, P7 mentioned that he checked his existing posts before the new student orientation, during which he expected to add many new contacts, to hide any old posts that he did not want to share with new contacts.

### 3.5.2 RQ2: How Moments Users Apply the Time Limit Setting to Support Their Evolving Self-Presentation?

We asked participants to report which Time Limit option they used and why they selected that option. We categorized their reasons for selecting a specific time limit setting into three categories, which we describe below. We found that the main reason participants gave was because it allowed them to control their self-presentation without taking very much effort. At the end of this section we summarize these reasons and also include users’ reasons for using the default Time Limit option to display all posts.

### 3.5.2.1 Time Limit Can Be Overly Restrictive

On users' Moments profile page, their choice in the Time Limit setting is displayed together with viewable posts within the selected time limit. Participants believed that one's choice in the Time Limit setting conveys important information about the user, just like their posts. So when our participants decided which Time Limit setting to use, they considered how their choices might be interpreted by their contacts.

Participants understood and respected other people's choices to hide posts through the Time Limit setting, but they did not like it when others hid too much content, especially using the three-day option. They expressed that they felt rejected when seeing no or few posts displayed on others' profile pages. For example, P12 said, *"When I want to know more about you, to care for you, I get nothing back. If I use the three-day option, other people will see nothing, and they will also be disappointed. They will be like, 'oh I want to care for you but you shut me out.'"* P4 had similar feelings about contacts who used the three-day option and those who added her to their *Hide My Posts* lists: *"when I see a line [when no posts are viewable within the time limit a user can only see a line with the notice about the poster's Time Limit option], I feel like I am blocked [when a user is added to the poster's Hide My Posts list he will see a line with an empty post list]."* Although participants clearly knew the difference between the two settings—adding someone to *Hide My Posts* was a configuration intentionally toward this person, while applying the three-day option was a configuration toward all contacts—they had similar reactions to both experiences.

In general, our participants disliked when their contacts over-restricted access to

information. They were especially harsh in judging newly added contacts they barely knew who used a restricted time limit. Participants used words like *defensive* (P3), *shy* (P3), *isolated* (P2), *not friendly* (P4), *aloof and icy* (P7), and *not willing to share* (P7, P11, P16) to describe their first impressions of a new contact when they found most or all of the new contact's content was hidden. Participants said they were less judgemental when established friends chose the three-day option because they knew these contacts not only from Moments posts, but also from direct messages and offline interactions.

Participants said they typically avoided choosing the three-day Time Limit option because they did not want to be viewed negatively, and they especially did not want to make a bad first impression on new people they would meet. They chose the three-day option if they were very conservative about sharing. For example, P1 used the three-day option for a short time period as a way of creating self-imposed isolation after a contact lied to her.

### 3.5.2.2 Time Limit Lets Others Know the Current Me

Participants usually assumed that glancing at newly added contacts' profile pages was normal and a good way to increase mutual understanding. However, they did not want other people to know their full history, especially things they shared when they were younger, because they saw it as unnecessary—and potentially harmful—for relational development. Even if they did not think letting a newly added contact see their full history of posts did any harm, they were still unwilling to grant them access. They felt it was okay to let people know their current self, as reflected in their recent posts.

As participants had different definitions of what constituted “current,” they chose different time limit options. Some felt life was cyclic, following certain patterns, so they preferred a time limit that matched their life cycles, e.g., a year (P1, P4) or a season (P5). Some participants thought their current status was defined by major life updates (P11, P15). For example, P15 said, *“Before I was here [the current university], I was at another university. Most of my newly met friends are from here so I don’t want them to know what I did at my previous university. I don’t want them to know my previous experiences.”* Other participants did not have a clear definition of “current”. P12 thought posts within two or three months could reflect his current status. P13 felt that posts within six months were more than her contacts needed to know, so she settled for the one-month option.

Participants preferred others to only see their current posts rather than everything they had shared on the platform because they knew that there might be inconsistencies between their “old self” and their “new self.” P13 was very clear that *“old posts do not represent who I am now.”* This inconsistency might be especially obvious if a person has posted a lot of content over time. For example, P10 said, *“You’ll see how a person changes if he does not set Time Limit.”* P3 and P11 once posted very frequently and accumulated a lot of posts. They both decided to hide posts older than six months because they did not want others to judge their younger selves and think they talked too much. Likewise, P10, P15, and P16 used the Time Limit setting to hide some “childish” or “stupid” old posts.

Participants described compromising between their desired time range for displaying posts, their recent posting frequency, and the limited options of the Time Limit setting. Participants usually excluded the three-day option when making the decision because of their posting frequency; since most were not posting daily, very little content would be

displayed if they chose the three-day option. When the only options were three days or six months, participants were much more likely to choose the latter option unless they were very conservative about sharing. After the one-month option was available, P12 shifted instantly from the six-month option to it because it was closer to his desired time range (two-three months). Participants sometimes were not very sure about which option was best for them. They tried different options and then settled on a final option. This was the most frequently mentioned reason for changing the setting. For example, P14 tried the one-month option and then changed to the six-month option. Because she did not realize she did not post that frequently at that time until a friend complained about seeing nothing on her profile page.

One downside of using the Time Limit setting is that it may prevent users from displaying expired posts that are important or meaningful. For example, P1 said, *“I had a big moment last year so I hope everyone can see. But now I can only choose between ‘six months’ or ‘all.’ I have to make a compromise and I choose six months.”* P4 suggested that Moments could be improved if it allowed users to select posts that could override the time limit so that these posts could always be visible regardless of the time limit. To overcome having to compromise between visibility and control, P16 made temporary changes in his time limit options. He used the three-day option for most of the time, but if he added contacts whom he especially wanted to impress he would switch to a longer time limit so that those contacts could know more about him. He said, *“I will change my option and display more if I add certain people, for example, nice looking girls or people who I collaborate with in research projects. I want to impress them. I want them to know who I am. But just for a short period of time.”* He assumed that a newly added contact was

very likely to check his profile page after they added each other as contacts. So he made those temporary changes, then switched back to his regular option when he estimated those contacts had finished checking his profile page.

### 3.5.2.3 Time Limit as a Low-Effort Impression Management Strategy

Another reason participants used the Time Limit setting was to achieve their self-presentation goals while minimizing cognitive effort. Managing each post individually and retroactively takes a lot of time and effort—especially for users who regularly shared content on the site—because they had to evaluate each post, consider its intended audiences and their current self-presentation goals, and apply that assessment to dozens, if not hundreds of posts.

Outside of the Time Limit feature, Moments does not currently allow users to manage posts as a batch (compared to a platform like Facebook, which has a “Limit Past Posts” setting). Users have to manage posts individually and each management behavior, such as setting the post to private, takes multiple clicks. P16 said, *“I am changing all the time. Sometimes I think my old posts are not mature... I also have some ‘dark histories’ that I do not want to keep on my profile page. So I manually set each of these posts private. It’s very troublesome. You have to click the ellipsis icon at the upper right corner of the post, then click ‘set to private.’ If I can use one click to set a post to private, I might not want to use the three-day option.”*

Another problem with retrospectively managing posts in Moments is that certain types of posts (e.g., text-only posts) cannot be set to private. Sometimes participants did

not want to delete these posts because they had archival value and were meaningful. P5 said, *“I did not want to delete [those text-only posts]. After all, they are something that I have posted, something about my past opinions. They also record my life with accurate timestamps. I think they are meaningful to me. Since I didn’t want to delete nor did I want others to see, I went with hiding them.”* P5 and P16 used the Time Limit setting to hide old text-only posts to prevent undesired self-presentation to their contacts while retaining access for themselves.

Moments users can use labels to manage the audience of each post. For example, granting contacts labeled as “friend” the access to a post. However, Moments does not support updating access to posts when related labels change, which makes unexpected self-presentation inevitable when users keep adding new contacts. For example, P3 excluded contacts under the “family and the elder” label when posting about her live streaming game play. She connected with a friend of her mom’s—and added this label to the new contact—after making posts about live streaming. Because of the design flaw, that new connection saw old posts about her live streaming that were hidden from others under this label. P3 said, *“it was so embarrassing”* because she did not want anyone with the label to know about her live streaming.

Participants used the Time Limit setting to minimize potential undesired or negative self-presentation. Even if they forgot to fine tune the privacy configuration of the viewable posts, the potential for undesired self-presentation would be minimal because the viewable posts were limited. P14 said, *“When I add a new contact, I’m sure there is a high probability that within my recent posts [posts within six months] he will not see anything I do not want him to see.”*

### 3.5.3 Summary of Findings

Participants used the Time Limit setting to manage their long-term exhibition of their self-presentation with low effort. Participants carefully decided the options of the Time Limit setting because their options were also a part of their self-presentation. In general, they did not want to grant contacts full access to their histories on their Moments profile because they felt it was unnecessary and undesired; nor did they prefer the overly restrictive option of three days because of the potential of being viewed negatively based on this option. They preferred to limit access to their recent posts so contacts could know their current self-presentation. They explored their own posting habits (e.g., recent posting frequency) and their definition of what time range represented their “current” self, considered how their Time Limit option would be viewed by their contacts, and finalized with one option from the limited choices. They also made temporary changes to their Time Limit option to satisfy their nuanced self-presentation goals.

Some participants chose the default Time Limit option, of keeping all posts visible. These participants also described inconsistencies in their self-presentation between older and newer posts. They chose not to hide content because they had already ensured all displayed posts were appropriate and consistent with their current self-presentation by applying strategies like self-censoring what to post and how to post (P2, P7, P9), carefully managing audience for each post (P2, P7), and deleting or setting to private older posts that did not reflect who they were now (P2, P7, P9).

## 3.6 Discussion

Social media users expand their social networks as they move through different life stages; this creates temporal context collapse, in which multiple audiences from different time periods are grouped together in users' social networks [25,168,217]. We argue the Time Limit setting mitigates some of the tensions of self-presentation caused by temporal context collapse by allowing posts to have characteristics of both ephemerality and persistence. Further, the Time Limit setting allows users to clearly define a public region of their posts (i.e., those within a specified timeframe) and a private region only visible to themselves (i.e., older posts that past the time limit).

Below, we describe the characteristics of social media platforms where temporal context collapse is especially problematic to users' self-presentation. Then we connect our work with Goffman's [71] and Hogan's [86] work on self-presentation with a focus on ephemerality vs. persistence of social media data. We also discuss design strategies for social media platforms to support ephemerality and persistence simultaneously and to clearly define the boundary between the public and the private in social media data.

### 3.6.1 Challenges of Temporal Context Collapse

Echoing previous studies [25,48,79,168], we found evidence of temporal context collapse in our study. Participants reported that as they moved from one life stage to another, their audience expanded. Their self-presentation evolved along with their changing social networks and their own maturity.

Temporal context collapse is especially problematic for users' self-presentation on

social media platforms like Facebook and Moments where users accumulate a lot of data across time, including their posts and social networks, *and* link their offline identities to their online identities. Other social media platforms designed to support ephemerality, such as Snapchat, prevent temporal context collapse because posts are only shared with their audiences in the moment of the post. As a result, these users do not feel pressure to resolve inconsistencies between current and old self-presentation and from misdelivering old self-presentation to current audiences.

The lack of anonymity or pseudo-anonymity (e.g., throwaway accounts) and the expectation of personal self-disclosure on some social media platforms, such as Facebook and Moments, intensifies temporal context collapse [47, 56, 114, 214]. Anonymous or pseudonymous platforms, such as Tumblr and Reddit, allow users to try on different online identities without worrying about risks to their offline identities [47, 114]. In addition, the cost of creating and switching between temporary accounts on these platforms is low. These users do not have to manage temporal context collapse because they can simply create different accounts to interact with people they meet in different life stages. On platforms such as LinkedIn, even though users typically maintain only one account tied to their offline identity, they experience less temporal context collapse because they usually only make disclosures on professional achievements and skills and are not expected to make disclosures that are very personal [47].

### 3.6.2 Ephemerality for Them, Persistence for Me

Social media platforms where temporal context collapse is especially problematic should consider designs like the Time Limit setting. The fact that content is ephemeral to audiences but persistent to posters prevents unwanted obsolete self-presentation in front of audiences while retains the value of social media data for posters.

Our work is a valuable case on social media users' self-presentation when social media data is both persistent and ephemeral. Goffman's theory of self-presentation is widely used to explain how people present their idealized images in front of other people in synchronous situations like face to face interactions [71]. Hogan [86] applies Goffman's theory to explain how social media users present themselves by creating an exhibition of artifacts (e.g., posts) afforded by the persistence of social media data. In line with Goffman's theory and Hogan's work, we showed that our participants were sensitive in how they presented themselves on Moments. We also showed that some of them applied the lowest denominator approach [86] to combat the pressure of self-presentation due to context collapse. In addition to self-presentation strategies outlined by Hogan and other researchers, we also found that our participants applied the Time Limit setting to manage their long-term exhibition of self-presentation. This exhibition, by default, is the full collection of one's social media data unless he deliberately deletes some of the data. With the Time Limit setting, Moments users set their social media data to be ephemeral to their audiences, customizing an appropriate area of exhibition of self-presentation. Interestingly, how they customize their self-presentation (i.e. their choices in how ephemeral their data should be) also becomes part of their self-presentation.

Our participants reported valuing the ability to make content ephemeral and persistent simultaneously with the Time Limit setting. This finding differs from Moments users in another study [120], where many participants expressed confusion about limiting information with the Time Limit setting and chose not to use it. In our study, only one participant (P9) expressed a similar opinion: *“You post because you want others to see. Since you want others to see it, it makes no sense if you hide.”* Other participants recognized the setting and only complained if they received extremely limited information (e.g., no posts displayed). One possible explanation is that it takes some time before social media users to try out different options in a new feature, explore their own needs, understand how their social networks perceive different options, and then finalize their choices in the feature. Interviews in [120] were conducted within one year of the launch of the Time Limit setting, so their participants could have still been exploring this setting at the time of data collection.

We asked our participants whether they would like to use a fully ephemeral setting, so that content was deleted instead of hidden from their audiences after the time limit. All participants said they would not use this feature. They wanted to retain access to the old posts because of its value: participants in this study—and in others—said they sometimes go through old posts to relive memories or to indulge in nostalgia [14, 166]. The desire to keep old content among Moments users is similar to Facebook users’ motivation to retain older Facebook posts as a “digital diary” [199].

The persistence of content is also important for users because users feel they “own” the data. Participants said they wanted their data to be there even if they did not go back to view it frequently. They said if anything should be deleted, users should have control

over when to delete—not the platform.

The ephemerality of content to audiences relieves users' concerns for having to create a consistent long-term self-presentation. In addition, since the platform's built-in features support users in hiding their old posts, users do not have to deal with the stress of retrospective impression management [168].

Ephemerality is not binary but a matter of degree, as suggested in [211]. The degree of ephemerality influences both the poster and the audience in terms of self-presentation. Under a high degree of ephemerality (e.g., 10 seconds in Snapchat Chat), the audience usually only engages with content for a short period of time, so his memory of this content can disappear quickly, leaving minimal influence on how he views the poster. The poster experiences less pressure in posting and does not need to engage in retrospective impression management. This is consistent with prior work on how Snapchat Chat users perceive the platform as a channel for mundane and unpolished posts [211]. Under medium ephemerality (e.g., three days in Moments), the audience is likely to revisit the content during its lifespan, for example, when he scrolls down his newsfeed too much and revisits posts he has already read yesterday. So the poster is more cautious posting and presenting himself, which is consistent with our interviews with Moments users, who applied multiple self-presentation strategies when posting. Inconsistencies in one's social media self-presentation are rarely obvious within three days but may be obvious in a longer period like six months. Thus, while a poster employing medium ephemerality or low ephemerality (e.g., six months in Moments) might have similar levels of self-presentation pressure when posting, the latter may be driven to retrospectively manage their self-presentation more frequently than the former. Our participants also noted this difference when comparing the three-day option

and the six-month option on Moments.

Social media platforms can implement temporal features similar to the Time Limit setting so that old content that expires from audiences' view remains accessible to posters. Then, the first question is: what is the proper expiry rate? Based on our results, Moments users dislike a high expiry rate (i.e., three days) as it conveys negative information about the user who applies this configuration; nor are they fully satisfied by a low expiry rate (i.e., six months) because of the potential of oversharing.

The second question is: How do platforms disclose or not disclose users' configurations of these temporal features to audiences? Our participants suggest that one's choice in the Time Limit setting also becomes part of his self-presentation. Future research is needed to explore user perceptions of social media data lifespan and users' interpretation of their networks' social media data lifespan across different social media platforms. We encourage social media platforms to run user studies to 1) find limited and representative temporal options for users since users can be overwhelmed facing too many options, and 2) explore the influence of the visibility of users' configurations of temporal features. A guide for using the temporal features should also be provided so users can select the best option for them. For example, platforms can guide users through an exploration of their past posting behaviors and their preferences of time, and provide information about how their contacts select between options.

### 3.6.3 Design Recommendations for Creating Boundaries Between Public & Personal Regions

Social media platforms should provide features that enable users to create a boundary between public and personal regions, like Time Limit setting does. The Time Limit setting creates a hard boundary between a public region—recent posts within the time limit—and a personal region—older posts outside the time limit. It guarantees that only users’ current self-presentation is displayed.

Researchers have argued that there is a natural temporal boundary between the public region (latest content) and the personal region (outdated content) on social media [217]. This boundary is typically soft and permeable on social media platforms and there is not a barrier between these two regions. For example, a “click to load older posts” button implicitly suggests a division between older and newer posts. However, users can ignore this division, press the button, and proceed to the older posts which typically represent a more personal region of self-presentation. Another example is Facebook’s Timeline, which allows users to navigate other users’ histories as far back as they want to simply by clicking on a time period and being taken to all posts from that time period. Features like this obscure the boundary between the public and the personal.

Time is only one method by which social media users may want to divide their social media data into the public and the personal. Social media platforms that implement a time limit setting may want to give more control to users than Moments allows, for example by allowing users to exempt some posts from the time limit setting. Because some posts are more valuable in representing one’s self and may remain valuable over time (e.g., graduation

posts). Such a feature would be similar to Twitter’s “pin a tweet to top,” which allows users more flexibility to customize their public regions. More research is needed to investigate if there are classes of posts that should be more public and others that should be less public. For example, platforms can automatically identify content about major life events (e.g., posts about graduations, weddings, birth of children) and prompt users to set this content more public, while making other content less public. Of course, in addition to time and importance of content, other dimensions to divide between public and personal should also be explored.

#### 3.6.4 Limitations

Because this study provides a qualitative examination of social media settings, we are limited in our generalizability. The 16 Moments users do not represent the general population of WeChat Moments users, and future research could use quantitative methods to identify the extent to which our findings hold across all Moments users. In addition, our participants originally hail from China and now are international students in the US. Their experiences with Moments are likely different from those who live in China because of the differences in how their social networks change and expand. More research is needed to examine how culture plays a role in social media users’ evolving self-presentation and their adoption of social media platform configurations. Our work is an interesting case on international students’ social media use.

### 3.7 Conclusion

Drawing on interview data with 16 WeChat Moments users, this study explores Moments users' rationales behind the Time Limit setting with a focus of their evolving self-presentation. We find evidence of temporal context collapse as Moments users describe various changes in their posting strategies to keep up with their own maturity and their expanding social networks. To mitigate the inconsistency between their self-presentation in their old posts and their new posts, Moments users repeatedly and retrospectively curate their past content to exhibit content that aligns with their current self-presentation goals. The Time Limit setting saves them this effort by assigning posts an expiry date, after which the posts are not viewable by their contacts but still accessible to themselves. We discuss the characteristics of social media platforms where temporal context collapse is especially problematic and provide design implications for these platforms to combat the problem. More research is needed to study social media users' perception of lifespan of their data, the duality of ephemerality and persistence, and the boundary between public region and personal region in one's social media data.

## Chapter 4: Within-Platform Variation in Self-Presentation

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### 4.1 Introduction

Social media provides people with the opportunity to present themselves online and carefully control and curate their self-presentation [86]. Many studies have examined self-presentation on a single platform, with some of the most popular being Facebook [104, 199, 205] and Snapchat [139, 192]. As people increasingly incorporate multiple social media accounts into their daily life [32], it is also important to understand how they navigate self-presentation across these different platforms.

Self-presentation in a social media ecosystem of platforms with different norms, audiences, and affordances is quite complex [47]. Users devote significant energy to navigating this complexity and achieving their desired self-presentational goals. For example, they need to create and manage boundaries between platforms to keep their identities and corresponding audiences separated [144, 178, 215].

A common framework for explaining between-platform differences in self-presentation is the affordance approach, which emphasizes that technical features on social media platforms are designed, perceived, and utilized differently, leading to differences in self-presentation [47, 180]. For example, LinkedIn’s profile interface resembles formatted resumes, encouraging a professional and formal self-presentation [196]. On the other hand, Tumblr is perceived as a creative and less-restrictive platform that encourages highly expressive self-presentation [47].

In recent years, maintaining multiple accounts on one platform has become increasingly common; for example, Reddit users may have “throwaway” accounts to post or comment on sensitive topics they do not want to link back to their main account [114], while Haimson and colleagues described how people undergoing identity transitions may maintain multiple accounts on social media platforms “to partition their networks into those who knew their current selves and those who knew their past selves” (p. 2902) [79]. Other researchers have highlighted ways that social media users navigate variegated self-presentation within a single account, such as politicians who try to balance personal and professional aspects of their personality [41] and teens who use strategies like social steganography to encode messages within their posts [22].

The within-platform difference in self-presentation cannot be explained by the affordance approach, as the technical features of multiple accounts on the same platform are the same. This raises questions about how social media users who create multiple accounts on a platform engage in different self-presentation strategies and manage their audiences. Instagram offers an opportunity to expand upon the limited research on within-platform difference in social media self-presentation. On Instagram, some users maintain two ac-

counts: a “real” Instagram (Rinsta) and a “fake” Instagram (Finsta), and usually perform different aspects of their personality on the two accounts [181].

In this study, we examine how college students present themselves on their Finsta and Rinsta, unpack the rationales behind differences in their self-presentation, and explore how they perceive responses to their self-presentation across the two accounts. To do this, we used paired surveys; in the first, we collected basic demographic information and open-ended responses regarding participants’ reasons for using Finsta and Rinsta, how they decide on what to post to each account, and their cross-posting experiences between the two accounts, if any. Participants who met inclusion criteria were invited to complete a second survey that presented them with up to six randomly selected posts from their two accounts; for each post, they rated their self-presentation and their perception of post responses across multiple dimensions.

Findings based on 499 rated posts and 453 open-ended responses highlight that participants’ self-presentation varied significantly between Finsta and Rinsta: they selectively presented positive and uplifting aspects of their lives with carefully edited pictures on Rinsta, and expressed themselves more freely—sometimes in emotional or negative ways—on Finsta. We also found that responses to Finsta posts were perceived as less satisfying, useful, supportive, and pleasant compared with that to Rinsta posts. Our mediation analysis suggests that emotions expressed in the post and the quantity of responses partially mediated the effect of account type on response perceptions.

This study builds on prior work in social computing and communication (e.g., [4, 181]) on how users re-purpose social media features and affordances to meet their multi-faceted self-presentation needs. Specifically, it extends prior qualitative and quantitative studies

of Finsta through a larger sample, by employing a study design where participants rated posts from each of their accounts, and by using advanced statistical analyses to identify mediating factors. Our findings provide quantitative support for qualitative studies like [210] and extend Taber and Whittaker’s quantitative findings [181] to explore how factors beyond personality traits varied across the two accounts.

Self-presentation is driven largely by one’s audience, and Finsta and Rinsta accounts differ significantly in their intended audience. By asking participants to reflect on the responses they received from their audiences across accounts, this study also helps explain why users take additional effort to engage in varied self-presentation. They may receive complementary benefits from using two accounts: Rinsta provides users with a large audience from whom they can receive positive feedback to their more curated self-presentation, while Finsta allows users to present their more authentic selves without being judged.

In the following sections, we overview prior work on social media and self-presentation, then describe our two-stage study of Finsta and Rinsta users. We present both quantitative and qualitative analyses of our data, then conclude by discussing how norms, platform features, and boundary management shapes users’ self-presentation on Instagram.

## 4.2 Related Work

### 4.2.1 Performing Self-Presentation on Social Media

There is a rich history of research examining how people make self-presentation decisions both offline and online. Goffman’s dramaturgical approach, developed in the 1950s, has been used to understand how people present their idealized selves in front of others, and

how their self-presentation varies based on the audience for whom they are performing [71]. Goffman distinguishes between the “front stage,” where people engage in more selective self-presentation that is tailored to their audience, and the “backstage,” where they can step away from that performance and be their true selves. For example, one is likely to dress and act differently when going to a job interview than when hanging out with friends.

In more recent years, researchers have extended Goffman’s work to online spaces and particularly to social media platforms (e.g., [217]). Hogan [86] notes that as self-presentation moves online, interactions are more likely to be asynchronous, with audiences viewing posters’ self-presentation after the process of performing is finished. Given the low cost of connecting with others, most social media users have a much larger audience with whom they engage, through both broadcasting content to a wide audience and through targeted interactions with individuals or smaller groups [57]. Navigating these audiences can be challenging due to context collapse [136, 197], whereby distinct audiences are grouped together into a homogeneous unit (e.g., “friends”).

Social media offers distinct affordances that shape how self-presentation occurs, and leads to different strategies than offline self-presentation. Due to the editability affordance of many platforms, users can carefully curate their self-presentation by selecting which aspects of their identity to share—and which to keep hidden [191]. The affordance of persistence offers a digital archive of one’s past posts, which can be both useful and embarrassing, depending on who is looking at the old content [168, 169]. In fact, the ephemerality of posts on platforms like Snapchat and WeChat are likely part of their appeal [15, 91]. Users also employ a wide range of social and technical strategies to manage their self-presentation across an often large and diverse audience [70, 198].

Researchers have identified several factors that influence how posters present themselves across different social media platforms [47, 55, 180]. DeVito and colleagues found that people’s perceptions of affordances related to self-presentation vary widely across platforms, explaining why they exhibit different self-presentation behaviors on different platforms [47]. Duffy and colleagues found that creative workers apply a platform-specific self-branding strategy to accommodate platform features, audiences, and their self-concepts on different platforms [55].

Researchers have also considered the effect of platform norms on self-presentation [164, 207]. For example, Waterloo and colleagues [207] found that people’s perceived appropriateness of sharing emotions differed across Whatsapp, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, such that Instagram was viewed as the least appropriate place for sharing negative emotions, and Whatsapp was the most appropriate place for sharing both positive and negative emotions. Sannon and colleagues evaluated how people with chronic illnesses decided which platforms to disclose about their health and found that participants carefully managed their disclosures depending on their audience on a given platform, and often migrated to new platforms that could better meet their needs [164].

Researchers have also evaluated the effect of audience on self-presentation [55, 144, 215]. When people post on social media, they conceptualize the audience with whom they are communicating [124] and adjust their self-presentation strategies accordingly [136]. The self-presentation practice gets more complicated as people navigate larger and more diverse audiences across their social media ecosystems [48, 79]. For example, Zhao and colleagues [215] found that social media users purposefully segment audiences by platform, keeping different dimensions of their identities and the audiences associated with each

separated.

#### 4.2.2 Self-Presentation Variation Within a Single Platform

While the above studies are useful for understanding potential variations in self-presentation across different platforms, they do not explain within-platform differences in social media self-presentation. Research has found that some Redditors create anonymous “throwaway” accounts to present their potentially stigmatizing aspects of their lives—discussing topics like mental health and obstacles in parenting [4, 148]—while avoiding context collapse [114].

Researchers have recently begun evaluating Instagram as one example of within-platform differences in social media self-presentation. This is due to the increasingly common practice of young people creating multiple accounts and presenting themselves differently across these accounts [102, 181]. These different profiles, reminiscent of Goffman’s distinction between front stage and backstage performances, are typically referred to as “Rinsta” and “Finsta” to distinguish the “real” and “fake” accounts.

Rinsta and Finsta accounts differ in self-presentation and audience. Research has found that Finsta is viewed as a space for less polished content shared with close friends [102, 210]. Consistent with their perceived norms on Finsta, people report that they create their Finsta to follow their friends’ Finsta and maintain small but close social networks [52, 102, 181, 210]. Users are clearly aware of differences in audiences between Finsta and Rinsta [52, 181] and devote much effort into having better control of Finsta audiences [210]. For example, Finstas are more likely to be set to private, and users closely manage whose

following requests they accept; this contrasts with Rinstas, which are more likely to be public-facing, with a more heterogeneous audience in mind [52, 181, 210].

As a consequence, people report that they post messy, random, funny, and negative content on Finsta while maintaining their Rinsta as a space to “put their best foot forward” [102, 181, 210]. Users also exhibit different personality traits on Finsta and on Rinsta. Taber and colleagues [181] found that people reported being more disagreeable and authentic on Finsta, while Kang and colleagues [102] found that people presented their actual self to a greater degree on Rinsta than on Finsta. Finally, Xiao and colleagues found that people think they present complementary aspects of themselves on Finsta and Rinsta, and neither is more accurate than the other [210].

Our study addresses some of the gaps in prior research. Most studies on Finsta have been qualitative (e.g. [52, 210]). In addition, the limited quantitative research on Finsta has treated self-presentation as a stable trait that did not vary within an account [102, 181]. However, individuals can present themselves differently within an account in different posts over time (e.g., [91, 168]) or in different communication channels within an account (e.g., Stories vs. Posts on Instagram [109], status updates vs. private messages on Facebook [16]). In prior research, participants’ responses might have been biased toward specific posts or be abstract and general. With our mixed-methods approach, we are able to quantify the difference in self-presentation between the two accounts by having participants view and rate randomly selected posts they have posted with explicit metrics of self-presentation, and to explain this difference with participants’ open-ended responses. Specifically, we ask:

- **RQ1: How do Instagram users’ self-presentation differ between Finsta**

## posts and Rinsta posts?

To answer this question, we measure three aspects of self-presentation: (1) self-presentation intention, which reflects how norms about self-presentation are perceived and performed; (2) effort put into editing images before posting; and (3) characteristics of the content shared, including emotions expressed, visual appeal, and post topics. We then follow up with qualitative analysis to enhance our quantitative results.

### 4.2.3 Perceptions Regarding Audience Responses to Posts

Self-presentation is not only about the performer, but also about the audience [71]. Social media users consider the potential audience for their posts [136,215]. Audiences can typically respond to posts and address needs signaled in posters' self-presentation, such as providing social support to those who disclose negative emotions (e.g., [6,34]), sharing useful information (e.g., [164]), responding to expressed emotions (e.g., [16]), or simply having fun and enjoyable interactions (e.g., [15]).

Several factors influence how posters perceive the responses to the content they share. Research has found that, regardless of relational closeness, people can provide social support to others on social media [29,59,155,162,162,164,209]. Weak ties or even strangers can provide valuable and useful information that one's close group cannot provide due to homophily [73,164]. Network composition also matters: Snapchat interactions were perceived as more enjoyable compared to other social media platforms, because users usually only interact with a small group of close friends on Snapchat [15].

The quantity of responses is as important as who provides responses. A study on

health blogging found that blogs with more reader comments were positively related to perceived social support [155]. Bazarova and colleagues [17] found that Facebook users perceive responses to posts with more comments and more likes as more satisfying and more useful. More responses also leave room for longer and more complex conversations, in which more useful information and constructive suggestions can be provided [95].

Emotions expressed in posts could shape the responses, which further influences how posters perceive the responses. Research suggests that after social media users use words about emotions, their contacts are more likely to use valence-consistent words and less likely to use words of the opposite emotions [108]. Bazarova and colleagues found that after sharing posts with more positive emotions, Facebook users are more satisfied [16, 17] and perceive the responses to the posts as more useful [17]. Posts with negative emotions might get supportive responses that include informational, emotional, esteem, instrumental, and/or social support [6, 83, 142].

Prior research on factors that influence social media users' perceptions of responses to their posts and the exploratory studies on self-presentation on Finsta suggest that users might perceive responses they receive on their Rinsta and Finsta posts differently. For example, Xiao and colleagues found that users regarded interactions on Rinsta (e.g., likes, generic comments) as superficial and transient while they perceived deeper engagement with their Finsta audience, who usually posted lengthy and supportive comments [210]. We propose to have participants reflect on their posts and responses they received under the posts and quantify how they perceived responses. We will examine the following question:

- **RQ2: How do Instagram users perceive responses to Finsta posts and**

## **Rinsta posts differently?**

Specifically, we will examine posters' perceptions of received responses in terms of satisfaction, usefulness, supportiveness, and pleasantness. Exploratory studies on Finsta suggested that negative emotions are appropriate and common in Finsta posts, while Rinsta is positivity-biased [181, 210]. To further explore this, we ask:

- **RQ2a: Do emotions expressed in posts mediate the effect of account type on perceptions of response?**

Finally, research suggests people usually maintain a smaller network on Finsta, which limits the range of people who can view and respond to their Finsta posts [181, 210]. Therefore:

- **RQ2b: Does the quantity of responses mediate the effect of account type on perceptions of response?**

## 4.3 Method

### 4.3.1 Procedures

After receiving approval from the university Institutional Review Board, we recruited participants in October and November 2020 from a large, public university in the eastern United States. Because we were targeting a small subset of people (Instagram users who actively maintained at least two profiles), we requested a random sample of 4000 undergraduate students from the Registrar's office and sent them survey invitations by email.

After approximately two weeks, a second random sample of 4000 undergraduates was requested to increase the sample size. The overall response rate was low (1.6%), likely due to a number of factors, including general survey fatigue, concerns the request was spam, the COVID-19 pandemic, the US Presidential Election, and the US Thanksgiving holiday. Beyond those factors, our recruitment focused on a narrow subset of Instagram users; even if some students were interested in the study, they may not have qualified to participate.

