Imagined Audiences, Emotions, and Feedback Expectations in Social Media Photo Sharing

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Abstract
The present research explores the effects of imagined audiences, emotions, and feedback expectations on social media photo sharing. We focus on the audience-oriented approach to sharing and on how discrepancies between expected and received feedback might shape photo sharing behaviors. Twenty-four participants were interviewed using scenario-based semi-structured interview method. The participants were asked to develop an imagined story about two fictional individuals who decided to share a photo on their social media. The story was guided by questions about the characters’ motivations and incentives to post and explored three alternative scenarios representing the reception of usual feedback, better than usual feedback, and the absence of expected feedback, respectively. The results indicate that individuals often adopt their audience’s perspective when choosing a photo to post, and consider whether the chosen image would evoke sufficient interest to induce feedback. The participants believed that emotional photos engaged their audience and motivated the viewers to provide feedback. Furthermore, the study identified and analyzed the concept of feedback expectations. When received feedback exceeded the expectations, individuals experienced happiness. However, the replication of successful content was considered appropriate only if accompanied by a suitable caption and posted after a period of time. When received feedback failed to meet their expectations, individuals felt disconnected from their audiences and experienced disappointment. They employed rationalization and feedback dismissal as coping mechanisms and displayed two common behavioral responses to unsuccessful feedback; they attempted to repost the photo avoiding previous mistakes, and they changed the style of content they posted.

Keywords
social media photo sharing, Instagram, Facebook, imagined audiences, emotions, social media feedback

Introduction
Imagine that you have just returned from an exciting and pleasant trip. Your phone memory is full of brand-new inspiring photos, and you look forward to letting the world know about your recent adventure. If you are a social media user, chances are that your profile will soon be updated with a picture that seems special to you, reflects your individual experience, and adds another piece of your digital identity into the jigsaw puzzle of your personal account. But what kind of image would that be and why would you share it? Who would you post it for? What kind of feedback would you anticipate, and how would you feel if your received feedback differed from your expectations?

The above description and questions were presented to the participants of this study during scenario-based semi-structured interviews. In the present research, we explore the role that emotions and imagined audiences might play in social media photo sharing, and how differences between anticipated and received feedback may shape the posting behaviors on Facebook and Instagram.

While there have been significant amounts of research and theorizing on self-presentation, impression management, and imagined audiences in both online and offline contexts (e.g., Goffman, 1959; Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Litt, 2012; Marwick & boyd, 2011), it is still not clear how these constructs interact in shaping online photo sharing.
behaviors. Our study investigates what roles self-presentation and imagined audiences play in posting photos online. We are interested in how these constructs influence specific elements of photo sharing, such as selecting content for a post and interpreting feedback.

In addition, while there has been research on emotions in social media, it focused mostly on specific aspects and steps of photo sharing (e.g., Chua & Chang, 2016; Malighetti et al., 2020). In contrast, our research clarifies how emotions manifest themselves throughout the whole process of posting a picture and distinguishes between the different photo sharing stages these emotions belong to.

Finally, there has been limited research on social media feedback and its behavioral and emotional consequences for users (e.g., Jackson & Luchner, 2018; Li et al., 2018). In our study, we develop a concept of feedback expectations and analyze how the discrepancies between actual and expected feedback impact actions and emotions of individuals.

To sum up, our research connects self-presentation and impression management with imagined audiences, emotions, and feedback expectations on social media and identifies specific behavioral consequences that result from the combined influences of the above constructs.

The literature review below draws on the extant studies and theories that relate to the field of social media photo sharing. First, we review self-presentation and impression management theory in the context of the present study, including the two-component model of impression management. Second, we explore how the relationships between imagined audiences, feedback, emotions, and self-presentation shape social media sharing behaviors.

The Theory of Self-Presentation and Impression Management

When a person posts a photo, they usually convey some personal information through it—for example, their individual appearance, location, and tastes. In this article, we consider social media photo sharing in the context of self-disclosure and apply impression management and self-presentation theory to understand motivations behind posting images online.

Self-disclosure encompasses a wide range of behaviors that lead to the sharing of information about oneself with others, and is often the focus of attention in social media research (Cozby, 1973; Luo & Hancock, 2020; Wheeless & Grotz, 1976). Self-presentation and impression management theory is often applied to explain behaviors related to self-disclosure, in particular our choices about what to share (or to withhold from others). The notion of impression management as one of the key drivers of human behavior comes from the field of social psychology and implies that people engage in behaviors that shape how other people see and perceive them (Goffman, 1959; Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Marder, 2012; Schlenker, 1980). Contrary to some popular beliefs, self-presentation is rarely associated with misrepresentation and manipulative and vain behaviors (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). In other words, when an individual performs impression management, they carefully consider what personal information should be made available or restricted to other people rather than present a false or untrue image of oneself to them. As such, successful self-presentation involves filtering information about oneself in such a way as to be favorably evaluated by other people, especially when aimed at less familiar audiences and in a short-term context. Impression management becomes complex and multifaceted when considered in the context of long-term relationship with close people—such a relationship would require a fine balance between accuracy and favorability. For instance, Tice et al. (1995) found that people resorted to favorable self-enhancement when presenting themselves to strangers, but were driven by modesty when managing the impressions of their friends. As a result, measured and thoughtful impression management can help individuals integrate better into society and build relationships with other people (Leary, 1996). Therefore, self-presentation plays an important role in the successful social functioning of an individual, and failure to achieve the desired impressions can lead to social anxiety and unpleasant experiences (Schlenker & Leary, 1982).

Self-presentation can involve both automated and controlled cognitive processes, which means that the actions of individuals who perform impression management are not always conscious and deliberate (Goffman, 1959; Schlenker, 2012). People can engage in self-presentation behaviors without being fully aware of doing so. Nonetheless, automated behavior does not imply the lack of intention. Behavior scripts and patterns that require low cognitive effort can be initially learned and adopted in an attempt to achieve certain goals, such as exerting control over information about oneself available to others (Bargh, 1996; Dijksterhuis & Aarts, 2010; Schlenker, 2012). As a result, a person can follow a behavior script that was originally developed as part of their self-presentation but later became an automated behavior pattern.

Interestingly, Bolino and Turnley (2003) found that men were more likely to engage in impression management behaviors than women, although the difference between the two genders was less striking when considering only positive impression management tactics. In addition, they discovered that individuals who tended to self-monitor their behavior and scored low in Machiavellianism were more likely to perform positive impression management.

Furthermore, Leary and Kowalski (1990) presented a two-component model of impression management. The first component represents the motivations for engaging in intentional self-presentation, while the second component reflects the construction of desired impressions. According to the model, individuals present themselves to others in a certain way if they have a relevant goal they want to achieve, such as
development and strengthening of social ties, or if they anticipate the reception of valuable outcomes, such as an increase in self-esteem or identity formation. Furthermore, individuals are more likely to manage the impressions of others about them, if their current image differs from their desired image. With regard to the second component, the impressions that people convey to others often stem from the self-concept of an individual, their current image, and their desired identity (e.g., who they think they are, how they think others see them now, and whom they want to be, respectively). In addition, these impressions are frequently limited by the social roles and undesired identities of individuals (e.g., who they are in relation to other people and whom they do not want to be, respectively) and adjusted to the values of those people whose opinions are important to the person performing impression management.

Self-Presentation and Impression Management on Social Media

The asynchronous nature of many contemporary social media platforms provides a wide scope for selective self-disclosure and careful self-presentation. It could be argued that individuals have better opportunities for filtering and tailoring personal information on social networking sites (SNSs) than they do in real life, which in turn leads to a more intentional impression management. Therefore, self-presentation and impression management theory has been widely applied to explain various digital behaviors. Schau and Gilly (2003) identified creation of personal websites as digital self-presentation. Similarly, Manago et al. (2008) found that individuals used MySpace to present idealized versions of themselves. Lyu (2016) discovered that social media users modify their traveling selfies in order to convey the desired impressions to their audience.