We targeted undergraduate students because they are among the most active social media users, and Finsta is especially popular among this age demographic [51,176]. Participants were required to be at least 18 years old; have two Instagram accounts, one regarded as their “real” account (Rinsta) and another one regarded as their “fake” account (Finsta); and be active on both accounts, making at least one post on each account within the last six months.<sup>1</sup>

The study included two surveys, both hosted on Qualtrics. In the first survey, participants reported their demographics, their general use of Finsta and Rinsta, and shared their Finsta and Rinsta usernames with us. Participants needed to accept a following request sent from the first author’s Instagram account if their Finsta and/or Rinsta was set to private so we could customize the second survey based on their posts. We only focused on posts, ignoring other forms of sharing on Instagram (e.g., Stories).

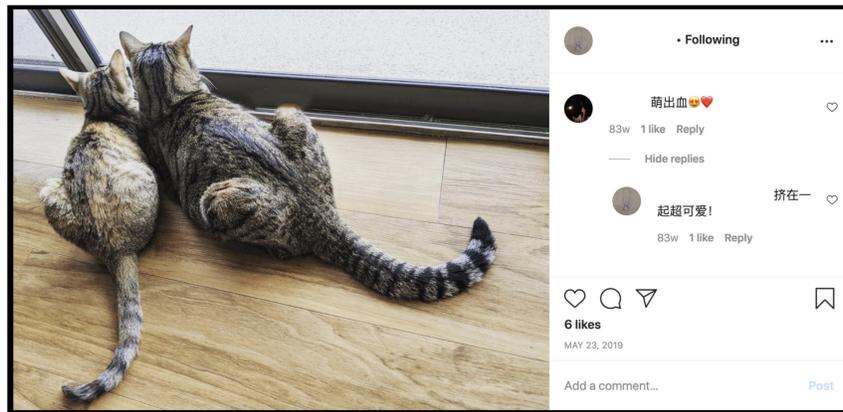
We collected a maximum of 30 recent posts from each participant’s account with Instagram Scraper<sup>2</sup> and kept the posts within the last six months. Participants who posted

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<sup>1</sup>We initially planned to focus recruitment on more active users, i.e., those who had at least three Rinsta posts and three Finsta posts within the last three months. However, the initial response rate was very low, and among those who completed the screener survey, many did not meet the original inclusion criteria. Therefore, we broadened the inclusion criteria to reach the sample size needed for analyses.

<sup>2</sup><https://github.com/arc298/instagram-scraper>

at least once within the last six months in both accounts were invited to complete the second survey, where they answered questions for two to six their posts. If they had more than three posts within the last six months on Finsta or Rinsta, three posts were randomly selected; if they had three posts or fewer, all of the posts were selected.<sup>3</sup> We used screenshots of the posts to help participants recall the situation when they posted. The screenshot stayed at the top of the survey page, with questions about the post listed directly below it (Fig. 4.1). The screenshot included the first picture of the post, the poster’s caption, and the likes and comments received, if any.



Think about the time when you wrote this post. How much do you agree with the following statements?

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
It was important for me to present myself positively in this post	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Figure 4.1: An example screenshot from the second survey. Questions about a post were listed under the screenshot.

<sup>3</sup>Our pilot testers (n=4) spent about 55 minutes rating 10 Instagram posts (5.5 minutes on each post). To collect sufficient data while not posing too much burden on participants, we asked participants to rate a maximum of six posts, hoping to have participants finish the second survey in less than 30 minutes. Respondents completed the ratings more quickly than our pilot testers, spending 17.4 minutes on the second survey, on average.

Each participant who finished both surveys was compensated with a \$5 Amazon Gift Card. Upon the completion of both surveys, participants were also entered into a raffle to win one of 10 \$50 Amazon Gift Cards.

### 4.3.2 Participants

We received 128 responses to the first survey. The majority of our participants identified as female (82.8%), and their age ranged from 18 to 25 ( $M = 19.8$ ,  $SD = 1.4$ ). Responses were relatively even across college year (freshman: 25.8%, sophomore: 28.9%, junior: 23.4%, senior and above: 21.9%). Among the 128 participants who finished the first survey, 29 of them were not qualified for the second survey (e.g., did not give us access to their accounts, did not have enough posts within the last six months), and one did not finish the second survey. The 98 participants who completed the second survey rated 499 posts in total (Finsta: 255, Rinsta: 244).

We report the general Instagram use of participants who finished both surveys in Table 4.1. Chi-squared tests showed that the posting frequency was significantly different between Finsta and Rinsta ( $\chi^2 = 20.01$ ,  $df = 6$ ,  $p = 0.003$ ,  $\phi = 0.32$ ), with participants posting more frequently on Finsta than on Rinsta—22.4% and 7.1% of participants posted at least weekly on Finsta and Rinsta, respectively. With this in mind, it was unsurprising that participants had more Finsta posts than Rinsta posts. They also had smaller social networks on Finsta than on Rinsta, both in terms of the number of followers and the number of accounts they followed. Their Rinsta accounts were followed by a diverse range of contacts including friends (100%), acquaintances (93.9%), family members (88.8%), relatives

	Finsta	Rinsta	t	p	Cohen's d
Num. Posts (last 6 months)	29.7(75.9)	6.5(7.6)	2.99	0.003	23.22
Num. Posts (total)	541.8 (2474.6)	63.7 (69.6)	1.91	0.06	478.10
Num. Followers	231.9 (1097.2)	1035.2 (764.3)	-5.95	< 0.001	-803.29
Num. Following	189.8 (268.6)	904.0 (650.6)	-10.27	< 0.001	-714.19

Table 4.1: Paired t-tests comparing the 98 participants' general Instagram use on Finsta and on Rinsta. Mean(SD) of their general Instagram use in are also included.

(81.6%), strangers (73.5%), colleagues (63.3%), a significant other (45.9%), and superiors from their job or school (23.5%). Their Finsta accounts were mostly followed by friends (99.0%), then by a significant other (30.6%) and acquaintances (30.6%). For 28.6% of participants, their Finsta followers only included friends.

Participants carefully managed their privacy configurations on Instagram. Looking at the 98 people who completed both surveys, 44.9% of them set both accounts to “Private” so that only approved users can view their content, while 39.8% set their Finsta to “Private” and Rinsta to “Public”. Only a small percentage of participants set both accounts to “Public” or set only their Rinsta to “Private” (7.1% and 8.2%, respectively).

### 4.3.3 Measures in the Second Survey

For each of the posts selected for the second survey, participants answered a set of questions, which we detail below.

*Self-presentation intention* (Cronbach's alpha = 0.86,  $M = 4.01$ ,  $SD = 1.56$ ). Participants rated their self-presentation intention when posting using the five-item self-enhancement scale [205]. They indicated their agreement with statements like “It was important for me to present myself positively in this post” and “This post reveals more desirable than undesirable things about myself,” on a seven-point scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly

agree).

*Picture editing.* Participants reported whether they applied filters and/or other picture editing techniques on the picture(s) of the post, and annotated if they used Instagram or external apps for picture editing. For those who edited their pictures, they also rated the effort they had put in editing the pictures of the posts using a scale from 1 (none at all) to 5 (a great deal). Less than half (194/495 posts) were edited. Overall, participants thought they used a little to a moderate amount of effort in editing pictures ( $M = 2.54$ ,  $SD = 0.94$ )

*Characteristics of posts.* Participants rated each post across three additional dimensions: expressed emotion, visual aspect, and post topic. First, they rated the emotion expressed in the post from 1 (strongly negative) to 7 (strongly positive). Overall, posts were rated as moderately positive ( $M = 5.61$ ,  $SD = 1.65$ ). Second, participants rated up to five statements about the visual aspect of their posts from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Two items were about the general visual effect presented in the post: “This post is visually appealing” and “The color scheme in this post is harmonious” (Cronbach’s alpha = 0.91,  $M = 5.07$ ,  $SD = 1.75$ ). Three items were about their appearance in the post, when applicable; for example: “I look attractive/cool/fashionable in this post” [141, 172, 187] (Cronbach’s alpha = 0.87,  $M = 5.21$ ,  $SD = 1.44$ ). Participants also annotated whether the pictures of themselves were selfies or non-selfie self-portraits. Third, participants annotated the topic of the posts. They could select from a curated topic list including frequent topics in research about Finsta (e.g., cursing/venting, Not Safe For Work) [210] and general social media literature (e.g., friendship, family) [181, 205]. They could also describe the topic of the post in their own words.

	Finsta		Rinsta	
	Range	Mean(SD)	Range	Mean(SD)
Self-presentational intention	1-6.8	3.12 (1.27)	1.8-7	4.94 (1.28)
Picture editing effort	1-4	1.96 (0.60)	1-5	2.74 (0.95)
Emotion valence	1-7	4.99 (1.86)	3-7	6.26 (1.08)
Appearance attractiveness	1-7	4.41 (1.57)	2-7	5.74 (1.04)
Visual appeal	1-7	4.23 (1.81)	1-7	5.96 (1.16)
Response satisfaction	1-5	3.61 (1.05)	1-5	4.20 (0.84)
Response usefulness	1-5	2.86 (1.30)	1-5	3.41 (1.18)
Response supportiveness	1-5	4.21 (1.03)	1-5	4.81 (0.58)
Response pleasantness	1-5	4.21 (0.96)	1-5	4.78 (0.65)

Table 4.2: Descriptive statistics of all the numerical measures about participants’ self-presentation in their posts.

*Perceptions Regarding Responses to Posts.* Participants answered two questions about their satisfaction to the responses on their posts [17] from 1 (not at all) to 5 (extremely): “To what extent did you like the responses (comments and likes) to your post?” and “To what extent were you satisfied with the responses to your post?” (Cronbach’s alpha = 0.92,  $M = 3.91$ ,  $SD = 0.98$ ). They also answered two questions about the usefulness of the responses [17] from 1 (not at all) to 5 (extremely): “To what extent did you find the responses to your post useful?” and “To what extent did you find the responses to your post valuable?” (Cronbach’s alpha = 0.87,  $M = 3.14$ ,  $SD = 1.27$ ). Participants also rated the pleasantness and supportiveness of their interactions with contacts in the responses using a 5-point semantic differential scale (1 = very unpleasant/unsupportive; 5 = very pleasant/supportive) [15]. Overall, they felt their interactions were both pleasant and supportive (Pleasantness:  $M = 4.50$ ,  $SD = 0.86$ ; Supportiveness:  $M = 4.51$ ,  $SD = 0.89$ ).

### 4.3.4 Qualitative Data & Coding

In the first survey, participants (N=128) answered three open-ended questions about (1) their motivation for using Rinsta, (2) their motivation for using Finsta, and (3) how they decided which account to post to. We asked a fourth question about cross-posting content to both accounts; 69 participants shared cross-posting experiences. In total, we included 453 responses across the four questions in our qualitative analysis.

We approached the data from a “contextual constructivist” position [130]. We did not seek to reach perfect agreement, instead recognizing that each coder likely interprets responses somewhat differently and that responses could have multiple meanings. This places less focus on metrics like inter-rater reliability and instead focuses on reflexivity of the coders and several rounds of coding and discussion.

To analyze responses, the two authors conducted several rounds of qualitative coding to identify themes across the corpus [106, 190]. First, they independently went through the responses for each question and came up with a set of codes. Then they met and discussed their themes, creating a codebook that reflected their combined coding. For the purpose of this study, they narrowed the set of codes to capture four themes that most closely matched the quantitative analyses: self-presentation intention, emotional expression, photo quality, and audience. See Table 4.3 for code definitions and examples. The authors further discussed each code and came up with examples for including and excluding a code.

The two authors then went back and independently re-coded the data. Multiple codes could be applied to a single response. They met a final time to review disagreements and decide on the appropriate code.

<b>Code</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Example</b>
Self-Presentation Intention	Comments that describe self-presentation goals for an account, or differences in self-presentation goals between the two accounts.	<i>I use Finsta to express my true unorthodox, or unprofessional opinions and ideas to my friends and my friends only. // I like presenting myself in a certain way in my Rinsta and it's more for showing bigger moments in my life.</i>
Picture Quality	Comments about picture quality or picture editing.	<i>If I take some good A1 pictures of myself, I post them to my Rinsta. When ... I take good pictures but not Rinstaworthy pictures, I post them to my Finsta.</i>
Emotion	Comments about sharing or expressing emotions through posts (e.g., ranting). Comments about an account being a safe space to share sensitive content without fear of judgment.	<i>I use [Finsta] as a fun spam account to just post whatever I want whenever I want. Only my close friends follow the account so it's a judgement free zone. I can rant and post crazy stuff on there. Everything stays private so it's safe.</i>
Audience	Comments about audience management or posting with a potential audience in mind, and references to whether an account is public or private.	<i>If it's something I only want my few close friends to see I would use my Finsta. // I use my Rinsta because I like a certain aesthetic and I'm proud of my pictures, so I want a larger audience to share them with, even tho I don't know everyone personally.</i>

Table 4.3: Codebook for open-ended responses regarding participants' rationales for using Finsta and Rinsta.

### 4.3.5 Limitations

This study is limited in its generalizability, in part, due to recruitment challenges. Our population of interest is relatively small compared to all Instagram users, and we had to relax our inclusion criteria to recruit a sufficient sample size. Although we wanted participants who were regular posters on both Finsta and Rinsta, we allowed those who posted as rarely as once every six months (on each account) to complete the study, and this less frequent use may influence results. Expanding our criteria from three months to six months may have also led to recall problems for some items (e.g., self-presentation intention, picture editing). In addition, since the posts included were posted during the COVID-19 pandemic, factors related to both posting frequency and post topics might deviate from that before pandemic (i.e., when participants had more chance of traveling, hanging out with friends).

We also recognize that some students may have chosen to not participate because they did not want to share their account information with researchers. The 98 participants who finished both surveys were comfortable with the researchers accessing to their Finsta accounts, which were usually regarded as a more private space (84.7% of Finstas were set to “Private”).

Lastly, our sample skewed heavily female, which could impact some findings. For context, 56.5% of Instagram users in the United States are female.<sup>4</sup> We do not have demographic data for users who maintain two profiles on Instagram.

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<sup>4</sup><https://www.statista.com/statistics/530498/instagram-users-in-the-us-by-gender/>

## 4.4 Quantitative Analyses

Below, we report results from our quantitative analyses. Since each participant rated multiple posts, we conducted multi-level modeling to control for potential within-participant differences. We used the R package “lme4” to build mixed effect linear regression models where participant ID was input as the random effect [13]. For RQ1, the models used account type (Finsta vs. Rinsta) as the predictor, and participants’ self-presentation across measured dimensions in each post as the outcome variables. For RQ2, the models used account type and post-level mediators as the predictors, and participants’ perceptions of responses to each post as the outcome variables. We used the R package “mediation” to perform the mediation analyses [189].

### 4.4.1 RQ1: Effect of Account Type on Self-Presentation

Participants rated several dimensions of self-presentation on each post, including how much they wanted to present themselves positively (*self-presentation intention*), how they utilized the technology to polish their self-presentation (*picture editing*), and three *characteristics of their posts*.

#### 4.4.1.1 Self-Presentation Intention

Participants reported having less intention to present themselves positively in Finsta posts than in Rinsta posts (Table 4.2). Self-presentation intention was significantly lower in Finsta posts than in Rinsta posts (Coef. = -1.84,  $p < 0.001$ , Table 4.4). Echoing previous literature, participants used their Rinsta, but not Finsta, as a space for “putting their best

	Intercept Coef. (SE)	Finsta (vs Rinsta) Coef. (SE)	$R^2_{conditional}$	$R^2_{marginal}$
Self-presentation intention	4.95 (0.10)***	-1.84 (0.10)***	0.52	0.34
Picture editing effort	2.74 (0.09)***	-0.75 (0.12)***	0.55	0.11
Emotional valence	6.26 (0.11)***	-1.27 (0.12)***	0.31	0.15
Visual appeal	5.96 (0.12)***	-1.76 (0.12)***	0.46	0.25
Appearance attractiveness	5.74 (0.11)***	-1.35 (0.12)***	0.47	0.21

Table 4.4: The results of the linear mixed effects models measuring the effect of account type on participants’ intention and effort in self-presentation, and self-presentation deliverables (\*\*\*)  $p < 0.001$ .

foot forward” [102, 181, 210].

#### 4.4.1.2 Picture Editing

Participants reported their picture editing behaviors on 495 posts.<sup>5</sup> In total, 39.2% posts were edited (194/495). Chi-squared tests showed that post editing behaviors differed significantly between Finsta and Rinsta ( $\chi^2 = 80.31$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $\phi = 0.40$ ), such that Finsta posts were less likely to be edited (Rinsta:  $144/242 = 59.5\%$ , Finsta:  $50/253 = 19.8\%$ ). In other words, the vast majority of Finsta posts went unedited, despite Instagram offering convenient one-click filters when posting.

Looking at the posts that were edited, participants reported putting less effort into editing Finsta posts than Rinsta posts (Table 4.2). On average, they thought they put less than “a little” amount of effort in editing the pictures in Finsta posts while putting between “a little” to “a moderate amount” of effort editing the pictures in Rinsta posts. Perceived picture editing effort was significantly lower in Finsta posts than in Rinsta posts (Coef. = -0.75,  $p < 0.001$ , Table 4.4).

<sup>5</sup>We excluded four posts because participants reported that they were not sure about their picture editing behaviors. We also note that four of the 495 posts only included videos. Due to the significant proportion of posts that included pictures, we kept the phrase “picture editing”.

### 4.4.1.3 Emotional, Visual, and Topical Characteristics of Posts

On average, participants expressed more positive emotions in their Rinsta posts than their Finsta posts (Table 4.2). Emotions expressed in Finsta posts were significantly more negative than that in Rinsta posts (Coef. = -1.27,  $p < 0.001$ , Table 4.4).

These results echo our descriptive data on topics of participants' posts (Table 4.5). While they reported covering a wide range of topics on both accounts, they were more likely to use Finsta for disclosing negatively valenced content. For example, on Finsta they were more open about their struggles and challenges in life (23.1% vs. 4.9% of Rinsta posts), and were more likely to vent or complain (17.3% vs. 0%). Participants reported sharing positive content on both accounts; for example, posting about their friends was the most common topic for both Finsta (24.7%) and Rinsta (32%). Posting about holidays and travel was more common on Rinsta (24.2%) than Finsta (8.6%).

Since Instagram is an image-based social media platform, we examined participants' perceptions of visual aspects of their posts, finding a significant effect of account type (Coef. = -1.76,  $p < 0.001$ , Table 4.4). On average, participants thought their Finsta posts were less visually appealing than their Rinsta posts (Table 4.2).

There was a significant difference in the type of pictures included in Finsta posts and in Rinsta posts ( $\chi^2 = 75.8$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $\phi = 0.39$ ). Rinsta posts were more likely to include self-portraits, especially non-selfie self-portraits than Finsta posts (Finsta: selfies = 42.0%, non-selfie self-portraits = 15.7%; Rinsta: selfies = 47.1%, non-selfie self-portraits = 41.8%).

Looking at posts including self-portraits, we found a significant effect of account type

Topic	% Finsta	% Rinsta
Friends	24.7	32.0
Holiday/Travel	8.6	24.2
Big life events	12.5	18.4
Arts/Culture/Literature/Movie/Music	14.9	13.5
Struggles/Challenges in life	23.1	4.9
Family	13.3	9.0
Cursing/Complaining/Negativity/Venting	17.3	0
Romantic relationship	7.8	7.4
Politics	4.7	6.6
Food/Cooking	7.5	1.6
Health/Medicine	5.5	2.5
Me/Self	1.2	6.6
Profession/Careers	3.1	4.5
Science/Technology	2.0	1.6
Fashion/Beauty/Hairstyle	2.0	1.2
Sex/Not safe for work (NSFW)	1.6	1.2

Table 4.5: Topic distribution in Finsta posts and Rinsta posts. The percentages do not add up to 100 because a post could be about multiple topics.

on participants’ perceptions of their appearances in these posts (Coef. = -1.35,  $p < 0.001$ , Table 4.4). On average, participants thought their Finsta self-portraits were less attractive than their Rinsta self-portraits (Table 4.2).

To summarize, we found that the effect of account type on self-presentation was significant. Participants reported lower self-presentation intention, devoted less effort into editing pictures and posted less visually appealing pictures, and showed more negative emotions with content across a diverse range of topics in their Finsta posts. Overall, these findings provide quantitative support to and extend Xiao et al.’s [210] qualitative study of Finsta, which found that users tend to post unfiltered content to Finsta.

#### 4.4.2 RQ2: Effect of Account Type on Perceptions of Post Responses

In addition to exploring differences in the type of content shared on Finsta and Rinsta, we also considered whether participants perceived interactions with audiences differently across the two accounts. We answered RQ2 based on posts that received responses (468/499 = 93.8%). To understand what predicted participants' perceptions of post responses, we ran three sets of mixed effect models on each of the four dimensions of participants' perceptions: satisfaction, usefulness, supportiveness, and pleasantness. Our baseline models included the account type as the fixed effect and participant id as the random effect. To understand whether emotion expressed and the quantity of responses mediated this relationship, we added the corresponding predictors to the baseline models and ran mediation analysis.

On average, participants reported lower levels of satisfaction, usefulness, supportiveness, and pleasantness on responses to their Finsta posts compared with responses to their Rinsta posts (Table 4.2). Our baseline models showed that the effect of account type was significant across the four outcome variables (Table 4.6).

The mediation analysis suggests that the emotional valence of a post partially mediates the effect of account type on participants' perception of post responses across the four dimensions. As previously reported, account type was a significant predictor of the emotion expressed in the post, such that Finsta posts expressed more negative emotions. In addition, emotional valence was also a significant predictor of the perceptions of post responses, weakening the effect of account type compared with the baseline models (Table 4.6). The indirect effect of the emotion expressed was significant for all four dimensions (satisfaction: Coef. = -0.24, 95% CI = [-0.33, -0.16],  $p < 0.001$ ; usefulness: Coef. = -0.18,

	Satisfaction	Usefulness	Supportiveness	Pleasantness
<i>Baseline models</i>				
Finsta (vs Rinsta) Coef. (SE)	-0.59 (0.08)***	-0.59 (0.09) ***	-0.61 (0.07)***	-0.58 (0.07) ***
Intercept Coef. (SE)	4.19(0.07) ***	3.41(0.10) ***	4.82 (0.06) ***	4.78(0.06) ***
$R^2_{conditional}$	0.36	0.39	0.29	0.22
$R^2_{marginal}$	0.09	0.05	0.12	0.11
<i>Models with Emotion Expressed as Mediator</i>				
Finsta (vs Rinsta) Coef. (SE)	-0.35(0.08) ***	-0.41(0.10)***	-0.42(0.07)***	-0.35(0.07)***
Emotion Expressed Coef. (SE)	0.19(0.03) ***	0.14(0.03)***	0.15(0.02)***	0.18(0.02)***
Intercept Coef. (SE)	3.03(0.18) ***	2.53(0.24) ***	3.89 (0.17) ***	3.63 (0.16) ***
$R^2_{conditional}$	0.42	0.41	0.34	0.32
$R^2_{marginal}$	0.17	0.08	0.18	0.21
<i>Models with Number of Comments as Mediator</i>				
Finsta (vs Rinsta) Coef. (SE)	-0.41(0.08)***	-0.39(0.11)***	-0.52(0.08)***	-0.52(0.08)***
Num. Comments Coef. (SE)	0.009(0.002)***	0.01(0.003)***	0.004(0.002)*	0.003(0.002)
Intercept Coef. (SE)	3.98(0.09) ***	3.17(0.12) ***	4.72 (0.08) ***	4.72 (0.07) ***
$R^2_{conditional}$	0.39	0.42	0.30	0.23
$R^2_{marginal}$	0.12	0.08	0.13	0.12

Table 4.6: Three sets of linear mixed effects models measuring the effect of predictors on participants' perceived satisfaction, usefulness, supportiveness, and pleasantness from the responses they received under their posts (\*\*\*)  $p < 0.001$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ ). Baseline models included account type as the only predictor.

95% CI = [-0.28, -0.09],  $p < 0.001$ ; pleasantness: Coef. = -0.23, 95% CI = [-0.31, -0.16],  $p < 0.001$ ; supportiveness: Coef. = -0.19, 95% CI = [-0.27, -0.12],  $p < 0.001$ ). The results suggest that responses to Finsta posts were regarded as less satisfying, useful, supportive, and pleasant compared with Rinsta posts partly because the emotions expressed in the posts were more negative. This finding resonates with prior work that found people perceive responses to posts with more positive emotions as more useful, and social media users feeling more satisfied sharing more positive emotions in their posts [16,17]. Participants did not perceive more supportiveness when expressing more negative emotions on Finsta, suggesting that negative disclosures on Finsta—and on other platforms—might be driven by different underlying mechanisms: Finsta disclosures might be more about getting emotions off one’s chest without expecting responses and supportiveness, while on other platforms, people signal the need for support when they share negative emotions and stories (e.g., depressed emotions, traumatized experiences) [4,6].

We used the number of comments to measure the quantity of responses. The mediation analysis suggests that the number of comments on a post partially mediates the effect of account type on the perceived satisfaction, usefulness, and supportiveness—but not the perceived pleasantness of post responses. Account type was a significant predictor of the number of comments received, such that Finsta posts received significantly fewer comments. The number of comments was also a significant predictor of perceived satisfaction, usefulness, and supportiveness in post responses, weakening the effect of account type compared with the baseline models (Table 4.6). The indirect effect of the number of comments was significant (satisfaction: Coef. = -0.18, 95% CI = [-0.27, -0.10],  $p < 0.001$ ; usefulness: Coef. = -0.21, 95% CI = [-0.33, -0.10],  $p < 0.001$ ; supportiveness: Coef. =

-0.08, 95% CI = [-0.15, -0.01],  $p < 0.05$ ). The results suggest that responses to Finsta posts were regarded as less satisfying, useful, and supportive in part because Finsta posts received fewer comments than Rinsta posts. The results echo previous research showing that the quantity of responses matters [17, 155].

## 4.5 Qualitative Analysis

To supplement the quantitative analyses presented above, we also provide a synthesis of key themes identified in participants' answers to four open-ended questions. We have organized these findings to mirror the quantitative findings for RQ1 and discuss differences in self-presentation intention, picture quality, and emotional content between the two accounts, as well as differences in perceived audience for Rinsta and Finsta posts.

### 4.5.1 Self-Presentation Differences Across Finsta and Rinsta

Participants talked about perceived norms of sharing on Finsta and Rinsta and described how they incorporated these norms in their self-presentation on the two accounts. The biggest normative difference in content was that Rinsta was for positivity and putting their best foot forward, while Finsta was for authenticity or sharing a more raw and real side of their lives.

Rinstas were much more likely to be public accounts, and participants described specific goals for their self-presentation, focusing on positive posts, posts where they looked attractive and/or professional, and posts presenting an idealized version of their life. For example, one participant said they used Rinsta *“to do the typical ‘social media’ thing and*

*show the best parts of my life.*” Others described their Rinsta as “*formal,*” “*professional,*” and “*public,*” or where they could “*receive external validation.*” They tended to share significant life events and pictures of better quality on Rinsta—both in terms of their appearance in self-portraits, as well as using photo editing to enhance the image. A few participants mentioned using their Rinsta for advocating causes and voicing their political opinions, especially if these were a core part of their identity.

Finstas, on the other hand, were often perceived as a place where one could be themselves and not worry about maintaining a public persona, much in the way Goffman [71] described the back stage, or as a participant described it: “*a less public account with less importance about ‘public image.’*” While they still perceived norms around Finsta, these norms focused on the absence of many of the strategies they felt they needed to conform to on their Rinstas. For example, in comparing their accounts, one participant said, “*It’s fun to use and to post random things that I wouldn’t post on my Rinsta because there’s pressure for your Rinsta feed to be perfect.*” They thought their Finsta self was “*less artificial*” and better reflected who they really were. They achieved these more authenticity-driven self-presentation goals on Finsta by posting less-calculated content and, sometimes said they posted anything that was on their mind at the moment, without thinking too much. Some participants used their Finsta to share specific interests or hobbies that they did not want to “overload” their Rinsta followers. The themes of these Finsta accounts included participants’ art and poetry, plants, drones, cars, food, and fitness.

Participants’ responses about their cross-posting experiences to Finsta and Rinsta highlight the difference in self-presentation between the two accounts. Slightly more than half (53.9%) of participants shared cross-posting experiences, where they posted the same—

or similar—images to to both accounts. When cross-posting, they typically posted different types of pictures from the same event to Finsta and Rinsta. Consistent with their perceived self-presentation norms on the two accounts, they usually decided which pictures to post based on picture quality and whether the pictures contributed to their self-presentational goals. For example, one participant mentioned, *“Usually I’ll post the good pictures from an event to Rinsta and the funny ones to Finsta.”*

The distinction between self-presentation on Finsta and Rinsta aligns strongly with Goffman’s metaphor of the front and backstage, where the front stage is the polished performance and the backstage is more casual and relaxed [71]. One participant said, *“On my Finsta I basically just gave a behind the scenes to the picture that I posted on my actual Insta (Rinsta).”* Participants also shared examples when they cross-posted about traveling or going to prom, concerts, or theme parks. For example, a participant said, *“Prom pictures was on both my Rinsta and Finsta. I had my pretty done-up pictures on Rinsta and my gross candid or after-party pictures on my Finsta.”*

One of the most common distinctions participants made when talking about cross-posting to both their Finsta and Rinsta was in the length and content of their captions. Most said they tended to be more descriptive about their real feelings and experiences in their Finsta captions. For example, a participant cross-posted about a show she was in on both Finsta and Rinsta, saying: *“On my Rinsta, I posted the photos I actually liked that showed off the event and I looked alright in. On my Finsta, I posted some behind the scenes of getting ready, and a picture everyone liked but I hated. The caption on Rinsta was simple but my Finsta caption was a small recap of the event.”* In general, participants also talked about posting *“short and cute”* captions on their Rinsta, while their Finsta

captions were longer and provided a space for behind-the-scenes information, complaining, fangirling, and more backstage disclosures.

Because Finsta was where users felt they could be more authentic and raw, and because these accounts tended to be smaller and more friend-focused, it was unsurprising to find that many participants said they used the account for venting, rants, and other emotional expressions. For example, one participant used Finsta *“to vent and unload to people I know who care”* while another noted they used it *“to rant and post things that are more personal about myself.”* Finsta provided an important outlet for expression to many of our participants, especially when they felt pressured to present their lives as happy and positive on their Rinsta. Echoing [207], we found that participants reserved Finsta for negative emotion expressions because Rinsta was viewed inappropriate for sharing negative emotions. We also found that some participants valued Finsta for providing emotional catharsis without an expectation that others respond or provide support. In an example of this, one participant said: *“I sometimes use it to express how I’m feeling to an audience that won’t necessarily respond. Sort of like a venting medium.”*

#### 4.5.2 Picture Quality Dictates Where to Post

Consistent with our findings regarding self-presentation intention and the image-oriented nature of Instagram, participants heavily relied on picture quality to decide which account to post to, and they described the effort they devoted into picture shooting and editing. Overall, pictures deemed *“good”* went to Rinsta, while pictures that did not make the cut quality-wise went to Finsta. More specifically, they described their Rinsta posts as

including “cute” pictures where they “look good,” and pictures that they were “proud of” and wanted to “show off,” while their Finsta posts were more about “casual,” “candid,” “random,” “silly,” and “funny” pictures. As one participant succinctly noted: “Finsta gets all my bad pictures.”

Participants said they put a lot of effort into selecting and editing pictures for Rinsta, but not for Finsta. Some described photo shoots or carefully planned images, like this participant: “I almost always post on my Finsta unless it’s a planned out picture that I took with the intention of posting on my main [Rinsta], in which case I take 50-100+ pictures usually and pick the top 1-5ish.” For more styled pictures, participants tended to “dress up” and “pose” to ensure they looked good in the pictures. One participant mentioned using a DSLR camera to shoot high-quality pictures for Rinsta, despite it being much easier to use their phone camera. Participants also described applying various photo editing techniques to images before posting to Rinsta. Participants recognized the effort they put in editing pictures in Rinsta posts, with one noting, “My Rinsta is for...photo essays I spent more than two hours on editing.” On the contrary, participants never mentioned paying attention to shooting and editing pictures for Finsta.

An unexpected use of Finsta by our participants was part of their picture curation process. A few participants said they used Finsta to see how the pictures would look on the platform; for example: “I use my Finsta to understand how my photos will turn out if I wanted to post them on my Rinsta.” They also mentioned cross-posting to Finsta to get feedback from friends and select the best picture from a set before officially posting to Rinsta. One participant said, “On Finsta, I’ll ask which ones [unedited pictures] to post or maybe ask for a caption and then I’ll post the actual edited pictures to my Rinsta with a

*good caption.*” Another participant said they would post the unedited version of an image to Finsta and the edited version of the same image to Rinsta.

### 4.5.3 Audiences Differ Between Finsta and Rinsta

Participants described different audiences for their Finsta and Rinsta accounts, both in explicit terms, such as when noting Finsta is *“just for friends”* or more broadly, such as describing Rinsta as a place to *“tell the world about all the cool things I do.”* Audience perceptions were often directly tied to use of privacy settings, and many Finsta accounts were set to private so only a selected few friends could view posts.

Use of privacy settings was less common on Rinsta, and participants said they expected their posts to be viewed by large and diverse audiences. Because public accounts are harder to manage, they carefully curated their posts, focusing on high-quality content that reflected positively on them. For example, one participant said, *“I use my Rinsta to establish myself online for possible employers, acquaintances, and people that I meet in life so they can see that I am a legitimate person.”* Many participants’ Rinstas were followed by strangers, which helped them evaluate their sharing decisions. Participants considered whether their posts would be appropriate or safe for strangers to view; for example: *“If it’s too personal/inappropriate for strangers to see, I will post on Finsta because I only have friends/people I trust on there.”*

This participant’s statement was echoed by many others, and reflects the more private and friend-focused nature of Finsta. Because content was heavily gated, participants felt they could freely express themselves without fear of judgment, and seek support and

feedback from their network. Participants viewed their Finsta as a “*safe haven*” for sharing intimate or painful moments from their life. For example, one participant noted, “*Only my close friends follow the account so it’s a judgment-free zone. I can rant and post crazy stuff on there. Everything stays private so it’s safe.*” By controlling who can see content, Finsta accounts allowed for significantly more freedom than the carefully curated Rinsta accounts.

## 4.6 Discussion

Social media platforms provide a number of ways for users to connect and interact with others, and numerous researchers have documented social media users’ self-presentation strategies. Research on online self-presentation has largely focused on either how individuals self-present on a single platform [192, 205] or has compared self-presentation across several platforms, where different features and norms afford different self-presentation goals [47, 196]. However, few studies have considered how self-presentation varies on a single platform, with most of these studies considering how users try to segment their audiences and mitigate the effects of context collapse [199]. On Instagram, however, some users engage in varied self-presentation by creating two accounts: one for more visually appealing, “Instagrammable” content (Rinsta), and one for a subset of their network, typically just friends and close connections, where they are less refined and more authentic (Finsta). This distinction closely reflects what Erving Goffman described as “front stage” and “backstage” performances in his canonical work on self-presentation in the 1950s [71]. In this case, Rinstas represent the front stage, where users portray the more idealized and

desirable version of themselves; Finstas are where they hang out and relax with friends without prying eyes or judgment.

Our quantitative and qualitative analyses highlight differences in Instagram users' self-presentation goals across their Finsta and Rinsta and their strategies to achieve these different goals. Our study complements and extends prior Finsta research by quantitatively examining self-presentation across several dimensions at the post level with a larger sample [102, 181, 210]. Previous research briefly mentioned how users perceive interactions on Rinsta and on Finsta [210]. Our study uses surveys to prompt participants to reflect on responses received under posts across multiple dimensions, suggesting the audience feedback is much more important on Rinsta than on Finsta. Together, these findings provide a more robust understanding of how users engage in self-presentational processes and adjust self-presentation based on their goals and audience.

Rather than focusing on the role socio-technical affordances play in shaping self-presentation on different accounts, our study identifies within-platform differences in social media users' self-presentation and emphasizes that users' perceptions of their Finsta and Rinsta accounts shape their self-presentation. Below, we discuss within-platform differences in perceived norms related to self-presentation, technical features used to fulfill different self-presentational goals, and boundary management between Finsta and Rinsta, and we argue that the two types of accounts provide complementary benefits and achieve users' multi-faceted self-presentation goals.

#### 4.6.1 Same Platform, Different Norms: Differences in Self-Presentation on Finsta and Rinsta

The clearest finding from our data—supporting and extending the small qualitative study by Xiao and colleagues [210]—is in the self-presentational differences between Rinsta and Finsta. Rinsta, in many ways, is the prototypical social media account, where users engage in idealized and even exaggerated self-presentations that show themselves in the best possible light. Our participants described spending significant time taking and editing pictures, or asking themselves whether a picture was “*Rinsta worthy*” before posting.

By itself, one could argue that this form of self-presentation is typical and potentially even problematic, given research suggesting the selectively chosen content shared on social media gives viewers a skewed perception of others’ lives and may have negative effects on users’ mental health [92, 170]. On the other hand, Finsta accounts may provide users with a needed outlet to step out of their front-stage performance and enter the backstage. As Goffman [71] notes, if the front stage expects people to behave in particular and normative ways, the backstage allows them to step away from their performance and focus on themselves rather than the audience. This framing is well-aligned with how many of our participants described their Finsta accounts: Finsta provided a place to vent and rage, to be vulnerable, to share whatever they wanted—all without concern about judgment or negative consequences. When cross-posting about the same thing on both accounts, many described being more comfortable sharing the imperfect “behind-the-scenes” moments on Finsta, both in their image selection and through variations in their captions. This may also be why participants reported posting more frequently on Finsta; there were fewer

expectations and they could be themselves with friends they knew and trusted.

Having these two distinct spaces for self-presentation can provide people with important benefits. Some participants mentioned using Rinsta to present a professional persona or expand their networks. These goals are not aligned with Finsta accounts, where users described more authentic and raw self-presentations and strengthening their connections with their closest friends, often by making their account private and limiting access to a select few. Balancing one’s personal and professional identities can be challenging, especially on social media. Researchers have highlighted the challenges politicians and celebrities face when trying to achieve this balance between their professional roles and their personal lives on Twitter [41, 136]. In practice, job-related platforms like LinkedIn, even with similar features to Facebook (e.g., friending, posting updates), do not try to be friend-focused platforms [196].

Different aspects of identities are naturally segmented, as reflected in how participants described using their Finsta and Rinsta. However, this is not to say that there is no overlap between the two identities. Over half of our participants described examples of cross-posting, sharing the same event with different images and captions. These cross-posting examples highlight the blurred boundaries between self-presentational goals across accounts. Previous research [215] found that people were extremely cautious with cross-posting because it “may entail losing control of platform boundaries around audience” (p. 94) and making their audience aware of their accounts on other platforms—where they may have different self-presentational goals, sharing strategies, and audiences. Participants in our study did not express similar concerns when talking about cross-posting between Finsta and Rinsta, likely in part because the access to Finsta accounts was heavily regulated, and

it was usually seen as okay for their Finsta audience to see their Rinsta posts.

#### 4.6.2 Using Platform Settings and Features to Achieve Self-Presentation Goals

To achieve desired self-presentational goals on Finsta and Rinsta, participants applied the platform's features differently. For example, at the account level, they configured their privacy settings and were more likely to set their Finsta accounts to private (84.7% vs 53.1% for Rinsta). The privacy setting of Finsta added a layer of personal and information security to the more more personal, sensitive, or unedited content shared here. For example, one participant said, *“Any pictures that reveal anything related to my location or other sensitive information go to my private Finsta for security reasons since many of the people following my Rinsta I do not know.”*

Participants also differentiated their post-level configurations, most notably via the thought that went into choosing content to post and the amount of editing. One surprising variation of this was mentioned by a few participants who described posting images to Finsta to get feedback from friends about which picture(s) should be posted on Rinsta, or to get a sense of how an image would appear on Instagram. This example highlights a core difference in self-presentation goals, where participants expressed little concern about posting more unfinished, raw, or lower quality images to their Finsta, while carefully edited and curated pictures posted to Rinsta to ensure they were *“Instagrammable.”*

Photo editing can happen both on Instagram and through external apps, and Instagram nudges users to edit content through their interface. Users can make simple edits

to their posts with one click, such as when they apply a filter. Our participants reported that they did not edit most of their Finsta posts. This was likely a purposeful decision for most, given their self-presentational goals for their Finsta, with one participant noting: *“My Finsta acts as a place where I can be myself in a, quite literally, unfiltered way.”*

On the other hand, participants said they were more likely to edit Rinsta posts with Instagram’s built-in features, which is also consistent with their self-presentational goals of presenting the *“best version”* of themselves, or conveying the *“pretty”* aspects of their lives. This view is also aligned with Instagram’s focus on photo editing and filters since it launched in 2010; it was one of the earliest platforms to provide filters to enhance images [89], and filter use has become largely normalized on the platform.

A final feature mentioned by participants, especially in their description of cross-posting experiences, was how they used captions across their accounts. By allowing captions of up to 2200 characters long, Instagram allows users to engage in self-presentation beyond what is in the images. Many participants noted the caption was often more important on Finsta while the image was more important on Rinsta. When cross-posting about the same event on both accounts, they tended to include more genuine and lengthy caption in their Finsta posts while pairing a *“cute”* and brief caption to their Rinsta posts. Given that Instagram studies have largely focused on images shared through the platform, this represents a new avenue through which to explore how social media users re-purpose site features to achieve self-presentation goals.

### 4.6.3 Using Two Accounts to Facilitate Boundary Management

Consistent with previous research on boundary regulation between multiple social media accounts [178, 215], identity/audience management was the most frequently mentioned motivation for our participants' use of Finsta and Rinsta. Participants left their positive and polished side on Rinsta, and their unfiltered, sometimes negative, side on Finsta, and made it very clear that they wanted to keep their audiences on each account separate, even if that required the additional effort of managing two accounts.

Some participants adopted a unique strategy to manage the boundary between their Finsta and their Rinsta. They did not specifically hide the fact that they had a Finsta; instead, they strictly managed who could access their Finsta accounts, as also mentioned in prior work [210]. Some participants purposefully linked their Finsta and Rinsta by using one account to follow another (60.2% of them used their Rinsta to follow their Finsta, 74.5% of them used their Finsta to follow their Rinsta), so that Instagram might recommend their Finsta accounts to their Rinsta followers. Other participants directly announced their Finsta in their Rinsta profile description, signaling to their Rinsta followers that another aspect of themselves was out there.

Since the vast majority of participants set their Finsta to "Private" (84.7%), linking the two accounts in this way might help users build up their Finsta audience in a more controlled manner. Finsta networks were carefully curated to avoid context collapse [136], which could be problematic when a message for one audience is viewed by others, who might not understand or approve of the message. One participant described how their audience management decisions helped them avoid context collapse: *"I don't have to worry*

*about messages being taken out of context because everyone on my Finsta would understand what I mean.”*

While context collapse was unlikely on Finsta due to strict audience management, our participants reported significantly lower levels of satisfaction, usefulness, supportiveness, and pleasantness in responses to their Finsta posts compared with Rinsta posts. This is contrary to [210], who found that through venting, Finsta users can get emotional support from peers. Future research is needed to better unpack the relationship between venting and support on Finsta. On the other hand, consistent with previous research highlighting that the quantity of responses matters in posters’ well-being [16, 155], we found that the number of comments participants received had a positive effect on perceived satisfaction, usefulness, and supportiveness in post responses. On Finsta, where the number of followers is usually much smaller and accounts are usually private, the quantity of comments is usually capped by the audience who can access the post. We also found that the valence of emotions shared in the post positively influenced how participants perceived post responses. This finding is consistent with previous research on emotional contagion that after users use words about emotions on their social media, their contacts adopt valence-consistent words [108]; as a consequence, it is not surprising that we found participants perceived responses to posts with more positive emotions as more pleasant. Our result is also consistent with [16] that people will feel more satisfied after sharing more positive emotions in posts, and with [104] that positive self-presentation enhances one’s well-being.

To summarize, our results extend prior studies of Finsta [181, 210] and suggest that reserving a private communication space with a small group of close friends and opening up to broad and comparatively distant friends can both benefit social media users. Our

results also indicate that offloading negative emotions and publicizing positive emotions are both critical emotional expressions on social media. These complementary and equally important benefits can explain why some users are willing to invest their time and energy into maintaining multiple social media accounts. We encourage future work to explore additional aspects of response perceptions and dig deeper into how the two accounts support Instagram users' mental well-being.

## 4.7 Conclusion

Social media have evolved significantly in the last 20 years, from a few platforms focused on friendship to now offering platforms devoted solely to images, videos, ephemeral messages, interactions with celebrities and strangers, and more. But one factor that has remained constant since their inception—in fact, that extends beyond social media to earlier forms of computer-mediated communication like message forums—is that users of these platforms engage in varied, and often carefully curated, forms of self-presentation [47, 87]. After all, our online selves are an extension and reflection of our offline selves, and how we self-present in different environments with different audiences matters [71].

In this paper, we have considered how Instagram users take advantage of the platform's features and affordances to present two distinct sides of their identity and to engage with different audiences. Through paired surveys and data from participants' two Instagram accounts, we show how Finsta and Rinsta serve very different self-presentation goals. To achieve these goals, participants devoted much effort into segmenting and managing audiences between accounts, and into creating content for both accounts. While this ap-

proach to impression management is more intensive than maintaining a single account, we argue that Finsta and Rinsta are complementary, allowing users to connect with friends of all kinds without experiencing context collapse, and to benefit from both negative emotion expression and positive self-presentation.

By gaining a deeper understanding of how Instagram users differentiate Finsta and Rinsta and benefit from using both accounts, we have opened up a new set of questions for future researchers. For example, when thinking about the role of authenticity in self-presentation, how do audiences perceive users' multi-faceted self-presentation? Beyond that, researchers may consider what is lost when social media becomes highly segmented. For example, researchers have highlighted how diverse networks facilitate social capital on social media platforms [59, 111]; if we keep audiences separated based on platform, account, and/or self-presentational goal, can we still obtain those resources?

Given that many social media users seek to avoid or mitigate context collapse, platforms should continue exploring various design options regarding privacy settings and audience management configurations. Beyond binary options (e.g., private vs. public accounts, as offered by Twitter and Instagram), are there account-level privacy settings that would help users better achieve their self-presentation goals without experiencing context collapse? One option is to offer more ephemeral forms of interaction, which other researchers have found offers self-presentation benefits [15, 91]; Instagram does offer this form of sharing through their "Stories" Feature [192], but there may be other formats to control not just who can access content but *when* they can access it. Finally, features that already exist (e.g., Facebook's "Friend Lists") or are re-purposed by users (e.g., creating multiple accounts to segment one's audience) to combat context collapse can be hard to maintain [198], so we

encourage researchers to evaluate whether there are more sustainable methods to assist users in achieving a varied self-presentation both within and across platforms.

Drawing on this and prior work, we argue that Finsta represents a robust area for expanding our understanding of self-presentation and identity, and has many applications for designers building and improving social media systems.

## Chapter 5: Between-Platform Variation in Self-Presentation

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### 5.1 Introduction

Social media has become a ubiquitous part of people’s lives, and people increasingly adopt multiple social media platforms that serve different self-presentational goals. Data from the Pew Research Center shows that 73% of the American adults use multiple social media platforms [32]. Self-presentation across multiple social media platforms is complicated and challenging, because people are under the tension of navigating norms, being familiar with technical features and affordances, and managing audiences on and across these platforms [48, 74, 78, 79, 145, 215].

In this study, I seek to understand how people navigate their self-presentation across their social media platforms by focusing on cross-posting, defined as *the act of posting about the same thing to multiple social media platforms*. I focus on cross-posting because it is a representative scenario where the tensions inherent in self-presentation are peaked. Specifically, people need to reevaluate their self-presentation goals and the norms of self-presentation on each of the platforms they are cross-posting to, figure out the features

and affordances that support—or don’t support—cross-posting, and consider differences between their desired audience for the cross-post versus the actual audience who can see the cross-post.

This study also extends the limited research on social media cross-posting. Prior cross-posting studies have used large-scale datasets to quantitatively measure the macro patterns of people’s posting behaviors (e.g., [63, 121, 146]). These studies have addressed some of the questions in social media cross-posting. For example, Lim and colleagues examined social media users who linked their accounts on six platforms and found that over 90% of Instagram users shared their Instagram posts to another platform [121]. However, they left the “why” questions behind social media cross-posting behaviors unanswered.

To the best of my knowledge, this is the first study to look at rationales behind social media cross-posting and specifically focuses on people’s self-presentation goals and challenges negotiated in the process. I ask two research questions:

- **RQ1: What are social media users’ primary motivations for cross-posting content to multiple platforms?**
- **RQ2: How do social media users’ self-presentation goals affect their (a) platform choice, (b) content drafting, and (c) audience management when cross-posting?**

From in-depth interviews with 15 participants who regularly cross-post across their social media, I identified that the primary goal of cross-posting is to ensure content reaches the desired audience. Participants were aware of who their audiences were on different social media platforms. Some used platform insight tools to enhance their understanding

of audiences. When cross-posting, participants ensured they presented themselves properly to different audiences on different platforms. They carefully evaluated what to cross-post, ending up with cross-posting “safe” content and content they wanted to promote as content creators or for marketing purposes. They experimented with various features supporting cross-posting and made their decision on how they wanted to cross-post to present themselves in the best light, via these features or manually. They usually cross-posted from their primary platforms to other platforms where their desired audience resided and the content would be viewed as appropriate. They drafted the content to address the relevant audience and to accommodate different platform ecosystems.

In the following sections, I first review prior work on social media self-presentation and cross-posting. I then describe the research design and processes. The qualitative results are organized in two parts: in the first I focus on participants’ high-level considerations of social media cross-posting and answer RQ1, and in the second I elaborate on their detailed strategies of cross-posting and answer RQ2. I conclude by discussing how audience plays a critical role in social media self-presentation and design implications for social media platforms.

## 5.2 Related Work & Background

### 5.2.1 Self-Presentation Across Social Media Platforms & Accounts

Self-presentation is one of the most important motivations for people to use social media [56, 115, 217]. The theory of self-presentation was first discussed in depth in Erving Goffman’s 1959 book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* to understand how people

present themselves in front of other people and how that presentation varies based on who they are interacting with [71]. As social media has gradually become ubiquitous over the last 20 years, many researchers have applied and extended Goffman’s theory of self-presentation to explain people’s online self-presentation [86, 217].

In recent years, researchers have become increasingly interested in understanding and comparing people’s self-presentation on multiple platforms and across different accounts on a single platform. Researchers have found that users devote significant energy to navigating this complexity and achieving their desired self-presentational goals across platforms. They need to create and manage boundaries between platforms to keep their identities and corresponding audiences separated [78, 79, 144, 178, 215]. From time to time, they also need to tweak these boundaries to allow for flexibility in the content some audiences can see [91, 144, 215]. DeVito and colleagues have proposed a framework to understand social media users’ self-presentation, viewing it within users’ social media ecosystems, where affordances, norms, and audiences are key components and together shape users’ self-presentation [48]. Below, I discuss previous research on these three components to provide contexts for us to understand self-presentation in social media cross-posting.

### 5.2.1.1 Technical Features & Affordances

Affordances in the context of social media refers to the “multifaceted relational structure between an object/technology and the user that enables or constrains potential behavioral outcomes in a particular context” (p. 36) [62]. Researchers are increasingly using affordances as a framework to understand why people present themselves differently across

platforms, emphasizing that the technical features of social media platforms are designed, perceived, and used differently, leading to differences in self-presentation across these platforms [47, 145, 180, 196]. For example, compared to five other social media platforms, people in DeVito and colleagues' study [47] perceived LinkedIn as a platform with higher identity persistence, or “the extent to which a platform affords the identification of content with an individual persona over time” (p. 742), such that people’s online identity on LinkedIn is more closely connected to their offline identity.

To manage self-presentation across platforms, users should become familiar with the various technical features and affordances of each platform they use. For instance, on Snapchat, content is generally deleted automatically after the recipient views it, while on other platforms like Twitter, content is persistent unless the poster deletes it. Even if two social media platforms have shared features, users need to be careful while using them, because the same features and affordances can be displayed and understood differently on different platforms or by different audiences [83, 105, 140, 188, 218]. For example, Liking, Thumbs-Up, or Starring posts is a shared feature across many social media platforms that can be perceived differently [83, 84]. Hayes and colleagues found that on Twitter, people Like content that is deemed “good enough,” while on Facebook, Likes are less about content quality and more about visibly reacting to their friends who post the content [84]. Likewise, Zhou and colleagues found that the smiley face emoji is widely understood as “a fake smile” by younger WeChat users, while older users still perceive it as an ordinary smile [218].

In addition to varying self-presentation across *different* platforms, researchers have also explored how people create multiple accounts on a *single* social media platform and present themselves differently [4, 79, 90, 102, 114, 181, 200, 210]. For example, Taber and

Whittaker found that people present themselves as more extroverted, less conscientious, and less agreeable on their Finstas (“fake” Instagram) than on Rinstas (“real” Instagram) [181]. The affordance approach cannot explain this within-platform difference in self-presentation, suggesting that more complex sociotechnical factors could contribute to the difference. Huang and Vitak [90] found that perceptions of norms in different types of accounts lead to different self-presentation between Finsta and Rinsta. Likewise, Haimson and colleagues [78, 79] found that people experiencing identity and gender transition create new accounts after the transition or use multiple accounts on Tumblr to explore and present different identities.

Next, I discuss how another two sociotechnical factors related to social media norms and audiences for content could contribute to social media self-presentation.

### 5.2.1.2 Social Media Norms

Having a good understanding of platform norms—and how they vary—is especially important for achieving self-presentation goals, as it helps users learn how to present themselves in a socially desirable way across platforms [215]. This is not to say that there is no norm that remains consistent across platforms; for example, most social media platforms have norms that discourage and punish disclosures that harass or threaten other users [33, 147], while sharing positive and entertaining content is also standard practice on most platforms [26, 195]. That said, there are also a lot of differences in norms across platforms. Zhao and colleagues [215] found that people think different platforms are used for different topics, such as content about politics only taking place on Facebook while

content highlighting aesthetics being appropriate for Instagram. Likewise, Waterloo and colleagues [207] examined the norms of emotion expression across Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Whatsapp. Their results echo previous findings about a positivity bias on social media platforms (e.g., [154]) and found that positive emotions are generally perceived as more appropriate than negative emotions on social media platforms [207]. However, the authors also noted that negative emotions are perceived the most appropriate on Whatsapp and least appropriate on Instagram [207]. Further complicating this finding, researchers examining use of Rinstas and Finstas have found that while negative disclosures may indeed be seen as inappropriate on the more polished and curated Rinsta accounts, they are quite common on the more private and “backstage” Rinsta accounts [90, 181]. In this case, norms of what is appropriate to share can vary within a single platform, based on the self-presentation goals of the user.

### 5.2.1.3 Audience Considerations for Achieving Self-Presentation Goals

In addition to understanding how norms guide disclosure decisions on social media platforms, it is also important to consider the role that audience plays in this process. As Goffman noted more than 60 years ago, individuals tailor their self-presentation to their audience [71]. It is critical to understand how people who use multiple platforms connect with different audiences and share different aspects of their identity with those audiences.

One phenomenon of interest identified in prior work speaks to the challenges of managing multiple audiences online. This phenomenon is context collapse, which refers to when a mix of multiple and/or different audiences is collapsed and becomes a singular group of

message recipients, as is the case on most social media platforms [136, 197]. Researchers have found that using multiple social media profiles is one strategy of combating context collapse (e.g., [198]). Nevertheless, users need to manage their audiences across accounts and platforms to avoid unwanted self-presentation in front of wrong audiences [48, 78, 79, 90, 144].

Users inevitably have to think about how to distribute their audiences across accounts and platforms. Some users distribute their audiences to different platforms by social relationship; when they post, they select platforms largely based on audiences they want to reach or avoid [144, 215]. In doing that, people can keep different dimensions of their online identities and corresponding audiences separated [215]. For example, research has found that Snapchat and Finstas (“fake” Instagram) are used for connecting with smaller and more intimate audiences like close friends [15, 90]. Sometimes, people also feel the need to relax platform boundaries and allow audiences or content from one platform to spread to another platform. Reasons for doing this may include the changing interpersonal relationships between them and their contacts, the inability of reaching desired audiences on a single platform, and their evolving self-presentational needs [48, 78, 79, 144, 215].

### 5.2.2 Cross-Posting

There is limited research on social media cross-posting (e.g., [63, 121, 146]), and in these studies, cross-posting is narrowly defined and focuses on posts shared verbatim on two or more platforms [63, 121, 146]. For example, Farahbakhsh and colleagues defined cross-posting as “the action of publishing the same information in two or more OSNs” (p. 1) [63]. In this study, I expand this definition to encompass more diverse methods for

sharing the same content; cross-posting in this study is *the act of posting about the same thing to multiple social media platforms*. With this definition, I include a broader range of cross-posting scenarios, from verbatim cross-posts supported by platform features like cross-site linkage, to manually drafted cross-posts that are not necessarily identical. Below I describe the differences between automatic cross-posting and manual cross-posting, and elaborate the self-presentational challenges specific to each approach.

### 5.2.2.1 Automatic Cross-Posting

Many social media platforms encourage cross-posting and provide features to automate cross-posting. They provide cross-site linkage features, so that users can link their accounts on other platforms. They also provide cross-posting features, so that their users can cross-post to other platforms with one click. On platforms like Instagram, users have to link their accounts on other platforms (Facebook, Tumblr, and Twitter) before cross-posting automatically (Fig. 5.1). While some other platforms further reduce the threshold to cross-post without account linkage in advance. For example, after uploading a short video, TikTok users can be redirected to their Instagram so they can directly share the video to Instagram (Fig. 5.2).

The limited research on social media cross-posting has used large-scale datasets to quantitatively measure the macro patterns of people’s posting behaviors but they did not answer questions about why people cross-post. For example, some researchers have provided evidence of the wide adoption of the cross-site linkage features (e.g., [37]) or that of the cross-posting features (e.g., [121]), but they did not explore why users favor these

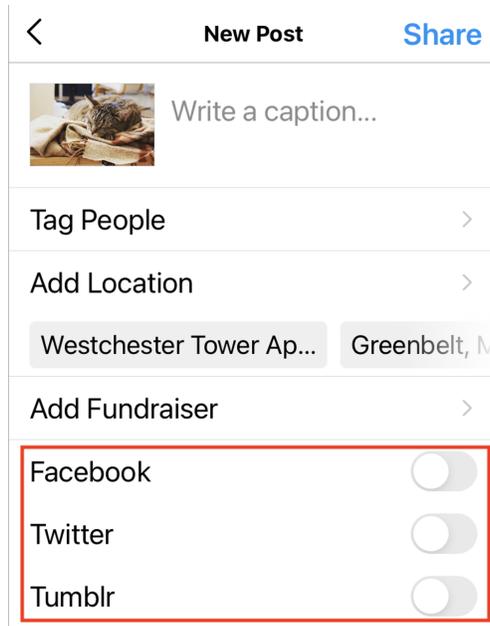


Figure 5.1: On Instagram’s New Post interface, users are prompted whether or not to share the post they are drafting to other platforms like Facebook, Twitter, or Tumblr.

features or consider these features from the perspective of self-presentation.

Social media users who cross-post with these features might experience self-presentational risks. The first potential risk is the loss of context. For example, a cross-posted Tweet from Instagram does not include the pictures in the Instagram post, potentially leading one’s Twitter audience to misinterpret their self-presentation due to the absence of context and visual cues in the pictures (Fig. 5.3).

Another potential risk is context collapse, specifically through exposing one’s account on one platform to the audience from a different platform. Research has found that people purposefully distribute contacts of different social relationship to different platforms or accounts [144, 200]. The boundary between different audiences can be blurred by cross-posting related features. For example, one’s Instagram audience will know their TikTok after they cross-post a TikTok video to Instagram, because TikTok includes a watermark

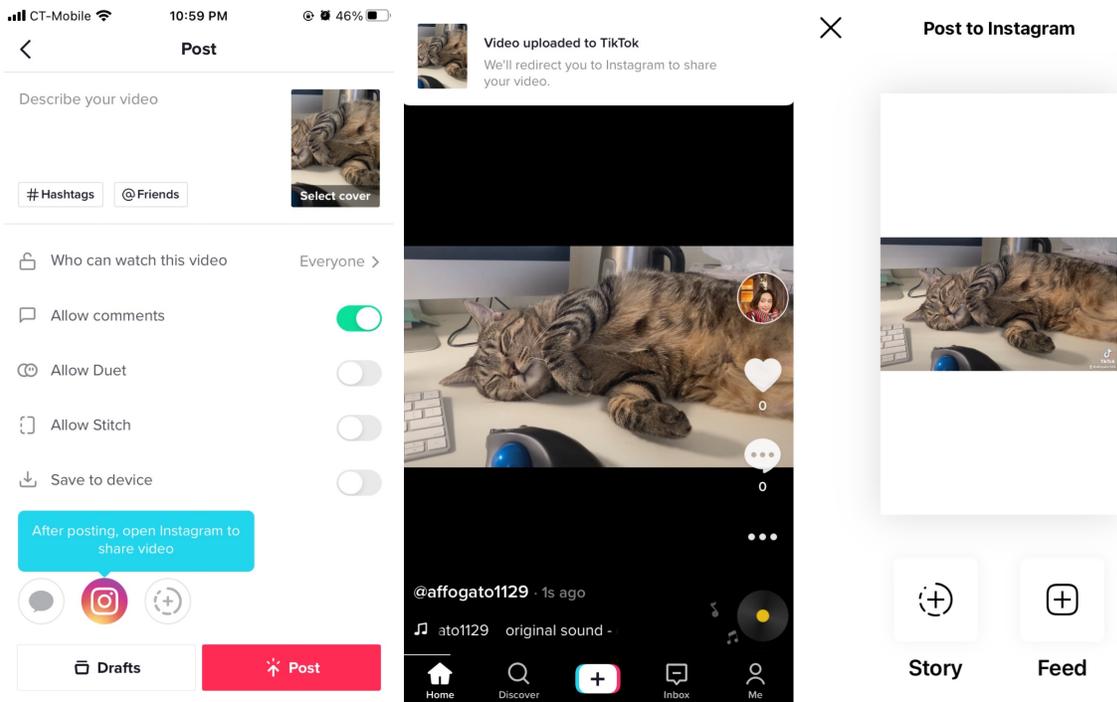


Figure 5.2: TikTok users can cross-post their short videos to Instagram by checking the Instagram icon (left). After the video is uploaded to TikTok, they can see a reminder at the top of the interface (middle) before being redirected to their Instagram to cross-post this video (right).

with the user name in the video. Likewise, one's Twitter audience will know their Instagram after they cross-post from Instagram to Twitter, because the tweet will include the URL to the Instagram post (Fig. 5.3).

### 5.2.2.2 Manual Cross-Posting

In addition to using built-in features on a given platform, social media users might manually cross-post and create posts about the same thing to different platforms, probably altering the content in small ways. One reason to manually cross-post is because not all social media platforms provide the features discussed above, or because users want to tailor their content for another platform. While not the main focus of their study, Zhao

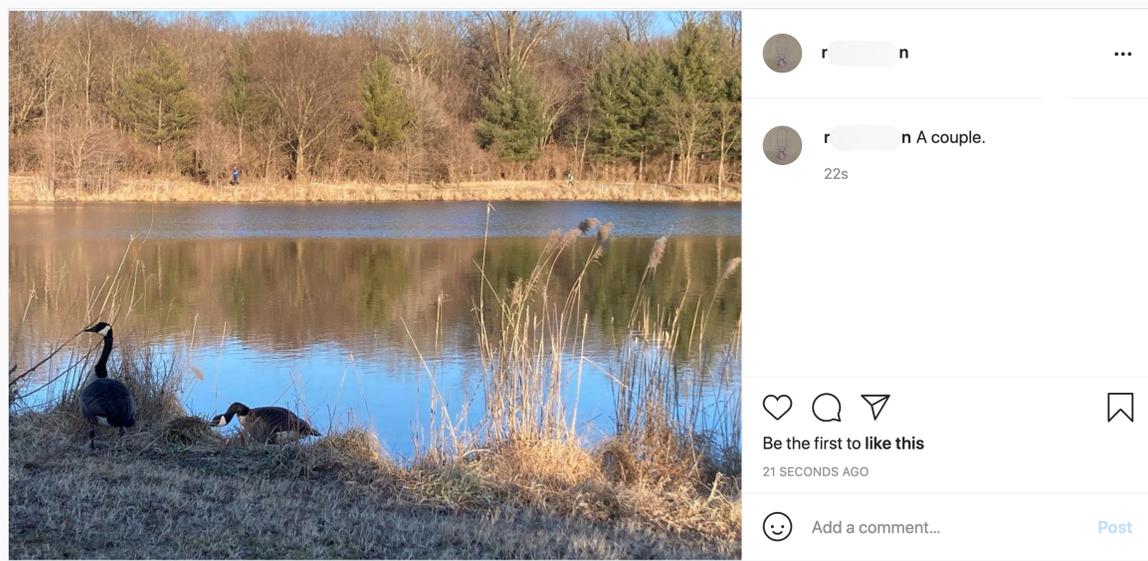


Figure 5.3: An example of one-click cross-posting from Instagram to Twitter supported by cross-site linkage.

and colleagues briefly mentioned that people strategically tailor content when cross-posting to different platforms [215]. This is consistent with an audience-reaching strategy of social media users: altering captions for the target imagined audience [126].

Compared with automatic cross-posting, social media users who manually cross-post should have less to worry about their self-presentation. They can carefully craft their posts on each platform themselves so their audiences are less likely to misinterpret due to a lack of information. Their accounts on different platforms are less likely to be exposed without the platforms giving this information away. If they do not use verbatim posts when cross-posting, it is less likely people will find their accounts on different platforms, even with the support of search engines.

### 5.3 Methods

With the above information about social media self-presentation and cross-posting in mind, I set out to explore the rationales behind cross-posting and their strategies of cross-posting with a focus on self-presentation.

To answer the two research questions, I conducted interviews to understand social media users' cross-posting experiences. Following approval from the university's Institutional Review Board, I conducted virtual interviews with 15 social media users who reported cross-posting experiences on a diverse range of platforms during August and September 2021.

I recruited participants from a large, public university in the eastern United States. Since I was targeting a small subset of social media users, I requested a large random sample of 3000 people from the Registrar's office and the Human Resources office at the university. This sample was equally divided between undergraduate students, graduate students, and university staff. I chose this approach because I wanted to capture a diverse range of scenarios of cross-posting, and the mix of students and staff would hopefully lead to diverse experiences.