Several studies have explored how Facebook users tend to present themselves. Michikyan et al. (2014) found that individuals mostly express their real selves on Facebook, in comparison to their ideal or false selves. Vogel and Rose (2016) analyzed the existing literature on Facebook self-presentation and its psychological outcomes, and found that users mostly engage in positive impression management, but the mental consequences of such behavior depend on whether their idealized version of self is built upon their own understanding or on the opinions of others. In the former case, the outcomes of Facebook self-presentation are typically beneficial to the person performing it, while in the latter case, they are mostly harmful.

Previous research has also identified various predictors of self-presentation on Facebook. Seidman (2013) identified low conscientiousness and high neuroticism as the main drivers of Facebook self-presentation. Meh dizadeh (2010) found that narcissism and low self-esteem were associated with greater self-promotion and more deliberate impression management on Facebook. Michikyan et al. (2014) found that the presentation of one’s real self was associated with a congruent understanding of one’s own identity, while lower congruency and low self-esteem were associated with false self-presentation. Similarly, Gil-Or et al. (2015) found that low self-esteem predicts false self-presentation on Facebook. More specifically, Lee et al. (2014) found that high extraversion was associated with both Facebook photo sharing and status updates, while narcissism was only associated with Facebook status updates. Similarly, Bowden-Green et al. (2020) found that extraversion induces the overall social media use across different platforms and the creation of content on SNSs. Therefore, these studies show that while there are multiple aspects that influence user’s willingness to engage in self-presentation on social media, managing audiences’ impressions represents a common and widespread behavior on SNSs.

Furthermore, several studies recognized self-presentation, self-expression, and self-promotion as common drivers of Instagram photo sharing. Lee et al. (2015) identified five main motivations that explain user’s engagement with Instagram, according to which people choose to share and view content in order to express their thoughts and feelings, communicate with others, keep photos as memories, find distraction from reality, and watch other users. Sheldon et al. (2017) analyzed differences in Instagram use motivations between American and Croatian students and found that Croatian students were more likely to engage in Instagram activity for social purposes (e.g., interaction with other users), while American students were more interested in individualistic uses of Instagram (e.g., for self-promotion). Overall, Sheldon et al. (2017) identified five main motivations for Instagram use: self-promotion, social interaction, diversion, documentation, and creativity. Instagram users have also been found to share photos (specifically, selfies) to receive attention from other users (Sung et al., 2016), manage their impressions (Pounders et al., 2016), and thus satisfy the need for social exhibitionism (Sorokowska et al., 2016). O’Donnell (2018) found that frequent photo posting on Instagram (in particular, in Stories) predicted users’ need for visual self-expression. However, it must be noted that intended self-presentation does not always match audiences’ actual perceptions. For instance, Harris and Bardey (2019) discovered that the way observers perceived personalities of Instagram users differed from how those users thought they were presenting themselves, thus demonstrating the discrepancy between the desired and actual self-presentation. The aforementioned work demonstrates that self-presentation and self-promotion constitute one of the most common drivers of social media posting, and specifically photo sharing.

Therefore, we can conclude that users engage in impression management when they post on social media. According to self-presentation theory, users target their impression management behaviors at specific imagined audiences. It is logical to assume that this approach is valid not only for offline behaviors, but for online context as well. Hence, it is
important to investigate how social media users imagine their audiences, and how these mental images influence self-presentation on SNSs.

**Imagined Audiences on Social Media**

As mentioned earlier, people engage in self-presentation to make a specific impression on their audience (Schlenker, 2012). According to Schlenker and Leary’s (1982), this behavior results in people imagining that they are watched and evaluated by their audience, and thus it leads to individuals’ increased attention to their audience’s feedback. These expectations influence the emotional state of the person performing impression management. While their research focused on social anxiety and explained it as a consequence of perceived unfavorable reactions from an individual’s audience, we argue that this approach to examining self-presentation can be applied to other types of imagined feedback and, subsequently, other types of emotional outcomes. In order to investigate the outlined connections between the constructs, we explore how they manifest themselves in the context of social media.

Social media users often target their sharing behaviors at a specific audience. However, due to the ambiguity and difficulty of identifying actual characteristics of one’s viewers and followers, individuals often create a mental representation of their target audience (Litt, 2012; Marwick & boyd, 2011). The issue of dealing with multiple and diverse audiences on social media is known as context collapse (Marwick & boyd, 2011). Litt and Hargittai (2016) discovered that there are two ways in which users cope with large and varied audiences on social media. According to the first approach, individuals generalized their viewers into one broad imagined audience. Following the second approach, users focused on a specific subgroup of their audience and took their characteristics as the basis for their imagined target audience. Furthermore, Marder et al. (2016) conducted a survey of 379 Facebook users and discovered that they selected the subsection of viewers with both the highest value and standards combined as their target audience for self-presentation. These studies demonstrate that individuals find it difficult to identify their actual social media audiences in all their diversity and variety, and as a result, they employ the different approaches, such as choosing the strongest audience (Marder et al., 2016) to creating a specific mental image of their social media viewers.

In addition, there have been multiple attempts in social media research to classify imagined audiences on different SNSs. Brake (2012) identified five different types of relationships between a blogger and their imagined audience—narrowcast, broadcast, dialogic, telelogic, and self-directed, based on the direction of their interaction flow (e.g., one-way, two-way, and intrapersonal) and the type of intended audience (e.g., friends vs. strangers). Murumaa and Siibak (2012) conducted focus groups with high-school students asking them to draw sketches of Facebook users, and thus identified six types of imagined audiences according to the perceptions of their participants: Eager Beaver, the Show-Off, the Businessman, the Perv, the Meanie, and the Habitual User. Most of the students considered themselves belonging to the latter group. Similarly, Kim et al. (2018) compared news commenters’ perceptions of imagined audiences on Facebook and New Sites and found that, despite imagining the audiences on those platforms as dissimilar, the commenters did not identify any specific differences in the audiences’ personal characteristics (e.g., responsiveness, intelligence, aggression) or in the overall quality of comments on Facebook and News Sites. The aforementioned work demonstrates that social media users tend to identify the characteristics of their imagined and classify them into distinct groups. Consequently, these distinctive and differing sub-audiences might influence users’ online self-presentation, particularly with regard to posting images on social media.

Imagined audiences have also been found to play a role in online photo sharing. Chua and Chang (2016) conducted interviews with teenage girls and found that they engaged in careful and selective self-presentation by posting edited selfies on social media. This behavior was aimed at receiving attention and approval from their peers, measured by the numbers of likes and followers. Similarly, Yau and Reich (2018) analyzed the norms and practices of adolescents’ self-presentation on both Facebook and Instagram and found that teenagers paid particular attention to creating such posts that their imagined audience would find interesting and attractive. Zheng et al. (2019) found that imagined audiences moderate the relationship between selfie-posting and self-objectification for female adolescents, while Ranzini and Hoek (2017) report that Facebook users affected by the idea of imaginary audiences were more likely to engage in impression management, paying specific attention to their content-based self-presentation. Scolere et al. (2018) and Duffy et al. (2017) found that online content creators form certain assumptions about their imagined audiences on different social media, and that these assumptions define their platform-specific self-branding and self-presentation.

The outcomes of these studies support the link between impression management and imagined audiences. Specifically, they suggest that social media users consider the characteristics of their imagined audiences when they engage in self-presentation on social media. In addition, these considerations influence what users aim to achieve by posting photos online. In other words, users, who post for specific audiences, also expect to receive feedback from them, which is often represented in a form of likes (Chua & Chang, 2016). Therefore, it is important to understand how these feedback expectations might impact emotions and behaviors of social media users.