Everyone in the sample received an invitation to participate in the study via email. In the email, I stated the inclusion criteria: to qualify, participants should 1) have accounts on multiple social media platforms; 2) have experiences of cross-posting content to multiple social media accounts; and 3) be at least 18 years old. Potential participants were asked to complete a short screener survey to determine their eligibility for the interview. The survey included questions about their general social media use, their familiarity and usage

of cross-site linkage features, their frequency of cross-posting, and their demographics (see details in Appendix D). To incentivize participation, I held a raffle for a \$50 Amazon Gift Card for those who finished the screener survey.

A total of 72 people completed the screener survey. I reviewed these responses and ranked those that met the inclusion criteria by the frequency of cross-posting. I prioritized those who had a higher frequency of cross-posting and invited them for interviews. I conducted interviews with 15 participants and reached data saturation, thus no reminder emails were sent to the participant sample pool to remind participation.

Before the interview, participants were encouraged to review their social media posts, especially the cross-posted ones, to help them recall the scenarios when they posted. They were also encouraged to share screenshots of the posts they planned to discuss with me. The interview protocol included questions about their general social media use for each account, their reasons for cross-posting, and their decision-making processes for specific cross-posts (see Appendix E for reference).

Interviews lasted between 30 to 57 minutes ( $M = 41$ ) and were conducted via Zoom. They were semi-structured so that participants could discuss their social media usage freely. During the interviews, some participants shared their screen and showed their social media interface ( $n = 5$ ) and/or used the screenshots of their social media posts ( $n = 11$ ), with 36 total posts screenshot and discussed. Each participant was given a \$30 Amazon Gift Card in compensation for their time. The participants' demographic information and their social media use can be found in Table 5.1.

ID	Gender	Age	Role	Content Creators	Platforms Used										Cross-posting Freq.		
					Ins	Tw	Yt	Fb	W	L	Snp	Pin	Rdt	Other	Auto.	Manual	
P1	F	22	Staff	No	x	x	x	x		x	x	x				Often	Often
P2	M	57	Staff	Yes	x	x	x	x	x	x		x		Tumblr, WeChat, Flickr		Very often	Rarely
P3	M	21	PhD Stu.	Yes	x	x	x	x	x	x			x	Medium		Never	Very often
P4	F	26	PhD Stu.	No	x		x	x	x	x		x				Often	Sometimes
P5	M	26	Mast. Stu.	Yes	x	x	x	x	x							Rarely	Very often
P6	M	21	Mast. Stu.	No	x	x	x	x	x	x			x			Sometimes	Sometimes
P7	F	25	Mast. Stu.	No	x	x	x	x	x			x	x			Often	Sometimes
P8	M	19	Undergrad	No	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x			Sometimes	Sometimes
P9	M	23	Mast. Stu.	Yes	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	TikTok		Never	Very often
P10	F	20	Undergrad	Yes		x	x							Tumblr		Never	Very often
P11	M	44	Staff	No	x	x	x	x	x				x			N/A	Often
P12	NB	18	Undergrad	Yes	x	x			x		x			Tumblr, WeChat		Never	Often
P13	M	23	Mast. Stu.	Yes	x	x	x	x	x			x				Often	Often
P14	M	26	Mast. Stu.	Yes	x	x	x	x	x	x			x			Sometimes	Sometimes
P15	F	29	Mast. Stu.	No	x	x	x	x	x			x				Often	Sometimes

Table 5.1: Participants' demographic information, whether they posted creative content, social media platforms they used, and cross-posting frequency. Cross-posting frequency was rated by participants on a five-point Likert scale from never, rarely, sometimes, often, to very often.<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Names of social media platforms are abbreviated for readability. Ins: Instagram; Tw: Twitter; Yt: YouTube; Fb: Facebook; W: Whatsapp; L: LinkedIn; Snp: Snapchat; Pin: Pinterest; Rdt: Reddit.

### 5.3.1 Data Analysis

All interviews were recorded.<sup>1</sup> Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim by transcription professionals, then coded through an iterative process [190]. First, I read through the transcripts multiple times to become familiar with the data. From this, I noticed that participants could be classified into two groups based on whether they shared beyond personal updates: (1) those who did by sharing creative content to larger and usually unknown communities or interest groups, and (2) those who did not. It is important to understand that sharing content about personal updates and sharing creative content is not exclusive to each other. All the participants except P10 had posted personal updates on their social media (see Table 5.1).

Next, I selected two transcripts from each of these two groups for open coding in order to capture diverse meanings. Dr. Vitak and I independently coded the two transcripts and noted emergent themes. After discussing the initial codes in-depth, we developed a codebook. Then each of us coded another transcript using the initial codebook and made notes. We refined the codebook by thoroughly discussing the transcript we each coded and polishing the definition of the codes. Finally, I revisited the four coded transcripts and recoded them based on the finalized codebook (see Appendix F) and coded the remaining 11 transcripts.

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<sup>1</sup>Some were audio-recorded and some included video, depending on participants' consent.

## 5.4 Results

In the interviews, participants shared how they conceptualize social media cross-posting. They largely reported that presenting themselves to their desired audiences were the most important factor behind cross-posting, which addresses RQ1. Participants also applied a range of strategies to achieve their self-presentation goals in front of different audiences on different social media platforms via cross-posting, addressing RQ2. Below, I first describe participants' perceptions and considerations for social media cross-posting. Then I elaborate on the specific strategies they applied while cross-posting.

### 5.4.1 Self-Presentation on Multiple Social Media Platforms via Cross-Posting

In social media research that focuses on single platform, researchers have found that self-presentation is one of the most important motivations for social media users (e.g., [115]). Participants in this study, who had experiences using and cross-posting to multiple social media platforms, recognized the salience of self-presentation. They also reported the challenges and complexities of navigating self-presentation and audiences on multiple social media platforms.

#### 5.4.1.1 Understand and Reach Different Audiences on Different Platforms

When asked about why they cross-posted on social media, participants reported that the primary goal was to ensure the desired audience sees the post, which echoed previous research finding that people cross-post because a single platform does not always have a perfect match of “content” and “contacts” [215]. Their desired audiences could be a larger

and/or more diverse audience group, or a few specific contacts. To do that, participants were aware of their audiences on the platforms where they cross-posted. They were also aware of the difference and the intersection of audiences between platforms.

Some participants mentioned they cross-posted so that more people would see the posts, especially posts about news or information that they thought might be relevant to anyone. For example, P4 said, *“I have been going through many Afghanistan and Taliban videos and stuff like how the women are desperate. So anything I feel people should know more about, I tend to post on every platform that I am in.”* When cross-posting things like that, participants did not think about the exact audience who might see the content; rather, they spread the information across platforms and hoped to increase the visibility of the post to a wider audience.

Other participants cross-posted to reach different audiences. This was common when there was a difference between the primary platform participants used and the platforms used by audiences they wanted to reach. For example, P7 cross-posted about being a speaker at a conference on both Instagram—her primary social media—and Facebook. She said, *“Apart from my close personal circle (on Instagram), I also wanted to share the photo with a bit of humor to my colleagues and some secondary or tertiary connections (on Facebook).”* Likewise, P11 primarily used Facebook but sent relevant Facebook posts to his brother via Twitter because his brother did not use Facebook anymore. He noted how dispersed his audience is, saying, *“not everyone I know are on one platform.”* When cross-posting to reach specific contacts, participants might tag them in their cross-posts to notify these contacts like P12 did.

Participants who identified as content creators or who ran social media accounts for

organizations were even more aware of audience differences between platforms and cross-posted to reach a broader and more diverse audience across platforms. For example, P2 is a photographer so he shared his photography on all his social media platforms. He said:

*“Instagram has become our main push out vehicle. Then, we copy everything that we push out on Instagram into other platforms just to reach, not just most people, but different groups of people. We find Facebook is the housewives, to be perfectly blunt about it. It’s mostly women, and mostly women of an age who follow us there. Instagram is a younger crowd.”*

Likewise, P10, a fan art creator who noted significant homogeneity across her audiences on Twitter and Tumblr, still cross-posted to both platforms because *“there are some people who only use one platform. So I’d like to make my content accessible to both populations.”* In this case, P10 sees this redundancy across platforms as worthwhile, even if the difference between audiences is small.

#### 5.4.1.2 Prevent Context Collapse OR Allow Contexts to Collapse Under Control

Previous research has highlighted how context collapse creates challenges for social media users’ self-presentation [136, 197]. As more social media platforms emerge—some of which are designed for users to socialize with a specific audience (e.g., LinkedIn for professional connections)—social media users distribute their personal and professional contacts across different apps, each representing a space with its own rules and norms and

reducing the tension of context collapse [144]. When participants discussed their social media cross-posting, they recognized this tension as well and shared how they navigated it.

**‘Safe’ content.** Participants usually applied the lowest common denominator approach [86] when considering whether and what to cross-post. In other words, they needed to make sure cross-posted content was appropriate for all platforms they were posting to and did not deviate from their self-presentation goals on each of the platforms. For example, P1 mainly used Facebook and Instagram to share her life updates and often cross-posted between the two. She cross-posted things she considered “*safe*,” such as her cooking or recipes. She said, “*I consider that safe and like, I don’t want to say acceptable on all of the different platforms, but I feel like everybody who’s following me or friends with me would appreciate that content.*” Similarly, P4 regularly shared her life updates on her Instagram with close friends and sometimes would cross-post to Facebook, where she connected with family and more distant friends in India. She described the cross-posted content as “*normal*” and “*not anything very personal.*” As a contrast, she purposefully did not cross-post her Instagram posts about boyfriends to Facebook because “*it’s a taboo in India.*”

**Intersection of different contexts.** Participants cautiously managed boundaries between each platform so that audiences from one platform would not be able to view content on another platform except when they purposefully allowed it.

When asked about whether they were concerned if the cross-posted post would expose their account on one platform to another, most participants were not too worried. Part of the reason is that the accounts they considered as more private were already gated by privacy configurations or by user preference. P14 changed his Instagram from public to private partly because he “*started getting a lot of followers who I didn’t really want on*

*my feed*” after cross-posting from Instagram to Facebook, so that no more people from Facebook would see his Instagram. P7 had already set her Instagram account to private, but was still being cautious before cross-posting from Instagram to Facebook. She described how she verified the settings worked, saying, *“I actually cross-checked from another of my friend’s account enabling all the other options, if she’s not on my Instagram, whether she can track back to my Instagram’s other photos. It’s not actually possible for her.”* P15 thought most of her Facebook contacts were older people who only used one platform, and therefore would not trace back to her Instagram page after she cross-posted from Instagram to Facebook.

Another reason why participants expressed low concern about cross-posting is that the content displayed was already reviewed and selected, so it was okay for anyone to view. In other words, these participants were already engaged in selective self-presentation and were largely confident cross-posting it would not be problematic. For example, P2 said,

*“I’m hoping they follow me everywhere, and I’m not terribly open with a lot of things. The online version of me isn’t necessarily an accurate reflection of the real-world version. Some things that I just keep my mouth shut. I try not to get political or anything like that. There are spaces for that, and this (social media) is not the space I use for it.”*

All participants reported some difference between what they posted and how they presented themselves across different social media platforms. They were most cautious about platforms where they interacted with close friends or shared more about their personal life and their opinions. They did not feel comfortable if audiences on other platforms

viewed content on these ‘friend-only’ platforms. But they were okay if audiences on these platforms viewed content they shared on other platforms.

Participants separated the most private aspects of their lives from more more public aspects by using different platforms or accounts, applying privacy configurations, and carefully making decisions about cross-posting. For example, P8 opened a private Finsta—as he described it, a “spam” account—after gaining more followers on his Rinsta account, which was set to public. He said:

*“So what I would expect my personal account to have is like a decent, sophisticated, more like a gentle image of myself, which would be completely different from my spam account, because people there know me personally, and they know what kind of a person I am. So even if I post, like, some stupid posts on my spam account, they wouldn’t judge me. But people on my personal account, like my main account would judge me. So I need to like be really mindful about whatever I post on Instagram (Rinsta).”*

For participants who posted creative content, they needed to consider the boundary between their creator side and their personal side on social media. On the one hand, they tended to proactively disclose and advertise their creator accounts on different platforms. On the other hand, they tried to prevent external traffic from social media they use mainly for personal connections. P5 was a YouTuber and made his online presence highly visible by including links to his multiple social media platforms under his YouTube videos, excluding Whatsapp, which he mainly used for connecting with families. P12 created doodle sketches and used the tool Linktree to create a social media landing page. They said, *“In the Linktree*

*link, I'll have just buttons that go to my different social media accounts, basically that but it's only for art. I don't put links to my personal accounts on those.*" P13, a sports graphics designer, put his personal Instagram handle in the bio of his graphic Instagram account. He made his personal account private to prevent unwanted following.

One participant (P3) realized that presenting both his professional side and his personal side was important. He used his Twitter to present both sides of himself: cross-posting his Medium blogs here for professional presence, sometimes cross-posting his Instagram posts to *"make people laugh or make them engage, make them like, make them follow."* Nevertheless, his Instagram, which he viewed as more private, was not used for promoting Medium blogs.

## 5.4.2 Strategies for Cross-Posting

With the understanding of how participants conceptualized cross-posting in mind, this section describes participants' strategies for cross-posting a specific post. I first describe how participants chose between automatic cross-posting and manual cross-posting, and then address RQ2.

### 5.4.2.1 Automatic Cross-Posting Supported by Platform Features

Participants could cross-post with features provided by social media platforms automatically. Some platforms like Instagram provide cross-site linkage features. Users can automatically cross-post their content to another platform after linking their accounts. Many participants used this feature to cross-post. They described the process of automatic

cross-posting as “seamless,” “convenient,” “comfortable”, “sav[ing] time,” and “useful”. P2 used IFTTT<sup>2</sup> to automate cross-posting. P13 used Facebook Creator Studio to schedule posts to his Facebook page and Instagram.

Despite it being easy to cross-post via these automatic features, participants reported issues and privacy concerns while using them. Some participants did not notice the default setting after they linked their accounts and cross-posted unintentionally. P4, who linked her Facebook to her Instagram, said:

*“Some things are just meant for Instagram, and I really don’t pay much attention at times. And they automatically get posted to Facebook and I’m like ‘oops this shouldn’t have happened.’ And then I go ahead and delete it. I think at times, it’s annoying. I guess nowadays, I’m just more cautious about it, and I turn it off every time I’m trying to post just for Instagram.”*

P1 found similar issues after linking her Pinterest to Facebook. She said, *“I think it just kind of became too cluttered on feeds, seeing what people were posting on Pinterest. So I went in and changed the settings so that nothing was being shared from Pinterest to Facebook.”*

P15 mentioned uncertainty about Facebook’s privacy setting of posts cross-posted from Instagram. She said, *“I always want to do a little bit double-checking that—that when I post something from my Instagram, that it will be posted on Facebook with the sign that says it’s just for your friends.”*

Participants also described incompatibility between different platforms while using cross-posting features, which potentially led to context loss. P1 and P15 noticed that the tagging information does not transmit when they automatically cross-post from Instagram

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<sup>2</sup>IFTTT refers to If This Then That, a service that allows users to program responses towards events.

to Facebook, such that they needed to edit and retag the Facebook posts. P13 noticed that when automatically cross-post from Instagram to Twitter, the pictures would not show up in the Tweet, decreasing user clicks. These differences make automatic cross-posting less appealing, as they require checking and additional editing.

#### 5.4.2.2 Manual Cross-Posting by Copy-Pasting Content Across Platforms

In addition to using automatic cross-posting features, participants also reported cross-posting manually, copy-pasting content or links from platform to platform and making edits if needed.

Some participants took a manual approach because of the above issues mentioned about automatic cross-posting. For example, P9 said:

*“I’m not a huge fan of trusting those networks of connecting your accounts. I just don’t really think it’s necessary. They now have this thing, oh, collect your data and do all this stuff. I know I’m using them anyway, but just I don’t always feel comfortable linking my accounts together, especially with certain things I don’t want to post on Facebook that I’d rather post on Instagram, for example.”*

In light of this, P9 used the manual approach cross-posting and promoting his podcasts on his podcast-only accounts and personal accounts. P4 also preferred manual cross-posting and felt *“this is way more controlled.”* Similarly, P2 noted, *“It’s nice to have a step back”* to check your content before cross-posting. He said, *“You need a chance to sort of wait, pause, take a breath, make sure it’s okay before you post it.”* He once misspelled in his post and the post went to all the platforms he used via IFTTT, which was embarrassing.

Some participants manually cross-posted because of usability issues and incompatibility across different platforms or different devices. P10 created videos about fan art and noticed the time limit and the quality loss of videos uploaded to Twitter. She needed to post videos to YouTube first before manually sharing the YouTube links to Twitter. P13 posted sport graphics and noticed Twitter had a stricter file size limitation than Instagram. He needed to compress the pictures and manually posted them to Twitter. P5 noticed that Instagram and Whatsapp do not support uploading from desktop, so he needed to switch devices and manually cross-post his YouTube videos from his smartphone.

Some participants realized that same content could turn out differently on different platforms. For example, P6 said, *“the formatting aspect of each and every app is quite different. Okay, I can bold the words in WhatsApp, right? But if I share it directly on Facebook or in LinkedIn, it will just show an asterisk around it. So, I used to edit those symbols that interfere with the reading aspect.”*

Sometimes participants cross-posted content manually because they had to. They needed to customize captions to suit different audiences on different platforms (see details in Section 5.4.2.4).

Many platforms have share buttons and encourage users to comment before sharing content to other platforms. With that, participants incorporated both the features and their manual effort in cross-posting. For example, P3 used Medium’s “Share on [Platform]” and “Copy Link” features to cross-post his Medium posts to other social media platforms and attached different comments to different platforms. Participants thought drafting a comment before cross-posting was an important step and tended to regard this cross-posting approach as manual. Nevertheless, they did not always attach lengthy comments, e.g., P9

cross-posted his podcasts to Instagram Stories with short captions like “check this out”. P5 used similar captions when cross-posting his Youtube videos to Whatsapp.

Participants sometimes described the manual cross-posting process as “*tedious*”. Overall, they did not dislike the process given they did not always need to do it and usually it did not take too long. Some participants explicitly said they “*liked it*” or “*felt good about it.*” Nevertheless, the extra steps required sometimes made participants reluctant to manually cross-post. For example, P7 said, “*I wanted to do it (cross-post to multiple platforms) for some of my posts, but then I’m actually too lazy and I just forgot about it.*”

#### 5.4.2.3 Platform Choice: Where to Cross-Post?

Participants shared a variety of reasons regarding how they decided which platform to first post to, and which to cross-post to. Many participants first posted to their primary social media platforms—for example, platforms they used the most, used to connect with close friends, or those with their preferred features. P15 always chose Instagram as the starting point of cross-posting because that was the platform “*I use the most, I use basically daily to also record things daily.*” P8 liked Instagram’s filter features. He would use these features to edit his pictures before cross-posting them to other platforms. Participants who created content always first posted to their main platform. P2 and P13 posted to Instagram first because their content was pictures. Similarly, P3 wrote on Medium, P5 posted YouTube videos, and P9 uploaded podcasts to Spotify and Apple Podcasts before they promoted their content on other social media platforms.

Participants’ understanding of how algorithms on these platforms worked influenced

their order of cross-posting. P5 figured YouTube would reward videos that received immediate user engagement and recommend these videos to more people, so he always cross-posted his YouTube videos to Whatsapp first because that audience prioritized watching his YouTube videos. P12 once waited before cross-posting to Instagram to make sure there was enough interval between their previous Instagram post and a new one. They said, *“I’ve just known from experience, like previous posts. If I post two things one after another without waiting, like, a few days or even a day, less people will see the second post, and I get less interactions and likes.”*

#### 5.4.2.4 Content Draft: How to Frame Cross-Posts?

Sometimes participants made edits on captions to accommodate platform limitations. For example P13 created sports graphics and hoped his audience use them as wallpapers. He included phrases like “check out my story for the wallpaper version” in his Instagram caption and directed viewers to his Instagram Story, where they could screenshot and get the wallpaper. On the other hand, he did not have to do that with tweets because Twitter has a “save this picture” feature, unlike Instagram.

The most frequently mentioned issue that made participants edit captions was from Twitter, which limits posts to 280 characters. For the same content, participants needed to be brief in their tweet but could be more verbose in their posts on other platforms. For example, P13 used limited tags in tweets but included as many tags as he wanted in the Instagram version of the same post.

This character limitation also influenced how participants decided which platform to

first post to. P1 preferred to start from the platform where a longer caption was desired, and then cut it down and post to Twitter when cross-posting content across accounts she ran for her organization. She said, *“I think I always start with the longest. I start with Facebook, and then I cut it down for Instagram, and then I cut it down again for Twitter.”* P10 preferred to start from Twitter and expand the caption for Tumblr while cross-posting. She said, *“Sometimes if I start in Tumblr, paste it into Twitter, it gets too long. So I’d rather just start in Twitter and hurt myself because I’m too verbose.”*

Some participants made edits on posts to engage with their audiences. As mentioned above, the primary goal of cross-posting was to ensure the desired audience sees and even responds to the post. When the desired audience was specific individuals, participants tagged them to notify them about the posts. For example, P12 cross-posted a picture of them taken by their friend to Twitter and to Instagram. They only tagged their friend on Instagram because this friend was more active on Instagram and did not really use Twitter. When the desired audience was a group of people, participants tweaked their words to address them. For example, P3 edited the captions when sharing his Medium blogs to different platforms. He said:

*“Each site, depending on its audience, has a slightly different text ... On Facebook the audience that I’m writing to is the school group, like the one that I mentioned. In schools we have ‘Hocam’. It means teacher in service. In this school culture, everybody calls everybody ‘Hocam’ if they don’t know the person. If I add ‘Hocam’ at the beginning of posts, then the engagement increases because people feel that they can connect with me more. But on LinkedIn, I have*

*to use more formal language because on LinkedIn they respond to more formal posts.”*

Participants’ content drafting strategy was embedded in their understanding of social media platforms. They developed their understanding of how platform algorithms worked and edited their content accordingly to have it be seen. For example, P12 said, *“I usually caption posts for different platforms differently because I know the algorithm works differently on different platforms. If I have, say, on Instagram, if my caption is long, it doesn’t really matter. But on Twitter, if the caption is too long, then less people will see it.”*

Some participants were aware of norm differences between platforms and deliberately edited their content to reflect the differences. P10 noticed that people included too many tags in their Instagram posts and cross-posted the verbatim content to Twitter without editing. She said, *“I don’t like the look of it. I don’t think that helps engagement. So I just thought to myself, while they’re different platforms, I should look at what I’m sending to make sure it’s what I want to represent.”*

Social media is constantly changing, so participants, especially those who promoted content online, created content to keep up with trends. P13 created football-related content and used hashtags of football tournaments in his posts as the tournaments were going on. Likewise, P5 explored trendy topics on YouTube and shot videos related to these topics.

#### 5.4.2.5 Audience Reaching: A strategy Exclusive to Content Creators

In the above sections, I described how participants chose their platforms and edited their content accordingly to reach their desired audiences. Below, I describe a strategy used

exclusively by content creators, which is using social media analytic tools to understand and reach audiences.

Participants used statistics provided by platforms to find out the right time to post.

P5 said:

*“Like a lot of analytics on YouTube, I’m sure you can dig into it a bit and draw some conclusions because that is something I do, figuring out what would be the best time to post a video, figuring out what particular topics to select. For example, for me, the best time to post a video is 12:00 PM on Sunday in India. Now that I’m here (the United States), I love to post something like one or two at night, and then the video will work. Some really good analytics like this, this place (analytic tools provided by YouTube) is like literally a goldmine.”*

Similarly, P13 shared how statistics from Facebook Creator Studio helped him decide the best time to post to Facebook page and Instagram. He said, *“I go into my ‘insights’, check my ‘audience’, ‘day & hour’ and whenever most of the followers are active, that is the time that I will post.”*

Participants also used these statistics to understand external traffic to their content and fine tune their cross-posting strategy. P3 said, *“Medium allows me to see how many people read it and where they come from, like do they come from Instagram or Facebook, or LinkedIn. I can see the data. As I can see the data, I can use that data to optimize my future writings. It gives me a lot of advantages to do that, so I use the feature a lot.”*

P5 realized that very few of his YouTube views were from Instagram. Sometimes he just skipped cross-posting his YouTube videos to Instagram because the additional views from

Instagram did not worth his effort cross-posting.

## 5.5 Discussion

As social media platforms have evolved over the last 20 years, people have incorporated more platforms into their online communication space. These platforms serve different end goals and include different features and affordances to facilitate connection, disclosure, and interaction [3]. Users often distribute different contacts to different platforms and treat each platform as a standalone channel with a set of communication norms and self-presentation rules [144, 215]. They do this, in part, because many of these platforms are designed for socializing with specific audiences; for example, LinkedIn is viewed as a place to make and maintain professional connections, while Facebook has traditionally been used for connecting with friends and acquaintances.

Users may also engage in some degree of segmentation of their audiences because they want to mediate the pressure of presenting themselves in front of an overly large and diverse audience on a single platform. Some platforms provide features to help with audience segmentation (e.g., Facebook’s “friend lists” to allow distribution of content to a subset of connections); however, research suggests that even those users who are highly engaged in curating their online presence may find these features more tedious than beneficial [198]. On the other hand, managing multiple accounts and audiences also requires more effort, especially for those who are using different platforms as an audience segmentation tool.

While audience segmentation is useful for sharing content that is likely only relevant or useful to a subset of one’s social network, people also disclose content they want to widely

share with a large and diverse audience, and researchers have highlighted various ways that social media platforms facilitate broadcasting of content widely with minimal effort [58]. Because of this, social media cross-posting can be highly useful in connecting with a large and diverse audience that is not confined within a single platform [215]. For example, people with health conditions might seek different types of support from different social media platforms by communicating their illnesses on these platforms [164]. Platforms like Instagram have launched features that support cross-posting, so that users can cross-post to multiple platforms with only one click. Research has confirmed that users widely use these features [37, 121]; for example, Lim and colleagues examined social media users who linked their accounts on six platforms and found that over 90% of Instagram users have shared their Instagram posts to another platform [121].

Social media cross-posting provides a useful case to explore the tensions users experience when navigating their self-presentation across multiple platforms, each having its own set of features, norms, and audiences. For example, social media users have to trade off between the cognitive burden required to discover and understand technical features, and the level of privacy and self-presentation flexibility enabled by these features. They can choose from many features to customize privacy settings of their posts and avoid unwanted disclosures. However, research has shown that people mostly rely on a single privacy setting for their Facebook posts instead of making full use of multiple settings [65]. The cognitive burden associated with thinking through different privacy settings will scale up when users make sharing decisions on multiple social media platforms, which causes pressure for their self-presentation. Another example is that people need to negotiate their self-presentation goals with norms and audiences of platforms. Research has shown that

people with potentially stigmatized identities (e.g., LGBTQ+) have to evaluate whether this identity performance will fit the platform, and to make decisions on not only disclosing this identity, but also their use of the platform at all [48].

This study extends limited research on social media cross-posting [63, 121, 146], and to the best of my knowledge, is the first study to explore rationales behind social media cross-posting with a focus on self-presentation. This study also has extended multi-SNS research and identified usability issues as participants switched between different platforms and devices and cross-posted. Based on in-depth interviews with 15 participants, I have found that reaching a desired audience is the most important reason for people to cross-post. I also elaborate how participants conceptualized cross-posting and how they applied strategies to cross-post in a way that satisfied their self-presentation goals and connected with their audiences. Below, I discuss context collapse as reflected in social media cross-posting, provide design implications for social media platforms to improve user experience in cross-posting, and discuss how people present themselves in an online space not limited to social media platforms.

### 5.5.1 Context Collapse as Reflected in Social Media Cross-Posting

This study has confirmed tensions of context collapse across social media platforms. Participants used multiple platforms to connect with different audiences. They were very aware of the difference in audiences between platforms and carefully maintain the boundary of each platform, e.g., by setting accounts to private to avoid unwanted traffic. However, when addressing this tension by segmenting audiences and corresponding communication

spaces, they gave up the ability to easily reach a large enough audience on one platform.

A subset of our participants did not only use social media for personal reasons, but also created content for a potentially much broader audience to consume. For example, they created podcasts, YouTube videos, photography, fan art, sports graphics, and blogs to share beyond their personal networks; at the same time, they shared personal updates with more personal connections like friends and families. They were aware of various audiences across their accounts and platforms, specifically pointing out the difference between their personal connections and the audiences of their creative content. They wanted to maximize the reach of their creative content. To do that, they used platform tools to understand insights of their content and their audiences, and cross-posted content with customized captions to address different audiences at the right time. They specifically gated the boundary between their personal accounts and their content creation accounts, mainly to prevent the larger and often unknown audience for their creative content from accessing their personal updates.

The research about content creators and social media influencers has found that audiences not only value the content, but also the personality and the authenticity of the creators themselves (e.g., [53, 67, 119]). Only one of our participants (P3) realized that disclosing more information about himself was helpful in engaging audiences of his blogs. He did so by sharing some pictures previously posted to Instagram about life updates to Twitter instead of directing traffic to his Instagram, which he regarded as a more private space. This raises the question of whether the presented authenticity of social media influencers, especially the more established ones, is really authentic. One study considering this found that livestreamers could not fake authenticity because their audiences would notice [119]. More research is needed to understand how influencers and creators deal with the pressure

of presenting multiple sides of themselves across social media platforms, especially how they present themselves in an authentic way without overly exposing themselves to a large and unknown audience.

From the case of their cross-posting, the data provides evidence regarding participants' efforts in managing two types of context collapse: context collusions and context collisions. As Davis and Jurgenson note, context collusion refers to when "*social actors intentionally collapse, blur, and flatten contexts, especially using various social media*" and context collision refers to when "*different social environments unintentionally and unexpectedly come crashing into each other*" (p. 5) [46]. Participants purposefully let some contexts collude when cross-posting. From carefully drafted cross-posts, they were able to deliver certain messages to a blend of audiences that spanned across social media, so that they could present themselves in an ideal way and harvest social capital from their networks. They allowed audiences from different contexts to view a slice of their online identity, which was selected and regarded as "safe" for this mix of audiences. At the same time, they tried their best to prevent these contexts from colliding and did not allow cross-posting to fail their previously devoted effort in separating different contexts across platforms. They did so by carefully reviewing the posts and technical configurations of platforms so that audience of one platform could not access content on another platform that they were not supposed to know.

## 5.5.2 Smoother Experience Cross-Posting to Different Platforms

Social media platforms should consider how to provide smoother cross-posting experiences for their users, as the participants in this study reported usability and incompatibility issues for different platforms and devices when they cross-posted. Fixing these issues might be easy, but there are questions social media platforms should think about before doing that.

Social media platforms should be more cautious about features that define them, even if users complain about it. For example, Twitter has long framed itself as being “*about brevity*” [159] and researchers have agreed that brevity is Twitter’s brand (e.g., [95]). In 2017, Twitter decided to double its character limitation from 140 characters to 280 characters to give users “*more space to express yourself* [159].” That said, the participants in this study—in 2021—still complained about the 280-character limitation when cross-posting, claiming that this limitation created extra steps for them as they copy-pasted content from platform to platform. Further loosening of this limitation, however, might blur Twitter’s brand and lower discussion quality. For example, Jaidka and colleagues found that empathy and respect decreased in political tweets following the doubling of the platform’s character limit [95].

Social media platforms might lose users to other platforms if they create an “overly” smooth experience for users to cross-post to external platforms. In other words, features supporting cross-posting serve to direct users to other platforms, leading users to spend less time on the original platform. In fact, some platform designs might have already reflected the company’s concerns of losing users to other platforms. For example, one’s Twitter

audience needs to be redirected to Instagram before seeing the pictures included in the post cross-posted from Instagram to Twitter. Losing users to other platforms is especially problematic for platforms that are similar or “old.” Research has found that people can have a new favorite platform and not use their previous favored platforms because of similarity of features, perceptions of the abandoned one’s decreasing popularity, and willingness to try the new platform [74].

However, it does not mean that social media platforms should purposefully leave the usability issues about cross-posting unsolved. Since October 21, 2021, Instagram allowed users to post from the desktop, which might benefit Instagram’s long-term growth. Users will be able to post more frequently with this additional channel when their smartphones are not around or when their content is stored on their desktop. Users will not be discouraged when they want to cross-post on desktop, like participants in our study complained about.

### 5.5.3 Performing Self-Presentation on Platforms Beyond Social Media

Self-presentation has always been one of the most important reasons for people to use social media (e.g., [115]). As people incorporate more social media platforms into their life, researchers are evaluating self-presentation as it occurs across these platforms. For example, DeVito and colleagues have proposed to understand people’s self-presentation within their social media ecosystems, where affordances, audiences, norms are key components and together shape users’ self-presentation [48]. Our participants’ responses suggest that they considered their self-presentation at a greater scale, performing their online identity beyond their social media.

The most frequently used platforms they mentioned were platforms that supported their content creation (e.g., podcast platforms). These content creation platforms usually do not have strong social media components (e.g., networking) and users like to share content they create to their own social networks. Even when the content creation platforms do support networking (e.g., YouTube), users may also have their own preferred platform to converse with their audiences about content they create. For example, P10 treated YouTube as a platform to host her videos about fan art, but she cross-posted these videos to her Twitter, and mainly interacted with her audiences there.

When cross-posting content they produce to a social media platform, people add another layer about themselves to their existing online image. Nevertheless, this cross-posting is a performance bounded by the social media platforms where content is shared. For example, participants mentioned they customized comments attached to the content they created to engage the audience on social media platforms they cross-posted to. After all, content creators value metrics like “total views” of their content and hope their personal networks contribute to these metrics, especially for those who are in the early stage of their content creator journey.

Interestingly, I also found that even participants wanted to maximize audiences of their content, they usually would not cross-post to their professional social network like LinkedIn (except P3, part of whose content was academia related). This suggests a trade-off between maximizing the audience of their content and maintaining their self-presentation on a platform where a singular and professional identity is preferred—or at least, considered appropriate or safe. Future research is needed to explore how content creation platforms where social media users engage in creative self-expression constitute and extend their

personal social media ecosystems.

## 5.6 Conclusion

As people increasingly incorporate multiple social media platforms in their life, it is important to understand how they use these platforms and present themselves on these platforms. In this study, I explored self-presentation on multiple social media platforms from the case of cross-posting, when the tensions of self-presentation is peaked and brings challenges to social media users.

Results drawn from 15 interviews with social media users who regularly cross-post unfold the limitation of using one platform and the challenges of using multiple. I found that the primary reason for participants to cross-post was to reach their desired audience, who resided on different platforms. While cross-posting, participants needed to consider what they wanted to communicate to their desired audience across platforms. As a result, they tended to share “safe” content that did not deviate from their self-presentation goals and the platform norms about self-presentation, or they cross-posted content they created (e.g., podcast) to share beyond their personal social networks.

They applied a range of strategies for cross-posting to ensure they presented themselves properly and engaged with their desired audiences. They explored platform features that supported cross-site linkage or cross-posting before deciding how they wanted to cross-post. Automatic cross-posting supported by platform features was perceived as convenient. However, the usability issues of these features and incompatibility issues of different platforms and devices usually drove them to cross-post manually so they could have better

control of posts. Manually cross-posting by copy-pasting and editing content from platform to platform could be “tedious” but allowed room for participants to customize content to engage with different audiences on platforms. Participants also devoted effort into deciding which platforms to cross-post to, in what order. In addition to applying privacy configurations on posts and accounts, some content creators also specifically mentioned another strategy they applied in audience management. They relied on platform insights to understand the user engagement of their content, and fine-tuned their future posting with this knowledge (e.g., schedule posts when audiences were more active). These results surface many usability issues social media platforms might want to resolve to improve user experiences when cross-posting.

This study has shown the complexity of navigating one’s self-presentation in their social media ecosystems, where features and affordances, audiences, norms on each of the platform collectively shape their self-presentation. More case studies about how different people with different self-presentation goals manage their online identity in and beyond their personal social media ecosystems are needed. Content creators are one group of social media users future research should consider. They have the intention of maximizing the reach of their creative content thus heavily relying on cross-posting. They need to manage conflicting needs between privacy and user engagement when sharing both personal updates and creative content online. Spending much time on social media, they might also have a deep understanding of social media algorithms and game the systems for the visibility of their content [42].

## Chapter 6: Audience Response to Drastic Changes in Social Media Influencers' Self-Presentation

### 6.1 Introduction

Self-presentation—how we represent ourselves to others—is one of the most important motivations for social media use (e.g., [23, 115, 217]) and has been a focus of social media research since the earliest days of social media [48, 56, 87, 97]. Self-presentation is a collaborative act involving both an individual (the performer) and their audience (friends and other connections) [136]. On social media, an individual performs their identity in a self-conscious way by posting content, making self-disclosures, and socializing with their audiences. Audiences, in turn, may provide explicit feedback that shapes future self-presentation—through comments, clicks, or even a lack of engagement—or they may influence the performer's self-presentation by innate characteristics. For example, the lowest common denominator (LCD) strategy for self-presentation involves careful consideration of one's audience and tailoring content to the person who is most likely to react negatively (e.g., a grandparent or boss) [86]. That said, the vast majority of the self-presentation research focuses on the performer while ignoring the audience.

Researchers evaluating how performers present themselves on social media have found

that their self-presentation is multi-faceted and constantly changing; as people grow and mature, experience different life transitions, and have different social networks, they change how they present themselves on social media [79, 91, 168, 186]. For example, Schoenebeck and colleagues found that young adults perceive their old posts as embarrassing and engage in retrospective impression management practices like curating past content [168].

Self-presentation also occurs across multiple platforms, and in recent years, people have been incorporating more and more social media platforms into their daily life [32]. Multi-site research has found that people can have different posting behaviors and portray themselves very differently across their social media platforms [21, 94, 144, 180, 207]. For example, Taber and Whittaker have found that people present themselves as more extroverted and more open on Snapchat than on Facebook [180]. For most social media users, their audiences will vary across platforms and thus help shape differences in self-presentation strategies. Therefore, performers carefully must manage these audiences across different social media platforms [144, 215] and keep multiple dimensions of their identity and the audience for each dimension separated from each other [215].

In this study, I consider how audiences perceive changes in others' social media self-presentation. To do this, I consider an example of a significant shift in self-presentation by evaluating how audiences respond to ex-veg\*n YouTubers' drastic transition from being veg\*n to quitting veg\*nism.<sup>1</sup>

Ex-veg\*ns, and especially those who have a large following, provide a useful case study for examining audience perceptions. In this study I focus primarily on social media

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<sup>1</sup>In this study, I do not distinguish vegans/veganism and vegetarians/vegetarianism. I use “veg\*n” to refer to vegans and vegetarians, and “veg\*nism” to refer to veganism and vegetarianism.

influencers, that is, *“everyday, ordinary Internet users who accumulate a relatively large following on blogs and social media through the textual and visual narration of their personal lives and lifestyles, engage with their following in digital and physical spaces, and monetise their following by integrating ‘advertorials’ into their blog or social media posts”* (p. 1) [1].

When people go veg\*n, they publicly declare their identity, morals, and lifestyle [77]. Veg\*n social media influencers are likely to be followed by people who share this aspect of their identity. When they suddenly declare that they are no longer veg\*n and make a dramatic shift in their veg\*n identity, they risk their relationship with their followers.

I am able to collect data on how audiences responded to this drastic shift in ex-veg\*n YouTubers’ identity because of the high visibility and availability of content on YouTube. The YouTubers I evaluate, like many other social media influencers, make their content highly visible and may even play the *“visibility game”* [42] to take advantage of platform algorithms and increase views, which translates into profits. They posted YouTube videos to announce their identity transition even though it is counter to the image they previously have curated. I can access the videos that represent their previous veg\*n identity and their current non-veg\*n identity and the comments of these videos. This behavior differs from most non-influencers; when using social media to document their identity transition, many people who do not profit from views and attention from other people usually limit the access to their old social media via privacy settings (e.g., [79, 91, 168]), making it difficult to research.

In light of this, I argue that social media influencers have a vested interest in maintaining positive impressions from their audience and that the audience therefore has significant power in shaping influencers’ self-presentation. By collecting comments under YouTubers’

announcement videos about quitting veg\*nism, I can begin to unpack how audiences perceive major changes in influencers' self-presentation. Therefore, the first research question is:

- **RQ1: How do audiences respond to ex-veg\*n YouTubers' announcement videos about quitting veg\*nism?**

In addition to evaluating audiences' responses to ex-veg\*n YouTubers' self-presentational shift, I also consider how audiences responded to their previous veg\*n identity, as well as how audiences responded to their new non-veg\*n identity. To do this, I also evaluate comments from influencers on pre-announcement videos about veg\*nism (as a baseline) and comments on post-announcement videos to see how audience responses evolved over time. Therefore, the second research question is:

- **RQ2: How do audience responses to ex-veg\*n YouTubers change over time (i.e., between pre-announcement, announcement, and post-announcement videos)?**

To answer these research questions, I collected nearly 15,000 comments across 30 videos from 10 ex-veg\*n YouTubers. For each YouTuber, I selected three videos: (1) the announcement video where they announced quitting veg\*nism, (2) a pre-announcement video where they shared about their veg\*n identity, and (3) the first post-announcement video they posted. I conducted quantitative data exploration and performed content analysis to identify emergent themes regarding social support and negative emotions, bond with the YouTubers, and group identity. I am interested in these themes because previous research suggests that discussions about these themes reflect critical processes in online

communities around social media influencers, which I will elaborate in the following section. Content analysis on a subset of 3483 comments showed that, despite significant negativity toward the YouTubers for quitting veg\*nism, audiences also provided significant support to the YouTubers to help them go through this difficult transition phase. Discussion of the YouTubers' transition from veg\*ns to non-veg\*ns continued in post-announcement videos, and audiences became more supportive and less critical toward the ex-veg\*n YouTubers over time.

This study contributes to the literature on social media influencers and expands the literature on audience responses to social media self-presentation. Inspired by the results of this study, I discuss the relationship between the audience and performer on social media and further consider the role social media affordances play in how users manage interpersonal relationships and self-presentation.

In the following sections, I first review the literature on social media influencers and their self-presentation, as well as online communities and social media influencers. This prior work helps frame my analysis of the data, where I focus on three categories of emergent themes: the bond with the YouTubers, the group veg\*n identity, and social support and emotions.

## 6.2 Related Work

### 6.2.1 Social Media Influencers & Self-Presentation

In this study, I consider a special class of social media users: influencers. Social media influencers are *“everyday, ordinary Internet users who accumulate a relatively large*

*following on blogs and social media through the textual and visual narration of their personal lives and lifestyles, engage with their following in digital and physical spaces, and monetise their following by integrating ‘advertorials’ into their blog or social media posts”* (p. 1) [1].

Social media influencers are often classified based on their number of followers; for example, according to a report from an influencer marketing platform, nano-influencers are those who have 1000 to 5000 followers, while mega-influencers are those with over a million followers [93]. However, there are no clear guidelines for the minimum number of followers one should have to become an influencer. Social media influencers can also be classified based on the platform they are mostly active on (e.g., Instagram, Twitch, YouTube). They gain attention and spend more time on their primary social media platforms and they may or may not have accounts on other platforms.

Regardless of their follower counts or platforms used, social media influencers need to connect with and engage their followers to profit from this career path. For example, livestreamers on some platforms can receive digital gifts—which can be exchanged for money—from their audiences during their live sessions [202], while YouTubers can profit from audiences’ viewing advertisements attached to their videos. Influencers can also promote products through sponsored content or “advertorials,” getting commission from audiences’ purchases of these products or getting paid from the sponsor [2, 19, 53, 116]. Social media influencers’ success or influence can be measured by quantifiable metrics like the number of followers, the number of interactions with followers (e.g., likes and comments), and the sentiment of comments [75], all of which are associated with audiences and audience engagement.

Social media influencers create a public persona to be consumed by large and of-

ten diverse audiences [35, 61]. Influencers value authenticity and consistency in their self-presentation because their audiences value it [53, 98, 119, 128, 134]. This perceived authenticity is important in their success as influencers. For example, researchers found that audiences' perceived authenticity of influencers has a positive effect on their purchase intention for products the influencers sponsor [152].

Authenticity can be judged over time. As Marwick notes, “*authenticity is determined by comparing their [influencers'] current actions against their past for consistency*” (p. 120) [134]. Authenticity can also be evaluated based on the influencers' self-disclosures. For example, Lovelock [128] has argued that authenticity is gradually built up as influencers produce more content and share more about themselves, including private aspects of themselves like sexual orientation. Self-disclosure is important in interpersonal relationship [76, 99]. Specifically for the relationship between social media influencers and their audiences, usually regarded as a parasocial relationship [110, 156, 213], previous research has found that audiences perceive a stronger parasocial relationship with influencers if they perceive more self-disclosure from the influencers [64, 107].

Authenticity in influencers' online self-presentation can also be judged as a comparison to their (perceived) offline identity. Audiences believe candid and not perfectly polished content is more authentic, so influencers may purposefully avoid editing out some linguistic errors in their content and create behind-the-scenes content [19, 53, 98]. Li and colleagues found that audiences of esports commentators notice and dislike fake performance in live commentary, such that the commentators need to bring their authentic and distinct personal styles and offline personalities to their live sessions [119].

## 6.2.2 Online Communities Around Social Media Influencers

Online communities around social media influencers are formed by influencers' audiences. These communities can form on the influencers' primary platform or extend to other platforms [208]. There are two mechanisms that explain how members become attached to an online community [157]. The bond-based group attachment theory holds that people become attached to specific members of the community, while the identity-based group attachment theory emphasizes that members are attached to a community because of a shared identity [157]. The two mechanisms are not exclusive to each other, but rather two dimensions to evaluate how group members are attached to an online community [157]. Below, I examine work on online communities and influencers that touches on these mechanisms, then review work on social support and harassment happening in these communities, as these are common outcomes associated with online communities.

### 6.2.2.1 Bond-Based Group Attachment & Parasocial Relationship

When audiences are attached to other group members—especially an influencer—they are more likely to actively engage in the community. There are different kinds of relationships in online communities. In this study I will focus on the relationship between social media influencers and their audiences, often regarded as a parasocial relationship [110, 156, 213]. Parasocial relationships are a one-sided relationship experienced by media audiences when they are repeatedly exposed to a media persona, such that they develop a sense of intimacy, perceived friendship, and identification with the media persona [88]. The concept was first mentioned in the 1950s to describe the relationship between media

audiences and media performers on radio, television, and movies. Since then, it has been used to explain different performer-audience relationships in different media contexts—including online communities and social media [11, 208].

Social media distinguishes itself from traditional media by providing more direct communication channels between audiences and influencers, potentially enabling reciprocal relationship between them. However, research has shown that influencers rarely engage in direct communication with individual members of their community. For example, Wellman found that an influencer put limited effort in a Facebook group she created for maintaining relationships with her followers, while the group was still active and self-sustaining because followers passionately posted to each other and to her [208]. Other research on YouTube influencers has shown that YouTubers rarely directly reply to comments and have one-on-one communication with audiences; instead they address their audiences via videos [98, 158, 194]. Despite that, minimal interactions from the influencers can still convey a sense of accessibility to their audiences because of the publicity and visibility of social media interactions [135].

This brings us to the first group of themes I will explore via an analysis of YouTube comments. The two sub-RQs related to identity-based bonds with influencers are:

- **RQ1.1: How do audiences discuss their bond with the ex-veg\*n YouTuber under the announcement videos?**
- **RQ2.1: How does discussion of their bond with the ex-veg\*n YouTuber change over time?**

### 6.2.2.2 Identity-Based Group Attachment

Social media influencers usually create content on specific topics or share specific aspects about their identity. Audiences are committed to the communities around influencers because they are also interested in these topics, perceive that influencers have expertise in these topics, and/or have shared identity with the influencers. For example, beauty communities form around YouTube ‘beauty gurus’ who regularly post makeup tutorials and beauty product reviews [19, 66, 68, 107]. Likewise, LGBTQ+ communities form around YouTubers like Ingrid Nilsen, who discussed their LGBTQ+ identity, e.g., by posting coming out videos [128].

Prior to quitting veg\*nism, ex-veg\*n YouTubers explicitly branded their veg\*n identity and created content about this topic. They may post veg\*n recipes or ‘what I eat in a day’ videos, or expand their content to include a wider veg\*n lifestyle that incorporates fashion and beauty (e.g., videos about veg\*n clothing haul or veg\*n beauty product reviews) and lifestyle (e.g., videos documenting their veg\*n beliefs and practices [80]). In this study, the common identity of the online communities I am interested in is veg\*n; audiences who are in these communities do not have to be veg\*ns but they most likely have significant interest in veg\*n-related topics. Nevertheless, I expect many of these audiences are veg\*ns. Research has shown that veg\*nism is an important part of veg\*ns’ identities [40, 77, 143, 160, 161] and that veg\*ns actively search for like-minded people to try out their veg\*n identity [113]. Another study also has shown that content about veg\*nism accessed via YouTube is important for people who transition into a veg\*n lifestyle [113].

Therefore, the second set of sub-RQs focuses on identity-based bonds and how they

change over time.

- **RQ1.2: How do audiences discuss their common identity with the ex-veg\*<sup>n</sup> YouTuber under the announcement videos?**
- **RQ2.2: How does the discussion of their common identity change over time?**

### 6.2.2.3 Community Outcomes: Social Support & Online Harassment

Social support, defined as *“the perception or experience that one is cared for, esteemed, and part of a mutually supportive social network”* (p.1 [183]). In many online communities, members provide social support to each other, such as health based communities for those suffering from chronic health issues as well as communities for those dealing with difficult life experiences (e.g., [5,43,164]). Social support exchanges also occur in online communities around social media influencers. For example, a Facebook group created by an Australia influencer Sarah is used as a space for Sarah and her followers to discuss a variety of topics, including diet and health and to provide social support to each other [208].

Oftentimes, social support is provided from audiences to the influencers instead of the other way around, because influencers’ content has higher visibility in their communities compared to their audiences (e.g., influencers’ YouTube videos vs. audiences’ comments on the videos). When influencers express negativity and vulnerability in their content, social support from their audiences can be expected. Research has found that sharing vulnerability and negativity is a strategy social media influencers apply to build their online image and engage their audiences [20,98,117]. For example, Jerslev found that a

YouTuber (Zoella) received emotional support and narrowed the distance between herself and her audiences by projecting herself as vulnerable and crying in some of her videos [98].

Nevertheless, social media influencers can also receive negative comments from their audiences. Due to the publicity and visibility of their online persona, and the scale of their audiences, influencers face an increased risk of online harassment and hate [53]. These forms of negative feedback not only happen on the social media platform they are active on [53, 55], but can also extend outside the platform. For example, Duffy and colleagues found that on the online community “Get Off My Internets,” anti-fans of influencers attack female influencers for “having it all,” i.e., career, relationships, and appearances [54].

Ex-veg\*n YouTubers who announced quitting veg\*nism are likely to receive both social support and hate from their audiences. When explaining why they made the decision to quit veg\*nism, they usually mentioned their health conditions and stated their pressure of drifting apart from their previous established veg\*n identity. This could result in social support from their audiences, especially those who are not necessarily strict about their veg\*n identity and care more about them as a person. On the other hand, this could also result in harsh comments or harassment from their audiences because many of whom care about their veg\*n identity. This brings us to the final sets of sub-RQs, which focus on social support and negative emotional expressions in audience responses to ex-veg\*ns’ identity shift.

- **RQ1.3: How do audiences provided social support to the ex-veg\*n YouTuber under the announcement videos?**
- **RQ2.3: How does the discussion of social support change over time?**

- **RQ1.4: How do audiences express negative emotions to the ex-veg\*n YouTuber under the announcement videos?**
- **RQ2.4: How do their negative emotional expressions change over time?**

## 6.3 Method

### 6.3.1 Data Collection

To build the corpus, Dr. Vitak and I used incognito browsers to search for YouTube videos and prevented sampling bias that might occur if searches were linked to an existing Google account. We searched different keyword combinations (e.g., “no longer vegan/vegetarian,” “stop being vegan/vegetarian,” “quitting vegan/vegetarian”) to identify videos about YouTubers sharing their stories about quitting veg\*nism (denoted as “announcement videos”). Announcement videos were selected if 1) the video was the first time when the YouTuber announced the identity transition from veg\*n to non-veg\*n on YouTube; 2) the YouTuber had posted at least two videos explicitly about veg\*nism prior to this announcement video<sup>2</sup>; and 3) the YouTuber had at least 5000 subscribers, which indicated an influencer status [93].

Along with each of the selected announcement videos, two additional videos were also selected: 1) the most recent video explicitly about veg\*nism uploaded before the announcement video, to map onto the YouTuber’s old veg\*n identity (denoted as “pre-announcement

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<sup>2</sup>I closely examined ex-veg\*n YouTubers’ video uploads and found that most videos are about lifestyle, food, and fitness. I also found that to establish their online identities as veg\*ns, they not only posted content explicitly about veg\*nism (e.g., videos that include these keywords in titles or thumbnails), they also discussed their veg\*n identities repeatedly in other videos that were not explicitly about veg\*nism (e.g., vlogs). Because of this, I believe having two videos explicitly about veg\*nism are sufficient for YouTubers’ audiences to understand their veg\*n identities.

ID	Num. Subscribers (k)	Num. Videos	Channel Creation	Announcement Video Upload	Location
Y1	339	163	2014	2019	Australia
Y2	5.4	71	2010	2019	Canada
Y3	60.6	136	2011	2020	UK
Y4	43.8	283	2013	2019	UK
Y5	485	654	2013	2019	US
Y6	214	90	2014	2018	UK
Y7	16.2	286	2013	2017	US
Y8	126	244	2014	2018	Australia
Y9	56.4	662	2010	2019	US
Y10	214	273	2016	2019	UK

Table 6.1: Basic information about the 10 YouTubers and their channels.

videos”); and 2) the first video posted after the announcement video, regardless of the theme (denoted as “post-announcement videos”). The final list included 30 videos from 10 female YouTubers (see details in Appendix G). The basic information about them and their YouTube channels can be found in Table 6.1.

I retrieved all comments posted on these 30 videos using the YouTube Data API<sup>3</sup> from May 24 to May 28, 2021. Comments that met the following criteria were kept: 1) they were first-level comments, which were more likely to be direct responses to the YouTubers’ self-presentation than nested replies; and 2) they were published within one week of the video publication, because audiences who watched videos during that time were more likely to be those who followed the YouTubers and were more familiar with the YouTubers’ previous veg\*n identity. I then removed non-English comments, comments that only included special characters and/or emojis, and comments posted by YouTubers themselves.

The final dataset included 14,775 comments under these videos (pre-announcement: 567, announcement: 10,124, post-announcement: 4084). On average, there are 509 com-

<sup>3</sup><https://developers.google.com/YouTube/v3>

ments collected per video (Median = 122,  $SD = 1137$ ), with the number of comments heavily skewed toward announcement videos. The average word count of the comments is 54.4 (Median = 31,  $SD = 70.5$ ). Comments under the announcement videos, on average, had 60.2 words ( $SD = 75.7$ ), followed by that under the post-announcement videos ( $M = 44.7$ ,  $SD = 58.1$ ) and comments under the pre-announcement videos ( $M = 20.7$ ,  $SD = 25.7$ ).

### 6.3.2 Quantitative Data Exploration

I conducted quantitative data exploration on the corpus at the comment level with Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC), a dictionary-based approach to analyze language features. Previous research has used LIWC to understand words in psychologically meaningful categories such as emotions (e.g., positive and negative emotions) and attentional focus (e.g., pronouns) on a range of different corpora [30, 148, 182]. I measured linguistic characteristics of each comment based on the LIWC 2007 dictionary [150]. To capture themes related to the research questions, I measured the percentage of words in each comment under two main categories: 1) affective attributes, including positive emotions, negative emotions, anxiety, anger, sadness, and swear words; and 2) first-person plural pronouns such as “we” to reflect when audiences perceived themselves as part of the community around the YouTubers. Descriptive statistics of the percentage of words in a comment can be found in Table 6.2.

I ran comment-level analysis to understand the effect of video type on the percentage of words of interests in a comment. Since each Youtuber had three videos sampled, and each

	Pre-Announcement N = 567	Announcement N = 10124	Post-Announcement N = 4084
Positive emotions	11.8 (15.9)	7.4 (9.1)	8.9 (10.9)
Negative emotions	1.2 (4.0)	2.4 (5.7)	2.3 (5.4)
Anxiety	0.3 (1.7)	0.4 (2.3)	0.3 (2.2)
Anger	0.4 (2.5)	0.7 (2.9)	1.0 (3.7)
Sadness	0.3 (2.5)	0.5 (3.1)	0.4 (2.2)
Swear	0.2 (1.6)	0.2 (2.0)	0.3 (2.0)
1st person plural	0.2 (1.3)	0.5 (1.9)	0.4 (1.8)

Table 6.2: Mean (SD) of the percentage of words of interest in a comment across video types.

	Intercept Coef. (SE)	Pre-announcement Coef. (SE)	Post-Announcement Coef. (SE)
Positive emotions	7.7(0.9)***	4.0(1.2)**	2.4(1.2)
Negative emotions	2.6(0.3)***	-1.1(0.4)*	-0.5(0.4)
Anxiety	0.4(0.05)***	-0.1(0.1)	-0.1(0.05)
Anger	0.8(0.1)***	-0.4(0.2)*	0.2(0.1)
Sadness	0.5(0.05)***	-0.2(0.1)	-0.2(0.1)***
Swear	0.3(0.1)**	-0.1(0.1)	0.1(0.04)
1st person plural	0.5(0.1)***	-0.3(0.1)***	-0.1(0.03)**

Table 6.3: The results of the linear mixed effects models measuring the effect of video type on percentage of words of interests in a comment (\*\*\* $p < 0.001$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \* $p < 0.05$ ).

video included multiple comments, I conducted multi-level modeling to control for potential influence of the Youtuber and of the video. I used R package “lme4” to build mixed effect linear regression models where Youtuber and video id was input as the random effects [13]. I built seven models, each using the video type (pre-announcement, announcement, and post-announcement) as the predictor, and the percentage of one category of words of interests in a comment as the outcome variable. Results can be found in Table 6.3.

Compared with comments under announcement videos, comments under pre-announcement videos had a significantly higher percentage of positive emotion words (Coef. = 4.0, SE = 1.2,  $p < 0.01$ ), a lower percentage of negative emotion words (Coef. = -1.1, SE = 0.4,  $p <$

0.05), and a lower percentage of words about anger (Coef. = -0.4, SE = 0.2,  $p < 0.05$ ). Compared with comments on announcement videos, comments on post-announcement videos had a significantly lower percentage of words about sadness (Coef. = -0.2, SE = 0.1,  $p < 0.001$ ). This suggests that the drastic change in YouTubers' online identity was negatively perceived by audiences.

A higher percentage of first-person plural pronouns like “we” were used in comments under the announcement videos than comments on pre-announcement or post-announcement videos (pre-announcement: Coef. = -0.3, SE = 0.1,  $p < 0.001$ ; post-announcement: Coef. = -0.1, SE = 0.03,  $p < 0.01$ ), suggesting that commenters more frequently discussed themselves as part of a wider community when responding to the YouTubers' decision to quit veg\*nism.

The quantitative data exploration with LIWC provided some insights into how audiences responded to the ex-veg\*n YouTubers' online identity transition as mentioned above. However, LIWC is not sufficient to address the research questions. First, not all the themes I am interested in are defined or have equivalents in the LIWC dictionary. Second, the nuances inherent in the corpus can not be correctly captured by LIWC. For example, with LIWC it is able to identify comments with more first-person plural pronouns, which likely indicate a better sense of community [30, 148]. However, without looking at the full comment, it is unable to understand which community the audience referred to when they used “we.” They could mean the veg\*n community from which the YouTuber was removing themselves, or they could mean the community that supported the YouTubers regardless of the YouTubers' dietary or lifestyle choices.

In light of this, I chose to use content analysis to address the RQs, manually coding a

subset of comments to identify themes and unpack the nuances in the dataset. Below, I describe the procedures in conducting the content analysis, including data scoping, codebook development, and coding process.

### 6.3.3 Content Analysis

**Data scoping.** In order to address the RQs and identify emergent themes in audience responses to ex-veg\*n YouTubers' announcement videos—and how these themes fluctuated across time from pre-announcement to post-announcement—I conducted content analysis on a subset of comments. Since comments were not evenly distributed among YouTubers and videos, with more popular YouTubers' videos and videos about trendy topics (e.g., quitting veg\*nism) attracting more comments, I adopted a sampling strategy that amplified audiences' voices under the less popular videos without over-representing audiences' voices under the more popular videos. For videos with comments above median, I randomly sampled 85% of them but no more than 200; for other videos I kept all their comments for qualitative coding. This sampling strategy guarantees that more popular videos will not have fewer comments sampled. 85% was selected to ensure that comments sampled under a less popular video would not exceed that under a more popular one. This process generated a corpus of 3483 comments across the three video types (pre-announcement: 567, announcement: 1676, post-announcement: 1240).

**Codebook development and coding process.** The codebook was developed based on comments under the announcement videos and was used on comments across the three video types. I was only interested in themes in audiences' responses to ex-veg\*n YouTubers'

announcement videos about quitting veg\*nism and looked at comments on pre- and post-announcement videos to track how these themes fluctuated over time.

Dr. Vitak and I independently conducted preliminary coding on approximately 3% (n=72) of the randomly sampled comments under the announcement videos. We adopted a semi-open coding approach, using Cutrona and Suhr's [45] definition of social support, which includes 13 types of social support across four categories. We took notes on other emergent themes while coding, then met and discussed the codes and emergent themes. Based on the lack of detail in many comments, we switched to Cutrona and Russell's [44] less fine-grained definition of social support, which includes five types of social support: emotional support, esteem support, network support, tangible aid, and informational support. "Tangible aid" was dropped because it did not fit the context of this study. The codes "emotional support" and "esteem support" were merged into one because we found it was difficult to distinguish between these two types of support in the dataset. In addition to codes about social support, other codes were refined and classified into identity-based group attachment, bond-based group attachment, and negative emotional expressions.

Dr. Vitak and I then completed a second round of independent preliminary coding on another 100 randomly sampled comments under the announcement videos using the updated codebook. We met again and discussed the codes, further refining the code definitions. The final codebook can be found in Table 6.4. The codes are not mutually exclusive except the two codes about negative emotional expression; each comment could be assigned multiple codes.

Holdout samples are commonly used in model building and testing, making sure models and algorithms trained on training set will perform well beyond the training set

[82]. I adapt this approach to ensure my sample was representative of the full dataset. I coded a random holdout sample of 100 comments under the announcement videos with this codebook. No new themes were identified in the holdout sample. Finally, I coded the full sample of 3483 comments with the finalized codebook.

Code	Definition	Examples
<b>Bond-based Group Attachment</b>		
Personal choice	Recognize veg*n or not is a personal choice, and/or recognize human body can react differently to a diet.	<i>“Everyone has to do what is right for their body. Everyone is different and can be sensitive to different things.”</i>
Request information	Ask the YouTubers questions and/or request more videos.	<i>“Can’t wait to see what new recipes you bring to the channel!” // “Will you still make food videos? Plant based or otherwise?”</i>
Authenticity	Recognize the YouTubers’ authenticity for coming out as ex-veg*n.	<i>“I STILL find you so inspiring, is that through it all you still have the COURAGE and STRENGTH to be your AUTHENTIC self, HONEST and OPEN.”</i>
Personality over shared identity	Value the YouTubers’ personality and show support to the YouTubers regardless of their veg*n/non-veg*n identity.	<i>“I still love your channel, your vibe and energy is why I subscribed, not because of your diet.”</i>
<b>Identity-based Group Attachment</b>		
Self-disclosure about veg*nism	Share personal stories about veg*nism.	<i>“I went through basically all the same experiences during my attempts at veganism. Started eating organic eggs and dairy again and immediately began to regain my health.”</i>
Critical to the YouTubers	Express a critical or negative attitude towards the YouTubers who quit veg*nism.	<i>“You’re a fraud.” // “Why would you want to add to the suffering of this world again?”</i>
Critical to haters	Express a critical or negative attitude towards haters who bashed the YouTubers who quit veg*nism.	<i>“Please don’t think what other people say, just listen to your heart and your body warning sign alert.”</i>
Veg*n community cult	Discuss the cult of veg*n community.	<i>“The vegan community is sometimes the very opposite of compassionate. I noticed that I started to hate humans too when I was vegan.”</i>
<b>Social Support</b>		
Emotional/esteem support	Make the YouTubers feel cared for by others, or bolster the YouTubers’ sense of competence or self-esteem.	<i>“Wow! This is truly informative. Thank you so much for sharing.” // “I’m so happy to hear that you are doing what works for YOU!!!”</i>
Informational support	Provide the YouTubers with advice or guidance concerning possible solutions to a problem.	<i>“Did you consult with a gut health doctor?” // “I recommend to watch Marcus from The healthy life, it might help [link]”</i>
Network support	Make the YouTubers feel being part of a group whose members have common interests and concerns.	<i>“We support you anyway.”</i>
<b>Negative Emotional Expression</b>		
Negative	Expressed negative emotions towards the YouTubers.	<i>“Pathetic! Unsubscribed....”</i>
Mixed	Expressed negative and positive emotions towards the YouTubers.	<i>“I’m glad you are being honest, but I hate that you have sooo many people that you influence and how many people are not going to be vegan because of this....”</i>

Table 6.4: Codebook for conducting content analysis on the 3483 comments across three video types. Examples were from comments on announcement videos.

Code	Pre-Announcement N = 567	Announcement N = 1676	Post-Announcement N = 1240
<b>Bond-based Group Attachment</b>			
Personal choice ***	0.2%	20%	8%
Request information *	22%	16%	17%
Authenticity ***	0%	9%	6%
Personality over shared identity ***	0%	6%	3%
<b>Identity-based Group Attachment</b>			
Self-disclosure about veg*nism ***	2%	21%	7%
Critical to the YouTubers ***	0.4%	10%	5%
Critical to haters ***	0.2%	6%	12%
Veg*n community cult ***	0%	2%	2%
<b>Social Support</b>			
Emotional/esteem support ***	53%	56%	64%
Informational support ***	6%	22%	8%
Network support ***	0.2%	9%	6%
<b>Negative Emotional Expression</b>			
Negative ***	0.4%	10%	6%
Mixed ***	0%	1%	0.4%

Table 6.5: Percentage of comments about different themes under the three types of YouTube videos. Asterisks next to the code mean that the the frequency of this code across video types is significantly different ( $*p < 0.05$ ,  $***p < 0.001$ ).

## 6.4 Results

Below, I report results of the theme distribution in comments across the three types of videos collected. Table 6.5 shows the comment distribution for each theme and across each kind of video. For each theme, I first describe comments of this code under the announcement videos, and then report whether and how comments of this code changed over time.