**Social Media Feedback and Emotions**

Therefore, we can assume that targeting imagined audiences often results in the expectations of social approval (Chua &
Chang, 2016) and the expression of interest (Yau & Reich, 2018). In turn, these expectations can be used as a benchmark to evaluate actual feedback, such as likes and comments on Instagram and Facebook. There is some evidence that the difference between expected and received feedback can evoke certain emotional responses. For instance, Li et al. (2018) discovered that teenage girls experience stress when they did not receive their expected number of likes for posted selfies. Similarly, Jackson and Luchner (2018) investigated emotional reactions of Instagram users to positive and negative feedback and found that individuals with adaptive personality experienced positive emotions after receiving positive feedback, while individuals with maladaptive personality experienced negative emotions after receiving negative feedback. Furthermore, Ozimek et al. (2020) found that difficulties in emotional regulation were associated with higher Facebook usage and moderated the relationship between unaccomplished goals and using the platform for social purposes. These findings also suggest a possibility of enhanced emotional regulation through content posting and feedback reception.

Consequently, these findings support the link between social media feedback and emotions. In particular, they show that users have certain feedback expectations for their social media posts, and that individuals experience negative emotions when these expectations are not met and positive emotions when they are exceeded.

**Emotions in Social Media Content**

There is also evidence that emotions constitute an important aspect of online content sharing. Waterloo et al. (2017) found that, overall, it is more appropriate to express positive emotions rather than negative emotions on both Facebook and Instagram, but the expression of negative emotions is more appropriate on Facebook than on Instagram. Malighetti et al. (2020) investigated how emotionality manifests itself in the photos with body image-related hashtags posted on Instagram and discovered that such photos mostly reflected happiness or neutral emotions. Similarly, Vermeulen et al. (2018) found that adolescents mostly shared positive emotions on Facebook and Instagram. These findings highlight a different emotional aspect of online photo sharing and support the idea of positive self-presentation on Facebook and Instagram.

While positive online sharing is common on social media, the sharing of negative experiences is also present, especially as a way to find social support. For example, Rashid et al. (2016) studied how Malaysian English language teachers engage on social media and found that they mostly posted about negative instances and issues with an aim to find informational and affective help and cope with unpleasant emotions.

The above work shows that apart from having affective reactions to social media feedback, emotions are also present in the posted content. Hence, it stands to reason that emotions have multiple roles in photo sharing, and that it is necessary to distinguish between various affective elements in the process of posting online.

**The Focus of the Present Research**

As the review above shows, researchers have identified that users engage in self-presentation and impression management when they post on social media. According to self-presentation theory, people target their impression management at specific audiences and adjust their presentation strategies accordingly (Tice et al., 1995). There is evidence that the same process happens on social media (Litt, 2012; Marwick & boyd, 2011), and that users consider their imagined audiences when sharing content online. While there is work on how individuals identify and classify their imagined audiences (Litt & Hargittai, 2016; Marder et al., 2016), and how imagined audiences influence self-presentation on social media (e.g., Duffy et al., 2017; Scolere et al., 2018), the link between impression management and imagined audiences in the process of photo sharing is still unclear. Consequently, our study focuses on understanding to what extent users’ self-presentation on Instagram and Facebook is shaped by their imagined audiences. Specifically, we are interested in whether users’ considerations of their imaginary viewers influence the type of content they post on social media.

Furthermore, our review identified that engaging in impression management entails the expectation of positive feedback and social approval. Evidence suggests that posting on social media results in anticipation of receiving likes (e.g., Chua & Chang, 2016), and that the discrepancy between expected and actual feedback evokes affective responses from social media users (Jackson & Luchner, 2018; Li et al., 2018). However, to our knowledge, the subjects of feedback expectations and their emotional influence on social media users have been underexplored and require more thorough and detailed investigation. Therefore, our study focuses on identifying to what extent feedback expectations are shaped by imagined audiences and self-presentation, and how the differences between expected and actual feedback impact emotional and behavioral responses of social media users.

Finally, the review above outlined the important role of emotions in social media sharing, specifically with regard to the perceived emotionality of shared content (Malighetti et al., 2020; Vermeulen et al., 2018; Waterloo et al., 2017). These findings suggest that emotions might be present in different forms and on different stages of the photo sharing process. Hence, our study aims at identifying the roles of emotions and investigates their potential connections to impression management, imagined audiences, and feedback expectations.