## 6.4.1 Bond-Based Group Attachment

The first group of themes is about bond-based group attachment. In this section, I explore how audiences discuss their bond with the YouTubers and how they valued the YouTubers as an individual instead of a label. The results suggest that audiences developed a parasocial relationship with the YouTubers and talked to the YouTubers like friends in the comment section of their videos. After elaborating on the results of the four related codes, I summarize this section and address RQ1.1 and RQ2.1.

### 6.4.1.1 Personal Choice

The most common theme discussed in comments on announcement videos that reflected bond-based attachment was when viewers commented on quitting veg\*nism being a personal choice, and expressed that they cared about the YouTubers' well-being more than their diet (20%). Many replied with comments like *“your body, your choice”* and wanted the YouTuber to *“do what’s the best for you.”* They recognized that there was an individual difference in how the body responds to a diet or food, e.g., *“Something that you arent [sic] told when researching vegan diets is that SOME people REALLY just cant handle a vegan diet. Every single body is DIFFERENT. And we all need different things.”*

From these comments, I see that audiences cared about the YouTubers as a person more than the YouTubers' veg\*n identity. By acknowledging the fact that human bodies might respond differently to a veg\*n diet and empathizing with the YouTubers for quitting veg\*nism, they became more attached to the YouTubers and their community.

Change over time. Chi-squared tests identified a significant difference in the frequency of this theme across time ( $X^2 = 185.91$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Under the pre-announcement videos, audiences rarely discussed whether adopting a veg\*n lifestyle was a personal choice (0.2%). Although not all post-announcement videos were follow-up videos about the YouTubers' choices of quitting veg\*nism, the discussion about whether this was a personal choice that people should respect continued, but less frequently than that under the announcement videos (8%).

#### 6.4.1.2 Requesting More Information

The second most common theme that reflected a bond-based attachment was when audiences requested the YouTubers film more videos or asked the YouTubers questions (16%). These questions and requested videos were centered around the YouTubers' lifestyle change. The vast majority of comments requesting information from the YouTubers indicated that the audiences were curious about the YouTubers who made this change, hoping to learn more about them or to help them better navigate their health issues.<sup>4</sup> Audiences are likely to stay tuned for updates from the YouTubers after leaving comments like these—previous research has found that YouTubers usually address their audiences via videos instead of directly replying to comments and having one-on-one communication with audiences [98, 158, 194].

Viewers were interested in knowing more about the YouTubers' lifestyle change, so they requested more videos with comments like *"I can't wait to see more of your journey!"*

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<sup>4</sup>Some audiences asked questions with a critical and hostile attitude, e.g., *"Why would you want to add to the suffering of this world again?"* Among the 269 comments labeled as "request more information," 40 of them were coded with negative or mixed emotional expressions (15%).

“What I eat in a day” videos or recipe videos are common and popular videos from these YouTubers, and viewers also expressed interest in updated, non-veg\*n versions of these videos. For example, one viewer said, *“Can’t wait to see what new recipes you bring to the channel!”* By doing that, viewers indicated their continued attention to the YouTubers and their channels in the future.

Viewers initiated conversations and asked the YouTubers clarifying questions about their lifestyle change. Some of these questions were amicable or neutral, e.g., *“Do you mind me asking you to elaborate more about how you felt?”* and *“So will you stop buying vegan clothes?”* In other scenarios, viewers provided information or alternative solutions to the YouTubers’ health issues (in cases where the YouTuber discussed health conditions they thought were caused by their veg\*n diet). For example, viewers wanted to confirm whether the YouTubers consulted doctors before attributing their health issues to their veg\*n diet; one viewer commented, *“Did you consult with a gut health doctor? Or speak to a vegan doctor? If you really believe in the ethics of veganism, you should do whatever you can to fix these underlying issues, instead of blaming veganism.”* Viewers also asked the YouTubers whether they tried alternative approaches to fix the health issues mentioned in the videos, e.g., *“Have you had UTIs and/or ever taken antibiotics for anything? Your problems could be gut related.”*

Change over time. Chi-squared tests showed a significant difference in the frequency of this theme across time ( $X^2 = 8.81$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Under the pre-announcement videos, there was a higher percentage of comments requesting information from the YouTubers compared with that on announcement and post-announcement videos. Under the pre-

announcement videos, viewers actively requested information from the YouTubers about the video content. For example, for a veg\*n recipe video, viewers asked questions about ingredients used in the recipe. Comments under post-announcement videos were similar to those under the announcement videos, mainly focusing on requesting more information, new videos, and clarification on the YouTubers' lifestyle change.

### 6.4.1.3 Authenticity & Personality Over Shared Identity

The third and the fourth most common themes that reflected a bond-based attachment were authenticity (9%) and personality over shared identity (6%). By recognizing the YouTubers' honesty and sincerity in announcing their lifestyle change—instead of hiding it—audiences highlighted that they were attached to the communities because they were attached to the YouTubers.

Some viewers perceived authenticity in the YouTubers' lifestyle change. They complimented the YouTubers for being authentic under the pressure of coming out as ex-veg\*ns. They frequently used words like *“honest,” “transparent,” “brave,” “genuine,” “true,”* and *“authentic”* to describe the YouTubers. One viewer wrote, *“Bonny, no matter what people say, whether they're right or not: I applaud you for being so honest. I can totally understand how difficult this decision was for you and how hard it was to share on camera. I'm really proud of you for opening up and telling us.”* This finding affirmed findings in prior research that audiences value influencers' authenticity [53, 98, 119, 128, 134]. Audiences might evaluate influencers' authenticity with different standards, e.g., consistency in self-presentation over time [134]. This finding echoes work by Li and colleagues [119],

which found that authenticity is perceived if audiences believe influencers are being their real selves instead of performing as someone they are not.

Viewers perceived authenticity from the YouTubers not only from the explicitly stated lifestyle change in the announcement videos, but also based on aspects of their personality. For some viewers, personality trumped the veg\*n lifestyle and identity they previously shared. One viewer said, *“I’m not here for your diet, I am here for your personality, you are amazing and your videos always put a smile on my face. Stay strong xox.”* Another viewer said, *“You are a person with so many layers and things to share.”*

Change over time. Chi-squared tests showed a significant difference in the frequency of these two themes across time (authenticity:  $X^2 = 61.54$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ; personality over shared identity:  $X^2 = 46.45$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). No comments were coded for these themes under the pre-announcement videos. The comments of these two codes under the post-announcement videos were similar to those under the announcement videos, but were less frequent.

#### 6.4.1.4 Summary: RQ1.1 and RQ2.1

Above, I have elaborated on how audiences discussed their bond with the YouTubers, which provides evidence of their bond-based attachment to the YouTubers’ communities. Based on this, I can address RQ1.1 by noting that audiences respected the YouTubers’ personal choices of quitting veg\*nism, wanted to learn more about the YouTubers’ identity change, perceived authenticity in the YouTubers’ announcement, and assured the YouTubers that they followed because of the YouTubers’ personality rather than a veg\*n label.

To address RQ2.1, I found that the discussions about three of the four themes (all except “request information”) had a similar trend: audiences barely discussed them in comments on pre-announcement videos, and discussed them more frequently in comments on announcement videos compared with that on post-announcement videos. A higher percentage of comments were coded as “request information” for pre-announcement videos and post-announcement videos compared with that on announcement videos. One reason for this discrepancy is that comments on announcement videos were more diverse compared with other two video types.

## 6.4.2 Identity-Based Group Attachment

The second group of themes I am interested in is about audiences’ identity-based group attachment. I explore how audiences discuss their collective identity centered around veg\*nism. I find that audiences express varying attitudes when discussing their collective identity: some ‘haters’ were furious about the YouTubers, others criticized the haters, and a third group reflected on their own stories related to veg\*nism and the veg\*n community. After elaborating on the results of the related codes, I conclude this section by addressing RQ1.2 and RQ2.2.

### 6.4.2.1 Self-Disclosure about Veg\*nism

The most common theme discussed in comments on announcement videos that reflected identity-based attachment was audiences’ self-disclosure about their own stories related to veg\*nism (21%). They shared their experiences with veg\*nism, diet, and health

broadly. These self-disclosures were often detailed and revealed much personal information. For example, one viewer reflected on their 10-year veg\*n journey, discussing their physical and mental health and their diet in detail, and then said, “... *as I had nothing to compare my results with since I came from a standard American diet and never really ate much meat and only some dairy and eggs and such. Anyways, life’s a journey. Good for you for continuing to evolve, grow, and learn. Be well!*”

In this example and others, viewers disclosed private and sometimes sensitive information as a way to support the YouTuber and their decision to quit veg\*nism. Part of the reason for these detailed disclosures is likely that YouTube lacks a real-name policy or identity enforcement; in online online communities that afford pseudonymity or anonymity, researchers have found that commenters are more likely to share intimate content [129]. Beyond anonymity, viewers may have perceived a closer and more intimate relationship with the YouTubers following sensitive disclosures made in their videos—especially if the YouTubers’ experiences with their diet or veg\*n journey were similar to that of the viewers. Previous research suggests that the strength of parasocial relationships increases as viewers perceive more disclosure from the YouTubers [64, 107].

Change over time. Chi-squared tests indicated a significant difference in the frequency of this theme across time ( $X^2 = 189.8$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Under the pre-announcement videos, participants rarely shared their own experiences being veg\*n and mainly focused on the content created by the YouTubers (2%). After peaking at 21% of comments in the announcement videos, only 7% of viewers in post-announcement videos shared their own experiences related to veg\*nism and diet in a show of support for the YouTubers.

### 6.4.2.2 Being Critical of the YouTuber and Their Decisions

It is unsurprising that there was a significant number of comments that were critical and/or negative toward the YouTubers for quitting veg\*nism, and it was the second most common theme discussed as audiences talked about their common identity (10%). Previous research has found that social media influencers are prone to online harassment and hate because of the publicity and visibility of their online persona, as well as the size of their audience [53]. On top of that, these announcement videos about quitting veg\*nism represent a drastic change in the YouTubers' online self-presentation, signaling an end to their veg\*n identity—an essential part of the communities they engaged in. Below we describe how some viewers reacted so negatively toward the YouTubers' identity change.

Viewers accused YouTubers of making the “wrong” decision. They accused YouTubers of being selfish, ignoring animal welfare, and only caring for themselves. For example, one viewer said:

*“I agree with you when you say ‘your body, your choice’ but I think that philosophy should be applied to all beings and not just humans. I agree with you that less is more and I don’t force my veganism on anyone but I’m certainly not going to tell someone that eating someone else’s body is their personal choice. What about the animal’s choice not to die?”*

Some viewers accused the YouTubers of a lack of authenticity in shifting away from veg\*nism. They called the YouTubers “fake,” “fraud,” “hypocrites,” and “liar.” Some even rejected the YouTubers' old veg\*n identity. These viewers were likely to be the

“ethical vegans” depicted in [77]—people who adopt “a vegan diet for moral, ethical, and political reasons” (p. 130)—who do not think other ex-vegans are ever vegan at all. For example, one viewer wrote, *“If you say you’re no longer Vegan, that means you NEVER WERE VEGAN. Fraud! You can’t ever claim to have been vegan then go an .. Incorporate animal products into your diet?! That’s disgusting.”* Some viewers reacted negatively even when the YouTubers said they would still do their best to minimize their animal product consumption, e.g., *“saying you ‘care about animals’ but also saying you ‘eat animals’ in the same sentence doesn’t make sense, just in case you didn’t realise.”*

Some viewers thought the YouTubers made the videos because “quitting veg\*nism” was seen as trendy among health and lifestyle influencers. For example, one viewer wrote, *“As soon as you saw how much attention Alyse [another YouTuber] got on her carnivore video, you had to jump on the wagon. What an unoriginal sellout.”* They also thought part of the reason why YouTubers quit veg\*nism was for money through video impressions, e.g., *“I know getting views is how you get paid, so I understand the temptation to ride the wave of ex-vegan YouTube videos.”*

Change over time. Chi-squared tests showed a significant difference in the frequency of this theme across time ( $X^2 = 71.67$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Under the pre-announcement videos, I only identified two comments that were critical of a YouTuber, one from a random anti-veg\*nism viewer and one complaining about the video content. While under the post-announcement videos, attacks that originated from the YouTubers’ lifestyle change continued but were less frequent than on the announcement videos.

### 6.4.2.3 Critical of Haters & Viewing the Veg\*n Community as a “Cult”

There were also viewers who criticized ‘haters’—people who left comments like those described in the prior section—regardless of whether they agreed with the YouTubers’ decision to quit veg\*nism. It was the third most common theme among those related to having a common identity (6%). Some viewers suggested the YouTubers should ignore the haters and focus more on themselves or people who supported them. For example, one viewer said, *“it sounds like you chose the right and best path for you both to heal and feel whole again. dont [sic] worry about the haters, they can mind their own business and worry about themselves. True fans and friends will want you to trust your own journey. thanks so much for sharing!”*

Though many of the negative comments indicated that the commenters were veg\*ns, it is unfair to think of the veg\*n community as a community of haters who are strict about other people’s lifestyle decisions and critical of those who do not live up to their values. However, some viewers indeed attributed the hate to the “*cult*” of veg\*nism instead of perceiving it as individuals’ bad acts. One viewer described the pressure of being veg\*n, writing: *“I have never really had a strong community of like-minded vegans or people who supported how I chose to eat, so I felt this incredible sense of pressure to not ‘drift’ away from a way of eating that I always went on and on about.”* Another viewer thought this pressure was not only toward veg\*ns but anyone: *“The problem comes into play when others try forcing their way of living on you. It’s like religion freaks, once they push their agenda on you.”*

Change over time. Chi-squared tests showed a significant difference in the frequency of these two themes across time (critical to haters:  $X^2 = 99.8$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ; veg\*n community cult:  $X^2 = 14.9$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Under the pre-announcement videos, there were no comments about the veg\*n community being cult-like, and only one comment about suggesting the YouTuber ignore some trolls. Under the post-announcement videos, the discussion of the veg\*n community cult continued at a similar level to that under the announcement videos, and I observed a higher percentage of the comments were on the YouTubers' side, criticizing the haters.

#### 6.4.2.4 Summary: RQ1.2 and RQ2.2

In the previous paragraphs, I have detailed how audiences discussed their collective identity, which provides evidences of their identity-based attachment to the communities. Based on this analysis, I can summarize the response to RQ1.2 thusly: audiences disclosed their own stories about veg\*nism; some posted hateful comments to the YouTubers for quitting veg\*nism and others defended the YouTubers and criticized the haters; they also reflected on the “cult” of veg\*n communities.

To address RQ2.2, I found limited discussion of these themes in pre-announcement videos. In the comments of post-announcement videos, discussions of viewers' personal experiences with veg\*nism died down, and there was a similar percentage of discussions that were about the “cult” of veg\*n communities. I also saw audiences more frequently criticized haters and less frequently criticized the YouTubers and their decisions to quit veg\*nism in the comments on post-announcement videos, suggesting that audiences might

gradually accept the YouTubers' ex-veg\*n identity.

### 6.4.3 Social Support from Audiences

Audiences frequently posted supportive comments to YouTubers. Below, I specifically focus on three categories of comments that showed emotional/esteem support, informational support, and network support.

#### 6.4.3.1 Emotional & Esteem Support

Expressions of emotional and esteem support were the most common type of social support in the comments on announcement videos (56%). Audiences made the YouTubers feel cared for and bolstered the YouTubers' sense of competence or self-esteem. They often shared brief and generic kind words to the YouTubers, e.g., *“Love you”* or *“Tons of blessings,”* and they complimented YouTubers' physical appearance (*“Your face is glowing and you look radiant!”*) or their videos (*“Love your vlogs and you share lots of good content”*).

In the announcement videos, many YouTubers mentioned that health issues were among the most important reasons why they quit veg\*nism. Viewers expressed their care for the YouTubers' health, e.g., *“hope u guys get well soon.”* They also recognized the YouTubers' choice to prioritize their health, e.g., *“Putting your health first is the right choice in any situation.”* Viewers also expressed understanding of the pressure YouTubers face in openly sharing their lifestyle change, e.g., *“I am sure this video was hard to make. I hope you can find answers and find your path to health.”* They affirmed the value of

these videos and thought people with similar issues or experiences could benefit from these videos, such as when one viewer wrote, *“Your experience is helpful to others who need to hear your story too! Thanks for sharing!”*

Change over time. Expressions of emotional and esteem support were also the most common type of social support in comments on pre-announcement and post-announcement videos. The percentage of comments providing emotional and esteem support increased over time, from 53% to 56% to 64%. (see Table 6.5). A chi-squared test showed that this difference was significant ( $\chi^2 = 26.4$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). The pre-announcement videos were mostly about veg\*n recipes or what they ate in a day when they were veg\*ns. Most of the comments coded as emotional and esteem support were compliments about the video content and the YouTubers. Post-announcement videos had the highest percentage of comments including emotional and/or esteem support, as viewers provided written support of the YouTubers’ decision, suggesting that viewers gradually come to accept the YouTubers’ lifestyle change.

### 6.4.3.2 Informational Support

Informational support was the second most commonly provided support type in comments under the announcement videos. Viewers shared various kinds of resources they thought might be helpful to the YouTubers, ranging from information about doctor appointments to YouTube videos or channels, books, links, and other online resources.

Many viewers provided information to the YouTubers by sharing their own or other people’s experience with veg\*nism, diet, and health. They highlighted similarities be-

tween their experiences, and they expressed sympathy for the YouTubers' decision to quit veg\*nism because of these similarities. For example, one viewer wrote an extensive comment, which said, in part, *"I'm coeliac, can't eat high sugar fruits and legumes very well, soy and high sugar foods like dates. I am the exact same as you and tbh [to be honest] I have thought about not being vegan because of my digestive system and if being vegan is worth it. ...I do understand your decision and support you so much because I can relate to you SO MUCH."* Many viewers shared their own tips on how they dealt with similar health symptoms, for example:

*"ive [sic] personally found 2 cups of celery juice each morning for about 2 weeks or so to be a miracle cure for digestive issues such as bloating, gas, and essentially even SIBO and IBS. Im [sic] amazed at how many people this has worked for so if your interested please give it a go. I had my own struggles with the vegan diet up until i tried this and it cleared up alot [sic] of issues."*

Some comments coded as "informational support" and some comments coded with "request information" served as the same purpose: viewers shared alternative or additional approaches to address the health issues YouTubers described in their announcement videos. Some viewers pointed out perceived mistakes in the YouTubers' previous veg\*n diet, e.g., *"I don't think animal products are gonna fix your problems, you just need to take vitamins supplements, eat healthy fats, lots of fruits and vegetables, soy, nuts, tofu, and you'll be fine."* Others emphasized the importance of non-dietary approaches, e.g., *"Drink lots of water. Meditate daily. I'm sure being a YouTuber must cause stress. ... Also get lots of sleep. I mean lots and lots and lots and lots of sleep. You heal when you are sleeping."*

Some viewers also pointed out that the YouTubers' mental well-being should be taken care of when going through the lifestyle transition. For example, one YouTuber (Y1) shared her long-term suffering with veg\*n food and how she could not fix her health issues while being veg\*n in her announcement video. In response, a viewer wrote:

*“It may take several more years of conscious ‘grieving’ because of the trauma and stress you have endured. As you go forward, please take very good care to guard and protect your ‘mental health’ and be extra kind and gentle with yourself. Do not underestimate what you have gone through the stress is insidious. You may have to take radical steps to really give yourself the mental and emotional safety you need so that the trauma of what you have endured is not carried forward.”*

Viewers provided knowledge about veg\*nism, nutrition, and health. However, it would likely be difficult for the YouTubers to evaluate the accuracy of this “knowledge” because very few viewers cited credible sources to support their statements. Some of the viewers shared information about benefits of veg\*nism and even hoped the YouTubers would reconsider the lifestyle change; for example, one viewer wrote:

*“It is the position of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics that appropriately planned vegetarian, including vegan, diets are healthful, nutritionally adequate, and may provide health benefits for the prevention and treatment of certain diseases, the largest group of nutritionists group wrote in its announcement. These diets are appropriate for all stages of the life cycle, including pregnancy, lactation, infancy, childhood, adolescence, older adulthood, and for athletes. Please reconsider your food choices. You seem like a very lovely person and you can*

*make the plant-based choice to reduce the suffering of animals and your impact on the environment.”*

Other viewers reassured the YouTubers that this change was good by sharing the benefits of animal products, e.g., *“Only animal products have significant amounts of the active forms of vitamin A, K2, B12, D3, B6 (pyridoxal phosphate), DHA...”* Finally, some viewers wanted to clarify or correct factual information made by the YouTuber. For example, after a YouTuber mentioned she thought tofu was not good for people so she used egg whites instead, a viewer replied, *“Tofu has 8g per 100g. One egg white only has 3.6 g of protein.”*

Change over time. A chi-squared test identified a significant difference between different video types ( $\chi^2 = 151.4$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), with the announcement videos including 3-4 times more informational support than the other two types of videos. Under the pre-announcement videos, viewers provided information to the YouTubers regarding things the YouTubers mentioned in the video. Under the post-announcement videos, the discussion of the YouTubers' lifestyle transition continued even though not all the post-announcement videos were follow-up videos about this topic. Content-wise, informational support comments were similar between announcement videos and post-announcement videos.

### 6.4.3.3 Network Support

Network-based support was the least commonly expressed form of support in our analysis. People follow these YouTubers for different reasons, with the YouTubers' veg\*n identity being one—but not always the only—reason. When the YouTubers announced

this change, some viewers showed support by highlighting the sense of community they felt. As mentioned in 6.4.3.2 and 6.4.2.1, some viewers shared similar experience with the YouTubers; they assured the YouTubers that *“I have heard other peoples stories like yours before, so you are not alone I’m sure.”* When expressing this network support, many viewers emphasized the community the YouTubers were in, e.g., *“you have so many people that support you,”* or by using plural pronouns, like in the comment, *“We all support you through this process.”*

Change over time. A chi-squared test found a significant difference between video types ( $\chi^2 = 53.0$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). The nature of the pre-announcement videos did not lend themselves to expressions of network support, so there were only a handful of network support comments on those videos. Under the post-announcement videos, I saw similar comments to those observed on the announcement videos, although less often (6% vs. 9% in announcement videos).

#### 6.4.3.4 Summary: RQ1.3 & RQ2.3

Social support was extensively provided in the communities around the YouTubers, especially in comments on announcement videos where the YouTubers shared their suffering and health issues that made them change their lifestyle. This echoes prior research that has found social support is critical in online communities about different topics, including diseases [43, 148] and parenting [5]. Addressing RQ1.3, I found that audiences provided emotional and esteem support to the YouTubers, showing they cared for the YouTubers and recognized their choice of prioritizing health; they provided informational support to

the YouTubers, hoping to help them navigate their health issues; and they provided network support to the YouTubers and let them know they were not alone.

Regarding RQ2.3, I found that emotional and esteem support was provided the most regardless of video types, and had an increasing trend across time, suggesting that audiences increasingly accepted the YouTubers' lifestyle change—or at the least, they were more inclined to vocalize their support for the YouTuber and their lifestyle change. Information and network support peaked on announcement videos, which indicates that audiences likely saw quitting veg\*nism as a time when the YouTubers felt the most vulnerable and needed support.

#### 6.4.4 Negative Emotional Expressions

Two types of negative emotional expressions from audiences to understand how audiences negatively responded to the YouTubers were annotated: purely negative emotions and mixed emotions where both negative and positive emotions were expressed.

Negative emotions expressed toward the YouTubers is detailed in Section [6.4.2.3](#); 10% of comments on announcement videos included negative emotions. I was also interested in mixed emotional expressions, even though they accounted for only 1% of comments on announcement videos. These comments reflected the duality of how a viewer was attached to the communities around the YouTubers. On the one hand, they were supportive and hoped the YouTubers the best because they had bonded with them and liked them as a person. On the other hand, they could not accept that the YouTubers gave up their common identity and became omnivores. For example, one viewer commented, *“This broke my heart*

*:( I love you and your videos but no animal deserves to die for food. ever.”*

Change over time. Chi-squared tests identified a significant difference in the frequency of negative emotional expressions over time (negative:  $\chi^2 = 66.2$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ; mixed:  $\chi^2 = 15.6$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).<sup>5</sup> A 25-fold increase in the percentage of comments with negative emotions under the announcement videos compared with the pre-announcement videos was observed (pre-announcement: 0.4%, announcement: 10%). This suggests that the YouTubers’ drastic identity change was indeed perceived negatively by some viewers. Under the post-announcement videos, the percentage of comments with negative emotions decreased—while still remaining 15 times higher than in pre-announcement videos. This, together with previous findings about emotional/esteem support and viewers being critical of haters, suggests that audiences were gradually accepting the YouTubers’ decisions to quit veg\*nism.

#### 6.4.4.1 Summary: RQ1.4 & R2.4

To answer RQ1.4, I found that audiences expressed negative emotions towards ex-veg\*n YouTubers for quitting veg\*nism. Some of these comments were not purely negative and indicated some audiences’ complicated feelings towards the YouTubers. To answer R2.4, I found that the negative emotions were barely seen prior to the YouTubers’ identity shift, peaked at their announcement videos about quitting veg\*nism, and decreased afterwards.

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<sup>5</sup>Since these two codes were mutually exclusive, another way of doing chi-squared test was to check whether there was a significant difference in frequency of emotional expressions (mixed, negative, other) over time. The test revealed a significant difference,  $\chi^2 = 83.6$ ,  $df = 4$ ,  $p < 0.001$ .

## 6.5 Discussion

Social media platforms provide users with opportunities to present themselves in front of a variety of audiences and to connect through shared identities and experiences. Although self-presentation is collaboratively constructed by both parties [136], social media self-presentation research has largely focused on the presenter’s perspective and overlooked how the audience reacts to that performance. This is a critical oversight, as self-presentation strategies are often adjusted based on audience feedback [163]; this becomes even more important for influencers, whose brand and popularity is tied directly to audience engagement.

In this study, I have evaluated audiences’ reaction to self-presentation during a major identity shift: when veg\*n influencers publicly shared their decision to quit veg\*nism. The findings detailed above focus on three core aspects of audiences’ reaction—group attachment, social support, and comment valence—via their comments on the video announcing YouTubers’ decision to quit veg\*nism. These comments are also compared to that on pre- and post-announcement videos to understand how these aspects shift over time.

Below, I unpack these findings further, using this study’s example of identity shift to consider the broader relationship between audience and performer. I also reflect on how social media affordances influence users’ self-presentation and relationship management. Specifically, I find that being transparent about identity transition is a good strategy for influencers who experience the transition, and that anonymity of social media platforms is a double-edged sword: it can encourage people to make sensitive disclosures and seek support; it can also foster negative responses because commenters will not be responsible for any negative consequences of their words.

### 6.5.1 Social Media Influencers & Their Self-Presentation

Authenticity is one of the most important characteristics audiences value in social media influencers' self-presentation. However, it is difficult for influencers to achieve this authenticity. Social media influencers, like other social media users, might change how they present themselves over time, which makes them less authentic to some of their audiences because of the inconsistency between old and current identity. They document different types of life and identity transitions on social media, from quitting veg\*nism to entering parenthood [117] and coming out as a sexual minority [128]. This change or add-on in influencers' identity usually brings pressure to the influencers' brands.

Influencers might lose followers because of perceived inauthenticity. To satisfy the followers who stay, influencers need to find the balance between their old and new identity. For example, Lehto described how a female fitness influencer carefully communicates her motherhood to her audiences as “an affirmation of the genuineness of the lifestyle she promotes”; this may help her better connect with other mothers and showcase that “the sporty lifestyle she promotes is attainable for other working women with families” [117]. However, in some cases one's old identity and new identity cannot coexist, like in our case being veg\*ns versus being omnivores.

Audiences are good at detecting fake versus authentic disclosures [119], which makes it difficult for social media influencers to pretend to be who they are not (e.g., their old identity). Being caught lying can cause detrimental effect on the influencers' career. One of the largest veg\*n influencers, Rawvana, was caught eating fish in her real life, which forced her to explain to her audience and announce that she had quit veg\*nism [36]. She

deleted her social media accounts following backlash, then later came back to social media with her real name (Yovana) instead of Rawvana, and she no longer describes herself as a veg\*n.

The inconsistency in influencers' long-term self-presentation is accessible to audiences on platforms like YouTube. Its recommender systems may resurface old content to current audiences. In addition, unlike other platforms including Instagram where audiences may need to scroll back through hundreds or thousands of posts to find one's posts several years ago, YouTube users can find one's old content easily with the search feature and the sort feature. Influencers are also disincentivized from deleting older content because on platforms like YouTube, those older videos may still get views, which provides revenue to those who have monetized their accounts.

The result suggests that one strategy to help social media influencers navigate identity transitions is to be up front and authentic in discussing the transition and the reasons behind it, and to give audiences time to digest and accept the transition. The ex-veg\*n YouTubers openly talked about how they switched from veg\*n to non-veg\*n in their announcement videos. They tried their best to explain why they had made this decision to quit veg\*nism, with the expectation that there would be backlash against them. There were indeed different opinions about whether the YouTubers were authentic in the announcement video comments. A small number of viewers thought they were lying and were never veg\*ns, while others embraced their courage to come out as who they were despite there was difference between their new and old identity.

Notably, I saw supportive comments increased between the announcement and post-announcement videos, while negatively valenced comments decreased; this supports the idea

that open and honest disclosures may be the best strategy for an identity shift like this and that viewers were likely to accept the YouTubers' identity change over time. Interestingly, YouTubers in this study did not take down all the videos that represented their old veg\*n identity (i.e., pre-announcement videos), and some of them repeatedly talk about their old identity in their post-announcement videos. This suggests that even though social media platforms afford persistence and 'never forget,' people care more about the present than the past. Alternatively, the people who linger in influencers' past give up trolling the influencers, and the rest of the old audience and the new audience are comfortable with the influencers' new identity.

### 6.5.2 Relationship Between Audience and Performer

Based on how audiences responded to ex-veg\*n YouTubers' identity transition and how they commented on their relationship, I can further consider the relationship management and self-presentation of general social media users who record their own or observe other people's identity transitions.

Social media users accumulate large amounts of data across time, which will inevitably include changes in self-presentation. Some of these changes are mild and difficult to perceive without closely looking at one's social media data, documenting as users mature [91, 168]. Platforms provide features that support users and their contacts to navigate their data across time, such as Timeline, through which Facebook users can jump into posts within a specific time period without scrolling endlessly. Platforms also proactively push notifications to their users regarding previous events with features like Facebook's

‘On This Day.’ Users’ old content is resurfaced to their current newsfeed, showing what they were like to their current audiences. When things like this happen, social media users can more easily see temporal differences in their self-presentation or in other people’s self-presentation. That said, users can typically prevent old content from being resurfaced. For example, research has shown that users retrospectively manage their previous social media data to keep their online identity up to date [168]. They can also rely on features that allow content to expire after a period of time, like Snapchat (10 seconds), Instagram Stories (24 hours), or WeChat Moments’ Time Limit setting (3 days and above) [15,91]. When users fail to prevent old content from resurfacing, they might be embarrassed briefly or enjoy the playful interactions with the close ties who ‘backstalk’ the poster’s previous social media data [168].

Some of the changes in one’s self-presentation should be more carefully planned and managed with the perception of audiences in mind, including the decision to quit veg\*nism—as discussed in this study—as well as cases where people share stigmatizing experiences or faceted identities [48,79]. Sensitive disclosures about these topics usually indicate the posters’ need for social support (e.g., [164]), but also expose posters to misunderstanding and attack. In this study, I have found evidence of both in audience responses to veg\*n influencers’ identity shift: audiences provided different types of social support to the ex-veg\*n YouTubers, while also criticized and attacked the YouTubers.

I think these audience responses can be understood using two mechanisms from group attachment theory about how members commit to online communities [157]. For audiences that were attached to the YouTuber first and the community second, they were more likely to be supportive regardless of whether the YouTubers were veg\*ns or not. For audiences

that valued the shared veg\*n identity with the YouTubers, they tended to be disappointed—and sometimes angry—when the YouTuber dropped the veg\*n label. Importantly, the two mechanisms are not mutually exclusive: a viewer might become attached to the community for both reasons and expressed a mixed feelings towards the YouTubers (see details in Section 6.4.4). Collectively, I have found a very diverse and complicated corpus of audience comments. There were commenters who were veg\*ns but were supportive, and there were commenters who were not necessarily veg\*ns but felt upset about the transition. There were also lengthy comments that expressed a mix of feelings to the YouTubers.

In addition to different group attachment theories, I think social media’s affordances and features help explain how audiences respond to other people’s stigmatizing experiences or faceted identities. For example, anonymity of YouTube commenters might encourage haters to post negative comments; research has found that commenters are more likely to post uncivilized comments under news articles when anonymous than when identified [165]. For platforms where one’s identity is closely tied to their offline identity (e.g., Facebook), users might think twice before commenting negatively because it could damage the relationship between the commenter and the poster. The public nature of these comments may also mean that a wider audience sees the negative comments, leaving a bad impression on their contacts as well. On anonymous or pseudonymous platforms, this becomes less of a concern.

On the other hand, anonymity can also enable social media users to more comfortably make sensitive self-disclosures about themselves. Research has found that Reddit users created anonymous “throwaway” accounts to discuss difficulties in parenting [4]; LGBTQ+ people use Tumblr to present their queer identity [78]. People might turn to anonymous

social media platforms to make these disclosures instead of relying on networks that know them to provide social support. In our data, the anonymity afforded by YouTube may have encouraged some users to share their personal experiences with veg\*nism and disclosed more sensitive information to the YouTubers than they would have if identified.

## 6.6 Conclusion

In this study, I explore how audiences responded to ex-veg\*n YouTubers' announcement videos about quitting veg\*nism, and how audience engagement changed over time. I am specifically interested in how these audiences expressed social support toward the YouTubers, the emotional valence of their comments, and how they perceived their relationship and common identity with the YouTubers.

Using content analysis on a subset of comments on 10 YouTubers' videos announcing they were quitting veg\*nism—as well as a pre- and post-announcement video for each—the findings highlight a mix of emotions toward YouTubers for quitting veg\*nism, with increases in both positively (supportive) and negatively (critical) valenced comments. In other words, a large-scale identity shift provoked strong emotional responses from many viewers, and the nature of the comments changed significantly between their pre-announcement videos and the announcement—and even beyond the announcement.

On one hand, some audiences described how they viewed the YouTubers as individuals instead of labels. They recognized that quitting veg\*nism was a personal choice, perceived authenticity in the YouTubers' transition, and expressed their support to the YouTubers for their personality beyond their veg\*n identity. On the other hand, some viewers focused

their comments on their collective identity as veg\*ns. They were disappointed and angry to the YouTubers for ‘quitting’ this group identity. They shared their own stories about veg\*nism, diet, and health to either support the YouTubers or to question the YouTubers’ decision to quit. Some of them were less judgmental towards the YouTubers, criticizing the toxic haters and reflecting on the veg\*n community cult they perceived.

This study examines changing self-presentation from the perspective of audiences, a perspective that is usually ignored in previous research about self-presentation. The complexity unpacked in the audiences’ responses potentially explains why previous research usually ignores this perspective and encourages future research to further dig into this dimension. In addition, the dataset was collected from videos of female YouTubers. It is interesting to explore identity transition from people with other demographic characteristics or use other social media platforms, because gender and affordances of social media might influence how users present themselves and interact with others on social media [103, 131, 204].

## Chapter 7: Conclusion

### 7.1 Introduction

The goal of this dissertation has been to understand variations in social media users' self-presentation and how audiences and presenters navigate these variations with the support of platform affordances. Through four studies, I have examined how various features, affordances, and practices on social media platforms help users create and manage versions of themselves that matched their goals, and how the audiences for that self-presentation responded to shifts in self-presentation.

These studies reaffirm that social media users may have multiple—and sometimes competing—self-presentation goals, and that these goals evolve over time. Users sometimes need to get creative to achieve self-presentation goals, especially when platforms do not offer features that let them reach those goals. As these goals change, users may shift their self-presentation strategies, perhaps by using in-platform features to limit access to older content, or by creating multiple profiles and segmenting their audiences across different platforms and different accounts within the same platform. The change in people's social media self-presentation is usually inevitable, as people grow and embrace changes in their offline life. Despite that, posters may carefully consider their audience and its likely reaction to such change, as the relationship between those sharing and consuming content can be

tenuous.

In the previous chapters, I have detailed three studies that focused on posters' self-presentation and one on audience reactions to changes in self-presentation. In Study 1, long-term WeChat users described how their self-presentation evolved over time and how they applied the Time Limit setting to only display their most up-to-date self-presentation. In Study 2, Instagram users described how they purposefully presented themselves differently on their Finsta and Rinsta accounts. Many of them applied privacy configurations to closely manage access to their Finsta and heavily relied on picture editing features for content posted to Rinsta. In Study 3, users who were active on multiple social media platforms described how they reached desired audiences and presented themselves in a desired way via cross-posting. And in Study 4, viewers of ex-veg\*n YouTubers responded to the YouTubers' announcement videos about quitting veg\*nism, expressing a mix of support and backlash in response to a significant shift in the YouTubers' identity and self-presentation.

Through these four studies, I have sought to develop a holistic understanding of people's social media self-presentation, an exhibition that is built and maintained over time, distributed and at the same time connected across accounts and platforms, and viewed by audiences. Based on their findings, I now offer four major takeaways: 1) temporal variations in social media self-presentation should be supported by platform designs; 2) multi-faceted self-presentation is carefully created and maintained across platforms and accounts; 3) other sociotechnical factors are critical in shaping social media users' self-presentation; and 4) the relationship between posters and audiences is constantly fine-tuned in the process of self-presentation. In the following sections, I provide more details on each takeaway and consider future directions for researchers to better understand social media self-presentation.

## 7.2 Takeaway 1: Temporal Variation in Self-Presentation Supported by Platform Affordances & Features

It is common to hear people say that “once you post something online, it’s there forever.” In many ways this is true: thanks to data persistence and archiving, people often accumulate more and more data on social media platforms over the years. This social media data is usually timestamped, recording how people grow and how their self-presentation evolves over time, for example, throughout emerging adulthood [168]. Emerging adulthood refers to the time period from late teen years into one’s early 20s, a time of significant growth and change in how people think about and interact with the world [8]. As teens and young adults are among the most prolific social media users, these changes are often reflected in their social media posts during this time period.

With the changes that happen as people grow and mature, they may not be eager to share older posts with their current network of connections. Researchers and media articles have highlighted some of the problems that may emerge when a person’s past posts and behaviors are resurfaced. For example, Haimson and colleagues found that people who experienced gender transitions inadvertently disclosed their trans identity to contacts they might prefer not to know when old pictures of their former identity were resurfaced by social media algorithms [79]. Likewise, news articles have highlighted extreme cases, like when racist or homophobic posts from an athlete’s teenage years put their career in jeopardy (e.g., [60]).

In this dissertation, I have investigated two aspects of temporal variation in people’s

self-presentation. In Study 1, I examined how WeChat Moments users' self-presentation evolve over time with a focus on the platform's Time Limit feature. In Study 4, I examined ex-veg\*n YouTubers' identity transition from veg\*ns to non-veg\*ns, focusing not on the poster but on audience reactions to this shift in self-presentation. These cases represent two very different ways in which self-presentation varies over time. The former reflects a natural evolution of one's disclosures over several years, while the latter example reflects a more abrupt change where the poster makes an explicit declaration of the shift in their identity. Below, I revisit findings from these studies and reflect on how affordances play a role in people's impression management processes.

In Study 1, I interviewed 16 long-term WeChat Moments users who had been using the app for 3-7 years. They reflected on their in-app disclosures and reported that as their social networks shifted and they grew up, their self-presentation evolved. In most cases, they wanted to share their current selves to their audiences—which was reflected in their most recent posts—rather than sharing their full social media history, which may include immature or embarrassing old content. WeChat's Time Limit setting mitigated the tension between their younger selves and their current self-presentation goals, without forcing them to manage older posts one by one. With this setting, users select whether they want to only display their posts from the last three days, one month, or six months to their contacts.

Prior work suggests that to mitigate the tensions that emerge as one's self-presentation evolves over time, some users retrospectively manage their old content [168]. For example, they use features like Moment's Time Limit setting or Facebook's "Hide From Profile" to hide their old content. On the other hand, some users might want to highlight that evolution and—in fact—may benefit from being more open and transparent regarding identity shifts.

One example of this is social media influencers, who benefit from audience engagement with their content and are therefore disincentivized from hiding older posts. Due to the visibility and persistence of their content, these users may also need to be more upfront in discussing identity changes with their audience; their decision to live a highly public life on social media means that anything they have previously shared could be revisited or reshared.

The context of Study 4 is about this second group of people. In this study, I observed how audiences responded to ex-veg\*n YouTubers who announced they quit veg\*nism and dropped the veg\*n label from their identity. In contrast to the WeChat users I previously described, these YouTubers did not retrospectively manage or hide their old content that mapped to their old veg\*n identity, and they did not pretend to be veg\*ns just to be consistent in their self-presentation. Instead, they purposefully announced that they quit veg\*nism and were transparent about the transition to their new identity. Part of the reason for this strategy was likely about business considerations: any additional view of old videos and the expected high user engagement under the “controversial” videos about their new identities translates into greater monetization of their content.

Beyond financial benefits, another likely reason for this approach is that social media affordances—especially the persistence of content over time on these platforms [191]—shape their self-presentation. Some may argue that the Internet is forgetful in an era of information overload, where people are too busy processing new information and tend to forget old information they have read. This might be true for mild changes in one’s self-presentation. That said, the persistence of content on most social media platforms, paired with features like Search, make it easy for one to quickly find old posts. Other site features

like Facebook’s “On This Day” resurface old content from years ago; although designed to facilitate reminiscence, such features may also remind people of awkward or undesirable past disclosures (e.g., [153]).

For social media influencers, the Internet never forgets. These users create public personas to be consumed by audiences [61] so their old identities are meant to be discussed and remembered. Even if ex-veg\*n YouTubers purposefully hide or delete content about their old veg\*n identities, their audiences will still remember. Unlike Instagram or WeChat, on YouTube it is easy to access one’s old content without scrolling forever. People can search with keywords like “[YouTuber] vegan” and see all related videos. They can also easily sort one’s YouTube videos in chronological order to see how the YouTubers presented themselves ten years ago, or browse video playlists created by the YouTuber. YouTube’s algorithms may also resurface old videos based on prior videos watched by a viewer. YouTubers themselves might also proactively resurface their old selves to their current viewers. For example, they might post reaction videos in which they record their reactions while watching their old videos, because “react to my first video” is a trendy topic.

Studies 1 and 4 highlight these distinct aspects of temporal self-presentation, including how users’ goals and identities shift over time, how users maintain their current selves via platform features affordances, and how their presentation of new identities are—to some extent—shaped by platform affordances. In light of this, I argue that **social media platforms should better consider the design of temporality in supporting users’ evolving and diverse self-presentation goals.** Current social media platforms have implemented different degrees of content ephemerality in their design, ranging from 10 sec-

onds (Snapchat Chat), to 24 hours (Instagram Stories), to six months (WeChat Moments), and researchers have explored how users on each platform employ these features [15, 192].

That said, users might not be fully satisfied with the limited options given to them. For example, in Study 1, participants reported issues they experienced when using the Time Limit setting. They defined “current” differently, such that the three options were not sufficient to satisfy all their self-presentation goals. Social media platforms should carefully consider which options, if any, are best for their users. Alternatively, platforms could consider an approach that empowers users to define for themselves how much ephemerality they need. That being said, user studies need to be conducted to create and evaluate different design options. Previous research has suggested that social media users only use a very limited number of features provided by the platforms [125]. Even if social media platforms come up with features that can better support users’ long-term self-presentation goals by allowing them to decide for themselves the degree of ephemerality they prefer, a more important question still needs to be answered: can we educate users about these features, and how is that best done?

The social media users described above have the choice of adopting ephemerality to mitigate the temporal tension in their self-presentation. For some users, especially social media influencers, ephemerality may not be a viable option. Influencers are under significant pressure to be open and transparent in their self-presentation, and the the visibility and persistence of their social media data means their content is highly accessible [53, 54]. More work is needed to understand how they navigate their changing self-presentation on public and persistent platforms like YouTube. In Study 4, I reviewed ex-veg\*n YouTubers’ pre-announcement videos about their old veg\*n identity; the continued presence of these

videos suggests these YouTubers do not deny or want to hide their past identity as veg\*ns. However, it is unknown whether these high profile users have already deleted or unlisted some of their old content about veg\*nism to downplay their old veg\*n identity or to shape how audiences perceive them. In addition, these YouTubers are likely active on other social media platforms as well, and they may use those spaces to communicate with their audiences about their identity shift in ways that differ from how they present themselves on YouTube. YouTube—which focuses on the visual component of self-presentation more than many other platforms—may present unique challenges to identity shifts.

Researchers should also continue to explore how YouTubers engage in impression management via interactions with their audience and through algorithm manipulation. YouTubers may engage in impression management via comment moderation—choosing to hide or delete comments they do not like or want others to see—because viewers are likely to be influenced by other viewers’ comments when sharing their own opinions due to the bandwagon effect [179]. It is also important to understand how YouTubers make sense of YouTube’s comment sorting algorithms and select which comments to moderate to maintain their self-presentation goals.

### 7.3 Takeaway 2: Multi-Faceted Self-Presentation is Supported by Platform Affordances & Features

As social media has become ubiquitous and people have dozens of platforms to choose from, it is inevitable that people will connect with different contacts in different online contexts. Social media users often start using different platforms and accounts for audiences

of different contexts to avoid context collapse and present themselves in a way that aligns with audience expectations of self-presentation norms in this context [144, 198]. In Studies 2 and 3, I focused on variations in self-presentation, both within the same platform (Instagram) and across multiple platforms. Below I elaborate on how social media affordances and features are used to support users' multi-faceted self-presentation goals.

In Study 2, I asked Instagram users to rate their Rinsta and Finsta posts across different dimensions of self-presentation. I found that Rinsta accounts are more likely to focus on positive and uplifting content while Finsta accounts are used for more off-the-cuff, emotional, and inappropriate content. Participants also applied picture editing features differently to customize content posted to the two accounts. Over half of the participants had experiences cross-posting the same topic to both their Rinsta and Finsta. They usually posted pictures of the same event to both accounts, with the 'nice' pictures going to Rinsta while the funny ones went to Finsta. Differences in caption practices also emerged: Rinsta pictures were usually paired with brief and cute captions, while Finsta posts often included lengthy captions providing more information and personal feelings about the event.

In Study 3, I interviewed social media users who had experience cross-posting content to multiple platforms, finding that they had different self-presentation goals on different platforms. Some of the participants in Study 3 were content creators, and they described how they managed their personal, professional, and content creator sides of self-presentation across multiple platforms. This was an unanticipated finding, as I did not seek out content creators specifically when recruiting participants for this study. However, they proved to be an interesting case study in self-presentation and audience management; future research should consider different types of users who have more layers of their online identity and

diverse audiences for each aspect of their identity like content creators. This has already been done in a limited way by looking at politicians, who may try to balance the more private and public-facing aspects of their identity [41]; however, this tension likely exists in groups beyond content creators and politicians, and exploring how they manage this tension could provide useful insights into designing for diverse self-presentation goals.

Participants in both Study 2 and Study 3 had clear boundaries that guided where content got posted; for example, ‘inappropriate’ content was only for Finstas (never Rinstas), while LinkedIn was only used for professional content and rarely used for personal updates. Even when content was deemed appropriate for multiple platforms or accounts, participants described specific ways they tweaked the content (e.g., the wording of captions) to accommodate the preferences of different audiences or different platform features and affordances.

To achieve their multi-faceted self-presentation goals across accounts and platforms, participants in these two studies devoted effort not only in creating different content, but also in carefully managing the audiences for their content. In Study 2, over 80% of participants set their Finsta to private, so that the imperfect aspect of their self-presentation would only be accessible to contacts they approved—typically a small group of close friends. On the other hand, most participants set their Rinsta accounts to public, allowing a diverse, large, and sometimes unknown audience to see their carefully curated and polished posts. Likewise, in Study 3, participants had a clear understanding of who their audience was on each platform and managed those audiences accordingly. They applied strict privacy settings on their private platforms so that people that they did not approve would not see their content on these platforms. For content creators, cross-posting their content to

various platforms increases the reach of the content, at the same time, also leaves digital footprints that potentially expose their more personal social media accounts. They carefully managed the boundary between their public-facing and personal self-presentation by limiting the access to their personal accounts.

Through Study 2 and Study 3, I have learned how social media users engage in their multi-faceted self-presentation with different audiences across multiple accounts and platforms, and how they apply social media affordances and features to achieve their self-presentation goals. Previous research identified how unfamiliarity with features of a platform might lead to unwanted self-presentation (e.g., [203]). From these two studies, I found that as participants incorporated more accounts and platforms into their social media space, the complexity of presenting an ideal version of self increased. For example, participants experienced unexpected self-presentation when they were not familiar with the cross-posting feature on Instagram—the default was to cross-post Instagram posts to the other platforms they linked; they realized usability issues and incompatibility issues between different platforms and different devices regarding character limitation, file size limitation, etc. and had to make adjustments accordingly to present in their preferred way.

Audience transparency, or the “awareness of who is in the audience for persona-linked content” (p. 4) [47], is among the most important affordances associated with social media self-presentation. My findings about how Instagram users managed their two accounts and how people managed their accounts while cross-posting have confirmed the importance of understanding people’s practices with audience management features and the need to better design these features.

Social media platforms have various ways of helping users connect with other people

or, in other words, exposing one's accounts to other people. Platforms like Instagram have a "Suggested for You" feature and can predict users who one might know on the platform. These features enable users to connect with their offline contacts online without using their real names. Social media platforms can also help users identify and import contacts from other platforms. With features like Snapchat's "Find Your Friends," users are able to connect with other people as long as they are phone contacts, while TikTok's "Find Facebook Friends" lets users follow their Facebook contacts on TikTok. It is even easier to expose alternate accounts if one links and cross-posts between their multiple accounts on different platforms. For example, if an Instagram user connects their Twitter account to Instagram, when cross-posting an Instagram post to Twitter, their Twitter audience is able to find their Instagram account.

All these features make it difficult for people to keep their offline and online contexts separated, and keep different online contexts separated. From Studies 2 and 3 I learned how users devoted significant effort into working around these features and protecting their multi-faceted self-presentation. Social media platforms should not force users to spend so much effort doing that, because it might drive their users away. Instead, they should come up with easy-to-use design options to help their users manage their audience—ideally with low cognitive burden. For example, social media platforms should consider adding a feature that enables users to opt out of features like Instagram's "Suggested for You" and Facebook's "People You May Know." Since there are accounts that are private in nature like Finsta or throwaway accounts on platforms that promote connectedness and openness, users of these accounts might experience social pressure when they have to reject following requests from people who they know in their life and find them through these features.

However, this might go against the platform’s goals of increasing user activity: one article reported that Facebook refused to let users opt out of its “People You May Know” feature in 2017 [85].

Lastly, there is limited research on the use and non-use of multiple social media platforms [74]. These two studies emphasize the importance of looking at people’s self-presentation across their whole social media ecosystem, as the experience of one platform might influence the adoption—or the non-use—of another platform. For example, in Study 2, I found that the pressure of being perfect on Rinsta drove people to create Finsta accounts so they could “be themselves”; in Study 3, I found that participants bypassed the usability issues of one platform by avoiding cross-posting to this platform. More research is needed to further explore how users dynamically balance their site usage within their social media ecosystems, especially given that people only have limited energy.

#### 7.4 Takeaway 3: Moving Beyond Affordances: Other Sociotechnical Factors that Shape Social Media Self-Presentation

A common framework to understand social media self-presentation is the affordance approach, which emphasizes that technical features on social media platforms are designed, perceived, and utilized differently, shaping self-presentation on a platform and leading to differences in self-presentation between platforms [47, 191]. In previous sections, I have reviewed how my dissertation provides more evidence to this approach. In this section, I will discuss how other important sociotechnical factors also shape people’s social media self-presentation, as identified in my dissertation. Specifically, I found that self-presentation

norms of social media platforms and of different account types on these platforms shape how they wanted to present themselves.

In Study 1, WeChat Moments users reported that avoidance of overly emotional, negative, or controversial content became a normalized practice because of their increasing awareness of how they could be negatively viewed from these Moments posts. In Study 2, I found that Instagram users carved out a space—Finsta—for content that potentially had a negative influence on their self-presentation. Participants perceived that norms of self-presentation differed between Finsta and Rinsta accounts: Rinsta was for positivity and putting their best foot forward, while Finsta was for authenticity or sharing a more raw and “real” side of their lives. These perceived norms shaped their self-presentation across the two accounts. In Study 3, participants described their decision-making processes when cross-posting content to multiple platforms. They tended to post “safe” content when cross-posting to avoid deviating from a more complex set of norms on these platforms; this practice is reminiscent to early work on social media self-presentation that found users tended to apply a “lowest common denominator” approach when sharing content to large and diverse audiences (e.g., Facebook Friends) [86].

Norms about self-presentation influence how social media users utilize platform features to achieve their self-presentation goals. In Study 2, participants rarely used picture editing features when posting to Finsta, while they spent much more effort editing and polishing pictures posted to Rinsta, conforming to these different norms of what should be shared to the two types of Instagram accounts. In Study 3, some participants shared content they created (e.g., YouTube videos) to different platforms. When doing that, they kept self-presentation norms on different platforms in mind and made adjustment to their

content accordingly. For example, Twitter’s setup prefers brevity—tweets are limited to 280 characters—so they would purposefully drafted a shorter caption in their tweet compared to longer captions about the same content posted to another platforms to engage their audiences.

These studies are consistent with previous research on social media self-presentation. Social media users adhere to different norms on different platforms and accounts [138,207,210], as reflected in Studies 1, 2, and 3. These norms evolve over time and often are learned through observation and interaction with others on the platform [138], which echoed with Studies 1 and 2. However, social media users might respond to these norms differently. In Studies 1 and 3, I found evidence of how users obey self-presentation norms on a range of platforms and tweak their self-presentation accordingly. While in Study 2, I found that self-presentation norms on Rinsta—being ‘perfect’ and positive—actually made users post less frequently and drove users away. Participants carved out a separated judgment-free space, Finsta, and presented their imperfect, emotional, and potentially inappropriate self there.

Future work should dig deeper into how self-presentation norms shift naturally and are shaped by users purposefully over time. New social media platforms emerge quickly and might be driven by distinct norms for self-presentation—what kind of content is valued, what is acceptable or unacceptable, how to interact with known and unknown others, and so on. Users might carry these norms to their primary platforms and influence the existing norms on these platforms. They might reduce their use of their previously favorite platforms and more frequently use platforms with norms that they feel more comfortable about. Or users might creatively develop their own sets of norms on certain platforms or on certain

account types, just like participants in Study 2 did on Finsta. In addition, as social media becomes a public sphere where people discuss societal problems and share their own political ideologies [69, 171], norms develop to define what a given platform views as acceptable—and what content they think should be censored or removed—influencing users to stay or to leave. For example, during the 2020 election season in the US, a subset of (far-right) social media users switch to platforms without these norms like Gab, “a social network that champions free speech, individual liberty and the free flow of information online.”<sup>1</sup> Another example is about abandoning social media giants for “open-source software for running self-hosted social networking services” like Mastodon. It has been a topic on Twitter since Elon Musk announced that he would buy Twitter in May 2022. On a Chinese social media site, Douban, there has been similar discussions after it announced a intensified censorship policy by requiring users to have a mainland China mobile phone number or an official identity document on file [118]. It will be interesting to learn how norms guiding discussions about political topics will evolve as more and more users join alternative platforms.

## 7.5 Takeaway 4: Managing the Dynamic Relationship Between Presenters & Audiences

Despite self-presentation being a collaborative process co-constructed by posters and their audiences [136], social media researchers largely ignore audiences’ perspectives to focus on how posters’ achieve their self-presentation goals with their imagined audience in mind (e.g., [53, 127]). My dissertation aims to understand both posters and their audiences

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<sup>1</sup><https://gab.com/>

regarding variations in posters' social media self-presentation. I have found that the relationship between posters and their audiences is constantly fine-tuned in the process of self-presentation.

I break the process of self-presentation into four steps and illustrate how my dissertation provides insights to each step (Fig. 7.1). This diagram is only intended to help visualize the interactions between posters and audiences in the process of self-presentation on social media. Entities in this process are represented with shapes with solid lines, including individual users (poster, audience) and artifacts (posts, responses to the posts, privacy configurations). The box with a bold solid line refers to the poster's social media presentation on one platform/account, an exhibition about the poster that is created and maintained on this platform/account. The poster can have a multi-faceted self-presentation extending across multiple platforms/accounts, which are omitted from this diagram. The lines with arrows pointing between boxes refer to steps in the process, indicating who creates or influences what. The dotted lines represent optional steps in the process. The dashed line between posts and the responses they receive (e.g., comments, likes) refer to the mapping relationship between them.

The first step in the process is when the posters post on their social media with their imagined audience in mind. All four studies in my dissertation provide evidence on this. In Study 1, participants presented who they currently were in their posts to their current social networks, and prevented newly made contacts from viewing their old social media data. In Study 2, Instagram users were aware their Rinsta was more public and their Finsta was more about socializing with close friends, so they carefully maintained a positive and uplifting image on their Rinsta and were able to let loose on their Finsta.

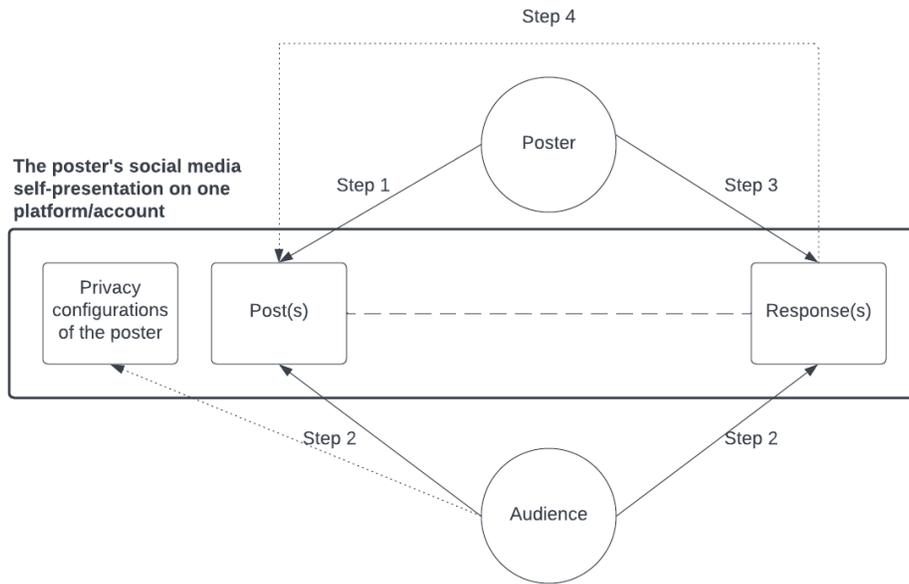


Figure 7.1: Relationship between the poster and the audience in the process of self-presentation.

In Study 3, participants were aware of different audiences on their multiple social media platforms and some utilized platform insight tools to know their audiences better. They customized their content for these audiences when cross-posting. In Study 4, ex-veg\*n YouTubers described how they decided to quit veg\*nism, hoping their audiences—many of whom followed the YouTubers for their veg\*n identity—could understand this identity change. Many other social media studies focus on this step of self-presentation as well, unpacking how presenters in different scenarios conceptualize their audiences and present accordingly on different platforms (e.g., [126,127,136]). My dissertation expands this branch of research by providing more insights into specific features and practices that may not be captured when focusing on a single platform or a “typical” user.

The second step of the self-presentation process is when the audience makes sense of (the left two lines pointing from audiences) and responds to (the right line pointing

from audiences) the presenters' self-presentation. Previous research on social media self-presentation usually ignores audiences' perspectives and overly focuses on presenters. Two of my studies begin to expand this branch of research. Since not all privacy configurations of the posters are viewable to audiences, the line pointing from audiences to privacy configurations on Fig. 7.1 is dotted. Since WeChat users' Time Limit setting is viewable to their audiences, in Study 1, I asked participants how they would perceive other people who applied the Time Limit setting. They tended to have a negative first impressions of a new contact when they found most or all of the new contact's content was hidden with the three-day Time Limit option. They were less judgmental when established friends chose the three-day option because they knew these contacts not only from Moments posts, but also from direct messages and offline interactions with them. It is interesting to find out that presenters' privacy configurations, when viewable and interpreted by their audiences, also contribute to the impressions they leave on their audiences.

In Study 4, I examined how audiences responded to changes in ex-veg\*n YouTubers' online self-presentation. Content analysis showed that they discussed a lot of topics about the duality of the YouTubers' identity: the aspect of being veg\*n in an online community originated from them sharing veg\*n-related topics and promoting the lifestyle vs. the aspect of being an individual who was not constrained by any label. Study 4 was a special case where I could examine how audiences respond to presenters' self-presentation because of the accessibility of social media data. More research should consider how audiences and presenters in other contexts interact in the process of self-presentation. In addition, the relationship between the audiences and the YouTubers was mostly one-sided, denoted as parasocial relationship in previous media research, where the audiences developed connec-

tions to the YouTubers but not vice versa [110, 156, 213].

Given the diverse technologies that support interactions on social media, it might be helpful to understand interpersonal relationship on a spectrum: a strict one-sided relationship between high profile users who only state their opinions instead of conversing with their audiences (e.g., some politicians); somewhat bi-directional relationships between fans and celebrities after fans request and pay for personalized videos from celebrities on sites like Cameo; and bi-directional relationships.

It is also important to understand how social media disclosures and interactions can extend beyond social media and influence offline relationships. The visibility of comment might play a role in this process. For example, audiences' responses and audience-poster relationships might be influenced differently on platforms with different levels of comment visibility. For example, we could compare platforms like YouTube where all comments are visible to all other commenters with platforms like WeChat Moments where comments are visible to other commenters only if the other commenters also connect with the poster and features like Instagram's Stories, where comments are only visible to the poster [192].

The third step in the process is when posters make sense of the responses they receive from their audiences. In Study 2, Instagram users thought the responses to their Finsta posts were less satisfying, useful, supportive, and pleasant compared with that to their Rinsta posts. Mediation analysis showed that part of the reason was that on Finsta, they received fewer responses. This finding supports the idea that audience responses on social media contribute to posters' well-being. Posters benefit from both interacting with a larger social network when purposefully putting their best foot forward, and from letting loose and interacting with their close connections. There is a branch of research about how

people perceive social support or satisfaction from social media comments (e.g., [16, 83]). More research should expand on further consequences of presenting oneself and receiving comments from other people as interpreting these comments can be a delicate process. Unlike posts, which can be presented in a variety of media formats (e.g., text, pictures, videos), comments are mostly text-based. Missing cues in comments can make posters misunderstand what the commenters mean and put the poster-commenter relationship at risk.

The fourth step in the process of self-presentation is optional for some posters or for some of their posts when they do not care about what other people say. In other cases, the posters adjust how they present in the future based on the responses they receive or other digital footprints left by their audiences. In Study 1, I observed how long-term WeChat Moments users' self-presentation evolved as they interacted with their changing and expanding audiences. In Study 3, participants also described how they learned to adjust their posting strategies based on user insight data, including views and comments, active hours when audiences responded. Social media platforms should conduct user research with content creators to identify what information they actively seek about user responses in order to adjust their self-presentation and posting strategies.

The relationship between posters and their audiences is a dynamic one, iteratively changing as the posters and their audiences collaboratively build the exhibition of the posters' social media self-presentation. This exhibition of social media self-presentation consists of not only posts [86]. Any information the audience can see about the posters become part of who they are, including the privacy configurations they select and the comments they receive from audiences. I hope future research can continue exploring this

dynamic process across different platforms with evolving features and different contexts.

## 7.6 Limitations

In this dissertation, I collected abundant data from social media users who were active on a range of platforms, including WeChat Moments, Instagram, YouTube, and more. The participants I collected data from use social media for a range of reasons, from sharing their personal life updates with close circles to creating content to be consumed by a large interest community. They also have different roles as they engage in social media activities. They are performers who create and maintain their online images according to platform affordances, norms, and audiences. They are audiences who watch other people perform online and give feedback. As performers, they also evaluate feedback from their audiences and develop understanding of these audiences or adjust their future social media behaviors. Nevertheless, I must note some limitations to the findings I have presented in my dissertation.

My research is limited in its generalizability. For example, the participants in Study 1 to 3 were recruited from the University of Maryland and consisted of mainly college students. While this was a purposeful decision in my study design and recruitment—as college students are among the most prolific users of social media—and they provided me with abundant responses about their social media use and self-presentation, I expect that expanding these studies to include more diverse populations may yield additional findings. For Study 2, it is also important to understand that the results of this small-scale study might not speak for the wider range of Instagram users who maintain two

accounts. Unfortunately, it is difficult to know how widespread this practice is and whether other demographic groups besides young adults maintain Finstas and Rinstas, given that Instagram does not publish details or demographic information for this subset of users. For Study 4, I collected comments from videos of female YouTubers. While this was not intentional—rather, only female YouTubers met the selection criteria—it is important to recognize that male YouTubers or posters on other social media platforms might have different narratives of their identity change, and thus lead to different audience responses.

I want to note several difficulties I encountered as I was working on Study 4. These difficulties might partly explain why previous social media self-presentation research does not focus on analyzing the audience’s perspectives on self-presentation. The first challenge was that audience responses are very noisy and complicated. There are many comments that are hard to understand because of the informal nature of online discourse, the omitted contextual information, and the community-specific jargon. In addition, there is no character limitation on YouTube comments, so comments can range from a single word or phrase to being quite lengthy and having multiple, complicated meanings; for example, a commenter could express both support and disappointment to the YouTubers in a comment. As a result, automated approaches for analyzing the text like LIWC were not effective in this study, and they could not fully capture this nuance and complexity. Because of this, my quantitative data exploration of the full dataset did not generate much insight, e.g., statistical models suggested that there is no significant difference between announcement videos and post-announcement videos regarding the the word categories that I was interested in.

The noise and complexity in the corpus suggests that manually and qualitatively cod-

ing the comments might be a better approach. Due to bandwidth issues, I could not code the full dataset and did data scoping to code a subset of the dataset. The descriptive statistics of theme distribution on this subset need to be adjusted if readers want to understand the estimated theme distribution on the full dataset. Nevertheless, these numbers reflect the trend of how themes in audience responses fluctuate across time from pre-announcement to announcement to post-announcement. They also indicate the comparative popularity of each theme under a given type of videos.

## 7.7 Conclusion

Throughout my dissertation, I have viewed social media self-presentation with a holistic approach; rather than focusing on a single platform, feature, or poster, I explored the complex relationship between posters and their audience across multiple platforms/accounts and over time. Across the four studies presented in this document, I have unpacked how people's self-presentation is shaped and supported by affordances, features, and sociotechnical factors like norms. I have also identified usability issues and provided design implications for social media platforms to better support users' self-presentation needs. I hope this work provides a strong foundation for future researchers and designers who strive to understand and improve social media users' experiences on and across platforms.

Appendix A: Study 1 Interview Protocol

The interviewer will be Xiaoyun Huang, the principle investigator of this study. The interview will be conducted in Chinese.

Interview starts with the interviewer going over consent form, briefly overviewing the goal of the study, answering any questions, then jumping into questions. Although the interview will be conducted in Chinese, we provide the questions in Chinese and in English in case IRB committee needs them.

[Consent form]

你是否同意参加我们的访问并且被录音？

Do you agree to participate and be audiotaped? [If yes, let the participant read and sign the consent form and continue. If the participant does not agree to participate, stop.]

[Introducing the study]

非常感谢您愿意参加我们的访问。我们的访问是为了了解用户对于微信朋友圈使用，尤其对是一个微信朋友圈的功能，三天可见功能的使用。我们会问你一些关于微信基本使用情况，你使用或者不使用三天可见功能的原因以及相关体验的问题。

我们的访问会在半小时左右，不超过一个小时。为了准确性我们需要对访问进行录音。你的个人信息会被严格地保护，在后续的数据分析以及发表的论文中，我们都会用匿名或者是编号来替换你的身份。在访问正式开始之前，你有什么问题吗？

Thank you so much for participating in our interview. Our interview aims at understanding users' experiences with WeChat Moments, especially with one setting of WeChat Moments, Viewable By Other setting. We will ask you questions about your general WeChat Moments use, your experiences and reasons for using or not using Viewable By Others setting.

Our interview will last for about 30 minutes, but less than 60 minutes. For accuracy we will need to audio record our interview. We will protect your personal information. We will use a pseudonym or an alphanumeric code to replace your identity in our data analysis and in the final deliverable of this study. Before the interview starts, do you have any question?

[After answering any question the interviewee may have, we will jump to the questions.]

### Questions in Chinese Version

#### 人口统计学特征

- 您的年纪？
- 您的学历？
- 您在哪里出生？

#### 微信朋友圈基本使用情况

- 您使用微信多久了？
- 您微信上有多少联系人？
- 您的联系人都有谁？
  - 您是否将联系人分组了？
    - 如果是的话，您是怎样分组的？
- 您使用微信朋友圈多久了？
- 微信朋友圈使用频率

- 发朋友圈的频率
- 看别人朋友圈的频率
  - 通过刷朋友圈看别人朋友圈的频率
  - 通过别人的个人主页看别人朋友圈的频率
    - 在什么情况下会去查看别人的个人主页？
- 您查看自己过去的朋友圈的频率？
  - 在什么情况下会去查看自己过去的朋友圈？

### 三天可见 / 半年可见功能

- **对从未使用过该功能的人的问题：**
  - 您为什么从未使用过它？
  - 您认为别人为什么使用该功能？
  - 当您发现您的一个微信联系人使用了该功能，您的感受或者反应是什么？能举一个例子吗？
  - 如果该功能有别的时间范围可选，你会愿意使用该功能吗？为什么？
    - 您认为哪些时间范围比三天和半年更好？为什么？
  - 您展示了所有的朋友圈，对此您是否有些担忧？
    - 如果有，您有哪些担忧？您怎样解决这些担忧？
    - 您是否考虑过这些朋友圈在未来的某些时候可能不再合适？
    - 您是否经历过以上的情况？
      - 如果有，请问能描述一下当时的情况以及您怎样处理的吗？
    - 您是否有只想给自己看的一些朋友圈呢？
    - 您的个人形象在您的新老朋友圈中是否有不一样的情况？
      - 如果有，请描述。
  - 展示所有朋友圈是否影响您的下列行为：
    - 您发朋友圈的行为。请描述。
    - 您管理朋友圈的行为。请描述。
- **对正在使用该功能的人的问题：**
  - 您为什么使用这个功能 / 您使用它的目标？
    - 这个功能满足还是未能满足您的目标？能举一个例子吗？
  - 您认为别人为什么使用该功能？
  - 当您发现您的一个微信联系人使用了该功能，您的感受或者反应是什么？能举一个例子吗？
  - 您选择的是三天可见还是半年可见？为什么？
  - 您认为这两个选项有什么区别？
  - 您是否改过该功能的选项？（比如从“三天可见”到“半年可见”，从“半年可见”到默认设置）为什么？
  - 如果该功能有别的时间范围可选，你会愿意使用别的时间范围吗？为什么？
    - 如果是的话，您认为哪些时间范围比三天和半年更好？为什么？
  - 在你改变到当前设置的前后以下方面有什么变化：

- 你发朋友圈的行为（比如朋友圈分组，发布的内容，发布的频率等）
  - 你管理朋友圈的行为（比如删除一些朋友圈，删除一些自己的评论，取消赞，屏蔽别人等）
  - 你的社交圈
  - 你想展示的个人形象
  - 你的担忧（比如隐私方面的担心）
- **对曾经使用过该功能的人的问题：**
    - 您当时为什么使用这个功能 / 您当时使用它的目标？
      - 这个功能当时满足还是未能满足您的目标？能举一个例子吗？
    - 您认为别人为什么使用该功能？
    - 当您发现您的一个微信联系人使用了该功能，您的感受或者反应是什么？能举一个例子吗？
    - 您当时选择的是三天可见还是半年可见？为什么？
    - 您认为这两个选项有什么区别？
    - 您为什么恢复了默认设置？
    - 如果该功能有别的时间范围可选，你会愿意使用该功能吗？为什么？
      - 如果是的话，您认为哪些时间范围比三天和半年更好？为什么？
    - 在您使用该功能时您是否有过担忧？
      - 如果有，您有过哪些担忧？您当时怎样解决这些担忧？
    - 您展示了所有的朋友圈，对此您是否有些担忧？
      - 如果有，您有哪些担忧？您怎样解决这些担忧？
      - 您是否考虑过这些朋友圈在未来的某些时候可能不再合适？
      - 您是否经历过以上的情况？
        - 如果有，请问能描述一下当时的情况以及您怎样处理的吗？
      - 您是否有只想给自己看的一些朋友圈呢？
      - 您的个人形象在您的新老朋友圈中是否有不一样的情况？
        - 如果有，请描述。
    - 展示所有朋友圈是否影响您的下列行为：
      - 您发朋友圈的行为。请描述。
      - 您管理朋友圈的行为。请描述。
    - 在你改变到当前设置的前后以下方面有什么变化：
      - 你发朋友圈的行为（比如朋友圈分组，发布的内容，发布的频率等）
      - 你管理朋友圈的行为（比如删除一些朋友圈，删除一些自己的评论，取消赞，屏蔽别人等）
      - 你的社交圈
      - 你想展示的个人形象
      - 你的担忧（比如隐私方面的担心）

## 和其他社交媒体平台的比较

- 你是否用过其他的社交媒体平台？比如 Snapchat, Instagram, Facebook, 微博, Twitter?
  - 如果是的话，在你看来，微信朋友圈和 Snapchat (Snapchat Stories)/Instagram (Instagram Stories)/Facebook (Facebook Stories)/微博 (微博故事)/Twitter 有什么区别？
    - 从平台的使用规范上来说
    - 从平台提供的功能上来说
    - 从你展示的个人形象上来说
    - 从你发表的内容上来说
    - 从你的社交圈来说
  - 如果是的话，在什么情况下你会偏向于微信朋友圈，什么情况下你会偏向于其他社交媒体平台？

### **Questions in English Version:**

#### **Demographics**

- How old are you?
- Are you a graduate student here or an undergrad?
- Where were you born?

#### **General WeChat Moments use**

- How long have you been using WeChat?
- How many contacts do you have on WeChat?
- Who are in your WeChat contact list?
  - Have you categorized your WeChat contacts?
    - If so, how do you categorize your WeChat contacts?
- How long have you been using WeChat Moments?
- WeChat Moments use frequency:
  - Frequency of posting
  - Frequency of checking others' posts:
    - from your News Feed
    - from their personal pages
      - Under what conditions will you go to other people's personal pages?
  - Frequency of checking your own posts posted before
    - Under what conditions will you check your own posts posted before?

#### **Viewable By Others Setting**

- **For those who never use this setting:**
  - Why do you never use it?
  - Why do other people use it from your understanding?
  - How do you feel or react when you notice one of your contacts are using this setting? Can you give me an example?
  - Will you be willing to use this setting if it allows other options other than "three days" and "six months"? Why or why not?

- What options do you think are better than “three days” and “six months”? Why?
  - Do you have any concern since you are displaying all your posts to others?
    - If so, what are these concerns and how do you solve your concerns?
    - Have you considered the possibility that something you post before is not suitable later?
    - Have you experienced the situation when something you post before is not suitable later?
      - If so, can you describe it and how do you react to it?
    - Do you have some posts that you want to keep only to yourself?
    - Is there a discrepancy between your personal image in the older posts and that in the recent posts?
      - If so, can you describe that?
  - Does displaying all your posts to others influence:
    - Your posting behaviors? Describe that.
    - Your curating behaviors? Describe that.
- **For those who are using this setting:**
  - Why do you use it / your goals of using it?
    - Does this setting satisfy or dissatisfy your goals? Can you describe that?
  - Why do other people use it from your understanding?
  - How do you feel or react when you notice one of your contacts are using this setting? Can you give me an example?
  - Which one do you choose, posts in the last three days viewable by others or posts in the last six months viewable by others? Why?
  - From your perspective, what’s the difference between these two options?
  - Have you changed your options in this setting (e.g. from “three days” to “six months”, from “six months” to “default”)? Why?
  - If there are other options other than “three days” and “six months”, will you use that?
    - If so, what options do you think are better than “three days” and “six months”? Why?
  - What’s the difference before and after shifting to the current option?
    - Your posting behaviors (e.g. audience management, content posted, posting frequency, etc.)
    - Your curating behaviors (e.g. delete your posts, delete your comments, delete likes, blocking people, etc.)
    - Your social network circles
    - The identity you want to exhibit
    - Your concerns (e.g. about your privacy, etc.)
- **For those who used this setting before:**
  - Why did you use it / your goals of using it?
    - Did this setting satisfy or dissatisfy your goals? Can you give an example?
  - Why do other people use it from your understanding?

- How do you feel or react when you notice one of your contacts are using this setting? Can you give me an example?
- Which one did you choose, posts in the last three days viewable by others or posts in the last six months viewable by others? Why?
- From your perspective, what's the difference between these two options?
- Why did you choose to return to the default setting?
- If there are other options other than "three days" and "six months", will you use that?
  - If so, what options do you think are better than "three days" and "six months"? Why?
- Did you have any concern when you were using this setting?
  - If so, what were these concerns and how did you solve them?
- Do you have any concern since you are displaying all your posts to others?
  - If so, what are these concerns and how do you solve your concerns?
  - Have you considered the possibility that something you post before is not suitable later?
  - Have you experienced the situation when something you post before is not suitable later?
    - If so, can you describe it and how do you react to it?
  - Do you have some posts that you want to keep only to yourself?
  - Is there a discrepancy between your personal image in the older posts and that in the recent posts?
    - If so, can you describe that?
- Does displaying all your posts to others influence:
  - Your posting behaviors? Describe that.
  - Your curating behaviors? Describe that.
- What's the difference before and after shifting to the current option:
  - Your posting behaviors (e.g. audience management, content posted, posting frequency, etc.)
  - Your curating behaviors (e.g. delete your posts, delete your comments, delete likes, blocking people, etc.)
  - Your social network circles
  - The identity you want to exhibit
  - Your concerns (e.g. about your privacy, etc.)

### **Comparison with other social media platforms**

- Have you used other social media platforms like Snapchat, Instagram, Facebook, Weibo, Twitter?
  - If so, from your experiences, what's the difference between WeChat Moments and Snapchat (Snapchat Stories)/Instagram (Instagram Stories)/Facebook (Facebook Stories)/ Weibo (Weibo Stories)/Twitter?
    - Norms of platforms
    - Affordances of platforms
    - Personal images
    - Content you post
    - Social networks

- If so, under what conditions will you prefer WeChat Moments than other platforms or prefer other platforms than WeChat Moments?

[Conclusion]

- 在我们结束访问之前，你有什么想要补充的信息吗？ Before we conclude the interview is there anything else you'd like to add?
- 你还有什么问题吗？ Do you have any last-minute questions for me?

这就是我全部的问题了，谢谢你花时间参加我们的研究，我非常感谢你分享你的经验。

These are all my questions, thank you for taking the time to participate in the study. I really appreciate you sharing your experiences.

Appendix B: Study 2 Screening Survey

## Demographics

- How do you describe your gender?
  - Male-identifying
  - Female-identifying
  - Non-binary
  - Prefer to self-describe: \_\_\_\_\_
- How old are you? \_\_\_\_\_
- What year are you in your undergraduate program?
  - First year
  - Second year
  - Third year
  - Fourth year
  - Fifth year and above

## Rinsta

Rinsta is your “real”, more official, and more public Instagram account.

- Q1: Please provide your Rinsta username below. We will send you a customized survey based on your Rinsta posts. If your Rinsta account is private, we will send you a following request from the researcher’s Instagram account (@affogato1129). Please approve this following request so we can customize the survey for you.
  - \_\_\_\_\_
- Q2: Is your Rinsta a private or public account?
  - Private - only people you approve can see your photos and videos on your Rinsta.
  - Public
- Q3: How often do you post on your Rinsta?
  - Not at all
  - Once a month or less
  - Multiple times per month
  - Around once a week
  - Multiple times per week
  - Around once a day
  - Multiple times a day
- Q4: Who follow your Rinsta accounts? [Check all that apply]
  - Family members
  - Relatives
  - Acquaintances
  - Friends
  - Strangers
  - Significant other
  - Colleagues
  - Boss/Supervisors/Professors
  - Others: \_\_\_\_\_

## **Finsta**

Finsta is your “fake”, less official, and more private Instagram account.

- Q1: Please provide your Finsta username below. We will send you a customized survey based on your Finsta posts. If your Finsta account is private, we will send you a following request from the researcher’s Instagram account (@affogato1129). Please approve this following request so we can customize the survey for you.
  - \_\_\_\_\_
- Q2: Is your Finsta a private or public account?
  - Private - only people you approve can see your photos and videos on your Finsta.
  - Public
- Q3: How often do you post on your Finsta?
  - Not at all
  - Once a month or less
  - Multiple times per month
  - Around once a week
  - Multiple times per week
  - Around once a day
  - Multiple times a day
- Q4: Who follow your Finsta accounts? [Check all that apply]
  - Family members
  - Relatives
  - Acquaintances
  - Friends
  - Strangers
  - Significant other
  - Colleagues
  - Boss/Supervisors/Professors
  - Others: \_\_\_\_\_

## **Rinsta vs. Finsta**

- Q1-1: Why do you use Finsta?
  - \_\_\_\_\_
- Q1-2: Why do you use Rinsta?
  - \_\_\_\_\_
- Q2: When you want to post, how do you decide which account to post to?
  - \_\_\_\_\_
- Q3: Have you posted about the same thing to both your Rinsta and Finsta (cross-posting)? The posts do not have to be exactly the same, as long as you think you talk about the same thing in both accounts. For example, a person goes on a trip during Thanksgiving vacation and posts to both accounts about this trip.
  - Yes
  - No
  - I don’t remember

- [If “Yes” in Q3] Q4: How frequently do you cross-post to both your Rinsta and Finsta?
  - Never
  - Rarely
  - Sometimes
  - Always
  - Often
- [If “Yes” in Q3] Q5: Please briefly describe a post you’ve shared to both Rinsta and Finsta, whether you made any changes to the caption or image, and what are these changes if any.
  - \_\_\_\_\_

**Contact Information**

- Please provide your email address below. We will send the customized survey based on your Finsta posts and Rinsta posts within 1 business day to this email address.
  - \_\_\_\_\_

Appendix C: Study 2 Template for Customizing Survey 2

[For each participant, we will randomly sample 3 of his/her Finsta posts and 3 of his/her Rinsta posts within the last 3 months. Participants will answer the following questions for each post. ]

### **Self-presentation intention**

Q1: Think about the time when you wrote this post. How much do you agree with the following statements? (1: strongly disagree; 7: strongly agree)

- It was important for me to present myself positively in this post.
- I was concerned about how I would come across in this post.
- This post reveals more desirable than undesirable things about myself.
- I didn't care what other people would think of me from this post.
- In this post, I worried about making a good impression.

### **Technical features for self-presentation**

Q2-1: Did you apply filters (e.g. color changes, stickers) and/or other picture edit features provided **by Instagram** to edit the picture(s) in this post?

- Yes
- No
- I'm not sure

Q2-2: Did you apply filters (e.g. color changes, stickers) and/or other picture edit features provided **by apps other than Instagram** to edit the picture(s) in this post?

- Yes
- No
- I'm not sure

[If "Yes" in Q2-2]: Q2-3: What were the apps that you used to edit the picture(s) in this post?

- \_\_\_\_\_

[If "Yes" in either Q2-1 or Q2-2]: How much effort did you think you've put editing the picture(s) in this post?

- None at all
- A little
- A moderate amount
- A lot
- A great deal

### **Self-presentation deliverables**

Q3: Which of the following best describes the emotion expressed in this post? (1: extremely negative; 7: extremely positive).

Q4: Does this post include picture(s) of yourself?

- Yes
- No

[if "Yes" in Q4] Q4-1: Does this post include one or more selfies of you?

- Yes
- No

[if "Yes" in Q4] Q4-2: How much do you agree with the following statements? (1: strongly disagree; 7: strongly agree)

- I look attractive in this post.
- I look cool in this post.
- I look fashionable in this post.

Q5: How much do you agree with the following statements? (1: strongly disagree; 7: strongly agree)

- This post is visually appealing.
- The color scheme in this post is harmonious.

Q6: Please select the topic of this post (check all that apply).

- Arts/culture/literature/movie
- Politics
- Science/technology
- Health/medicine
- Holiday/travel
- Family
- Friends
- Romantic relationship
- Food/cooking
- Big life events
- Struggles/challenges in life
- Professional information
- Cursing/complaining/negativity/venting
- Sex/Not safe for work (NSFW)
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

### **Outcome of self-presentation**

Q0: Did you receive any responses (comments and/or likes) to this post?

- Yes
- No

[if "Yes" in Q0] Q1: Who gave you responses (comments and/or likes) to this post? [Check all that apply]

- Family members
- Relatives
- Acquaintances
- Friends
- Strangers
- Significant other
- Colleagues
- Boss/Supervisors/Professors
- Others: \_\_\_\_\_

[if "Yes" in Q0] Q2: Please select the statement that best describes your feelings after you shared this post (1: not at all; 5: very much)

- To what extent did you feel satisfied after posting it?
- To what extent did you think your goal for this post, if any, was achieved?
- To what extent did you like the responses (comments and likes) to your post?

- To what extent were you satisfied with the responses to your post?
- To what extent did you find the responses to your post useful?
- To what extent did you find the responses to your post valuable?

[if "Yes" in Q0] Q3: How pleasant or unpleasant was the interaction between you and other people under this post? (1: very unpleasant; 5 = very pleasant)

[if "Yes" in Q0] Q4: How supportive or unsupportive was the interaction between you and other people under this post? (1: very unsupportive; 5 = very supportive)

Appendix D: Study 3 Screening Survey

**Basic social media use:**

Q1: What social media platforms do you use? [Check all that apply]

- Facebook
- Instagram
- Snapchat
- Pinterest
- LinkedIn
- Tik Tok
- Twitter
- Whatsapp
- Reddit
- Flickr
- Tumblr
- Youtube
- Other social media platforms: \_\_\_\_\_

[For each platform selected in Q1] Q2: How often do you post on these platforms?

- Not at all
- Once a month or less
- Multiple times per month
- Around once a week
- Multiple times per week
- Around once a day
- Multiple times a day

**Cross-site linkage:**

Some social media platforms provide **cross-site linkage** features. With these features, users on platform X can link their accounts on other social media platforms to their accounts on X.

Q1: Do the social media platforms you are using provide cross-site linkage features?

[list all the platforms the participant is using]

- Yes
- No
- I don't know

Q2: Are you using the cross-site linkage feature on these platforms?

[list all the platforms that the participant answers "Yes" in Q1]

- Yes, I am using this feature.
  - I link my accounts on \_\_\_\_\_ to my account on this platform.
- No, I have never used the feature.
- No, I used it before but am not using it now.
- I don't remember

Q3: Are you using bio link tools like Linktree or Shorby to share your accounts across multiple social media platforms?

- Yes
- No

### **Cross-posting:**

Q1: Have you posted about the same thing to multiple platforms (**cross-posting**)? The posts do not have to be exactly the same, as long as you think you talk about the same thing across these platforms. For example, a person goes on a trip during Thanksgiving vacation and posts to different platforms about this trip.

- Yes
- No
- I don't remember

[If "Yes" in Q1] Q2: How frequently do you cross-post?

- Never
- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Often
- Always

[If "Yes" in Q1] Q3: When you cross-post, how do you usually do that?

- Automatically share content to linked accounts
- Manually copy-paste/edit content on different platforms
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

### **Demographics**

Q1: How do you describe your gender?

- Male
- Female
- Non-binary
- Prefer to self-describe: \_\_\_\_\_

Q2: How old are you? \_\_\_\_\_

Q3: Which of the following best describes your occupation?

- Student
- Faculty
- Staff
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

[If “Student” in Q2] Q3: What degree are you working on?

- Undergraduate degree
- Master or professional degree
- Doctoral degree

Q5: What is the highest degree or level of school you have completed?

- High school or equivalent
- Some college
- Undergraduate degree
- Master or professional degree
- Doctoral degree

### **Interview & Contact information**

Q1: If you are eligible for the study, are you willing to schedule a virtual interview with us to talk about your social media experiences?

- Yes
- No

[If “Yes” in Q1] Q2: Please provide your email address below. We will send emails to schedule interviews. \_\_\_\_\_

Appendix E: Study 3 Interview Protocol

[Before the interview, we've already asked participants to read through their social media, especially their cross-posted posts. We also encourage participants to share the screenshot of any cross-posted posts with us via email, if they are comfortable sharing. During the interview, we ask participants to have their social media at hand to help them better recall their social media experiences, especially their cross-posting experiences.]

Warm up questions about general social media use:

- In your survey responses you mentioned you are using [platform X, Y, etc.]. Could you walk me through how you use each of the social media platforms? For example, what do you usually post, who do you interact with on each of these platforms? You can start with your favorite or most-used social platform.
- Do you have any topics that you usually post exclusively on [platform X] instead of other platforms? If so, what are these topics?
- Do you have any topics that you'd like to share on [platform X] and also other platforms? If so, what are these topics?

Cross-site linkage:

- In your survey responses you shared with us that you are linking your account on [platform X] to your account on [platform Y]. Why do you link these two accounts?
- In the screener survey you share with us that despite knowing [platform X] has the cross-site linkage function, you choose not to use it. Why is that?
- In the screener survey you share with us that you once used the cross-site linkage feature on [platform X] but you are not using it now. Can you share with us why you used it at first and what made you give it up?
- In the screener survey you share with us that you use bio link tools like Linktree or Shorby to share your accounts across multiple platforms.
  - Why do you do that?

Cross-posting:

- Could you share with me something that you've talked about on more than one platform? The posts do not have to be exactly the same, as long as you think you talk about the same thing on these platforms. For example, a person goes on a trip during Thanksgiving vacation and posts to multiple platforms about this trip. We will go into some details about this cross-posting experience, so feel free to use your social media posts for your reference.
- Why did you cross-post about this?
- Platform choice:
  - What platforms did you post it to?
  - Why did you choose these platforms?
  - Did you post to [platform X] and [platform Y] simultaneously? Or did you post to one platform first and then another?
    - If done in succession: How did you decide which platform to first post to?
- Audience:

- So you just said that you cross-posted it to [platform X] and [platform Y]. On each of these platforms, who did you expect to see the post?
- Was there an overlap between those who could see your post on [platform X] and those on [platform Y]? If so, who are they?
- Did you use privacy settings on each of these platforms to have a better control over who could actually see the post? Why or why not?
  - If yes: What privacy settings did you use for the posts?
- Cross-posting:
  - Since you've linked the two accounts, did you use this feature to automatically cross-post?
    - If yes:
      - How did you feel about the automatic cross-posting process?
      - Since you cross-posted content from [platform X] to [platform Y], did you know whether your contacts on [platform Y] could trace back to your account on [platform X] from the post?
        - If no:
          - Imagine that if your contacts on [platform Y] could trace back to your account on [platform X] from the post, would your posting behaviors change? If so, how?
          - Imagine that if your contacts on [platform Y] could not trace back to your account on [platform X] from the post, would your posting behaviors change? If so, how?
        - If yes:
          - How did you discover that contacts on [platform Y] can/can't trace back to your account on [platform X]?
          - Does knowing that influence your posting behaviors? If so, how?
      - Did you worry if your contacts on [platform Y] discover your [platform X] account? What are you worried about? Why?
        - If no: Why didn't you use this feature to cross-post?
    - Did you manually cross-post to these platforms?
      - If yes:
        - Did you make edits to the caption?
          - If yes:
            - What were they?
            - Why did you make these edits?
          - If no: Why?
        - Did you include different pictures or videos in the post?
          - If yes:
            - What were they?
            - Why did you choose these pictures or videos?

- If no: Why?
    - Is there anything else that differs between the two posts?
    - How did you feel about the manual cross-posting process? Did you think it was too much work to do? Did it bother you?
- Self-presentation
  - The cross-posted posts specifically:
    - Is there any difference between how you want to present yourself in this cross-posted post on [platform X] and that on [platform Y]?
      - If so, could you describe how you want to present yourself from this post on [platform X] and that on [platform Y]?
    - How did you feel if someone saw this post on [platform X] and on [platform Y] and perceived the difference in your online images?
  - Self-presentation on the two platforms in general:
    - Are there any differences between how you want to present yourself in general on [platform X] and that on [platform Y]?
      - If so, could you describe how you want to present yourself on [platform X] in general? And on [platform Y] in general?
      - If not, why?
    - How do you feel if someone sees your posts on [platform X] and on [platform Y] and perceives the difference in your online images between the two platforms?

Appendix F: Study 3 Codebook

## Codes:

- Goals of Social Media:
  - Definition: Participants' main reason for using each of their accounts/platforms.
  - Example: *"When I do use the Instagram Stories function is usually to share someone else's post about something. And it's not easily like I'm sharing, like, the things that I do on Snapchat Stories."*
- Audience Management:
  - Definition: Participants mentioned strategies for audience management.
  - Example: *"I previously used Instagram as a personal platform. It was actually a private account for me."*
- Perceptions of Audience:
  - Definition: Participants described audiences of their different accounts/platforms, or described the difference/overlap of audience between accounts/platforms.
  - Example: *"As Instagram has evolved, a lot of my friends, everyone uses Instagram these days. So yeah, even though Facebook has a much larger [audience], because they're like school friends, university friends, family, relatives. But they're not people I really wanted to interact with on a daily basis."*
- Self-Censorship:
  - Definition: Participants mentioned self-censorship, e.g., topics they don't mind sharing across accounts/platforms, topics they intentionally avoid for specific accounts/platforms.
  - Example: *"For me, specifically, my family and close friends don't always agree politically on Facebook, so I avoid posting political things on Facebook. Whereas I'm a bit more open on Instagram, because I have less closefamily and friends that are watching me."*
- Difference in Self-Presentation:
  - Definition: Participants described how their self-presentation varied between different accounts and different platforms, or between their personal side and their creator side.
  - Example: *"I keep it more scholarly and professional on LinkedIn, a little slightly more informal on Facebook and Twitter. I make jokes on Twitter but I try to always be kind and try to connect people rather than aggrandize myself necessarily. Although, posting about my accomplishments is okay. This is my philosophy on social media."*
- Manual Effort in Cross-Posting:
  - Definition: Participants described how they manually draft content when cross-posting, e.g., copy-pasting from platform to platforms, sharing urls to the OP on platform A with customized captions on platform B.
  - Example: *"I upload YouTube videos using my desktop browser. I mostly use Facebook on the desktop, I hardly use it on the mobile app. As soon as I create a video, I copy the link, and I copy the description which I have created in the video. I put the description here, post the link here. Whatever I create, the first cross-post that I make is always on Facebook because it's easily accessible by desktop."*

- Technologies to Assist Cross-Posting:
  - Definition: Participants mentioned using technologies to automate or partly automate their cross-posting.
  - Example: *“I have another type of way of sharing this content that is just basically linking Instagram with my Facebook, not Twitter. There I share things a little bit more personal, but to make sure that people that it's not on Instagram will see the content, for example, my extended family, my mother-in-law, for example, she's not in Instagram.”*
- Perceptions of Cross-Posting:
  - Definition: Participants described how they perceive about cross-posting processes, or things they want to improve about cross-posting and the current technologies.
  - Example: *“This mishap happens because there is this button that's turned on automatically. For me, it's turned on. And I need to turn it off if I don't want to share it. So instead of that, if they pop up something and they say, ‘hey, do you want to cross link this’, then it's useful.”*
- Considerations Behind Cross-Posting:
  - Definition: Participants described why or why not cross-post, or described their reasons for how to cross-post, or described why or why not link their accounts.
  - Example: *“So at first, when the function (cross-site linkage) was newly added, I was pretty curious about it, and I started using it. But then I got to know that whatever I post on Insta has an impression on my Facebook account. And that is something I didn't want it because I personally, I would say use my Facebook just to connect my game data.”*
- Examples of Cross-Posting:
  - Definition: Participants shared examples of cross-posting.
  - Example: *“Let's say, I went to a trip. And I posted it on Instagram. And I would also like put the same story and snaps on Snapchat. Because there might be a few people who follow me on Snapchat, but not on Instagram.”*

## Appendix G: Study 4 Youtube Video Lists

Below is the list of 30 videos from 10 ex-veg\*n Youtubers, each had 3 videos sampled: the pre-announcement video, the announcement video, and the post-announcement video.

ID	Youtube Channel	Youtuber's Gender	Youtuber's Location	Num. Subscribers (k)	Quit Veg'n Announcement Video					Pre-Announcement Video					Post-Announcement Video							
					Video	Publication Date	Num. Views	Num. Comments	Thumbs Up	Thumbs Down	Video	Publication Date	Num. Views	Num. Comments	Thumbs Up	Thumbs Down	Video	Publication Date	Num. Views	Num. Comments	Thumbs Up	Thumbs Down
1	Bonny Rebecca	F	Australia	339	<a href="#">Why I'm no longer</a>	01/14/2019	1.7m	17k	44k	12k	<a href="#">VEGAN TASTE</a>	12/22/2017	93.5k	221	3.6k	72	<a href="#">WHAT I ATE TO</a>	01/25/2019	462k	4.5k	24.0k	3.7k
2	Heather Pace	F	Canada	5.4	<a href="#">Why I'm No Longer</a>	07/10/2019	100k	2.3k	2.4k	1.1k	<a href="#">Vegan Snickers</a>	07/04/2019	2.9k	18	134	1	<a href="#">How To STOP In</a>	07/16/2019	431	2	10	4
3	Brianna Jackson	F	UK	60.6	<a href="#">Why I'm No Longer</a>	01/07/2020	86k	2.5k	2.3k	2.5k	<a href="#">WHAT I EAT IN A</a>	05/05/2017	64.8k	189	1.8k	83	<a href="#">What I Eat Now</a>	01/14/2020	63.9k	992	1.9k	861
4	Living the life you	F	UK	43.8	<a href="#">Why I'm No Longer</a>	03/31/2019	54k	1.6k	1.8k	1.4k	<a href="#">20000 SUBSCR</a>	10/17/2018	1.4k	69	164	2	<a href="#">Visiting A Hot Spi</a>	04/07/2019	4.5k	140	367	16
5	Yovana Mendoza	F	US	485	<a href="#">My Current Diet</a>	12/10/2019	51k	872	1.5k	1.9k	<a href="#">ARM WORKOUT</a>	01/29/2019	13.6k	66	558	125	<a href="#">PECAN PIE BAR</a>	12/12/2019	5.3k	32	257	94
6	Victoria Rose	F	US	214	<a href="#">Why I'm no longer</a>	02/27/2018	204k	3.1k	3.7k	1.9k	<a href="#">The TRUTH Abou</a>	11/19/2017	4.5k	84	253	11	<a href="#">Hey, My name is</a>	03/11/2018	26.3k	456	1.2k	88
7	More Than Mom	F	US	16.2	<a href="#">1 YEAR VEGAN</a>	12/06/2017	511k	2.4k	6.3k	3.6k	<a href="#">WHAT I EAT AFT</a>	09/11/2017	1.9k	12	90	4	<a href="#">A MESSAGE TO</a>	12/15/2017	7.6k	206	567	41
8	Christie Swadling	F	Australia	126	<a href="#">Why I'm no longer</a>	08/21/2018	190k	1.8k	5.9k	977	<a href="#">PALEO + VEGA</a>	08/14/2018	39.9k	96	1.5k	52	<a href="#">- HOW TO LEAN</a>	08/27/2018	68.4k	148	1.7k	105
9	MontanaDanna	F	US	56.4	<a href="#">WHY I'M NO LONGER</a>	03/31/2019	21k	996	894	533	<a href="#">WHAT I ATE TO</a>	03/27/2019	3.8k	125	264	6	<a href="#">EATING MEAT F</a>	04/02/2019	23.7k	749	816	392
10	Tish Wonders	F	UK	214	<a href="#">NO LONGER EA</a>	03/17/2019	191k	2.5k	7.5k	1.1k	<a href="#">PLANT-BASED V</a>	01/07/2018	521k	583	21.2k	201	<a href="#">WHAT I ATE TO</a>	03/28/2019	41.8k	840	3.6k	121

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