Drawing on self-presentation and impression management theory and the existing literature on emotions, feedback, and imagined audiences on social media, we investigate the following research questions:
**RQ1.** To what extent self-presentation and imagined audiences drive photo sharing behavior on Facebook and Instagram? What role do imagined audiences and impression management play in selecting content for social media posts?

**RQ2.** What are the different roles of emotions in the process of photo sharing? How is emotionality reflected in a posted image? What emotions result from social media feedback, and how do they affect subsequent photo sharing behaviors?

**RQ3.** Does targeting imagined audiences result in certain feedback expectations? If so, how does the discrepancy between expected and received feedback shape subsequent photo sharing?

Consequently, our research questions address three important gaps in the existing literature. First, we investigate the links between impression management and imagined audiences in photo sharing and analyze how these constructs might influence specific behaviors and practical decisions in social media posting. Second, we identify various manifestations of emotions throughout the whole photo sharing process. Third, we explore the formation of feedback expectations and investigate how self-presentation and imagined audiences might influence it. In addition, we specify how discrepancies between expected and actual feedback shape specific photo sharing behaviors.

In order to begin exploring photo sharing on social media, we developed a semi-structured scenario-based interview schedule, combining photo elicitation, narrative interviews, and fictitious scenarios, and applied it to our research. This approach allowed users to adopt an imagined persona and avoid any shyness or reserve that might accompany sharing of personal information. The method also allowed for enough distancing to induce genuine and willing self-disclosure, by reducing the perceived possibility of being judged by an interviewer. Nonetheless, while allowing for some creative freedom, the interview still revolves around participants’ own practices and experiences. In order to develop the story, the interviewees have to reflect on their own social media use and on behaviors and practices observed on SNSs. Furthermore, the creative and gamifying element of developing a story improves participants’ attention and increases their engagement with the interview process.

Following our method, we asked the participants to develop a story about a couple sharing a traveling photo on Facebook or Instagram. The study followed a semi-structured scenario-based interview schedule that was constructed based on the above-mentioned research questions. The participants were asked to choose a photo which their imaginary couple would share on Facebook or Instagram and answer questions about the photo and the overall process of posting it. Furthermore, the interviewees were offered three different feedback scenarios (i.e., expected feedback, more than expected feedback, and the absence of expected feedback) subsequently and were asked to comment on them.

Based on the impression management theory literature and the existing literature on emotions, imagined audiences, and feedback, we assumed that participants would target their fictitious posts at specific imagined audiences and choose photos that these audiences would deem interesting and engaging. We also expected that this targeting would result in an expectation of positive feedback. Finally, we anticipated that participants would associate positive emotions with expected and more than expected feedback and negative emotions with the absence of expected feedback.

### Method

**Procedure and Materials**

In order to incentivize participants to analyze their motivations and emotions in a reflective, focused, and thoughtful way and avoid superficial answers, such as “I just like pretty photos,” “I feel neutral,” and “I don’t feel anything,” the authors of the present study deployed a creative elicitation technique involving storytelling. Creative elicitation techniques are aimed at engaging research participants with scenarios, imagery, and physical artifacts to ensure their open and involved contribution to the study and facilitate their sharing of tacit and implicit information (Sutcliffe & Sawyer, 2013). Creative elicitation methods are considered to be appropriate in studying sensitive digital experiences (e.g., cybersecurity) (Coles-Kemp, 2018).

The authors of this study tailored a semi-structured scenario-based interview schedule combining photo elicitation, narrative interviews, and fictitious scenarios. Photo elicitation is successfully used in various research areas including but not limited to studying alcohol intoxication and gender using social media as a research tool, exploring tourist experiences using researcher-found photos (Matteucci, 2013), and identifying the meanings assigned to outdoor adventures (Loeffler, 2004). Tailored narrative interviews and fictitious scenarios are often employed in such sensitive research areas as healthcare and applied psychology, where it is crucial to elicit deeply personal but frequently implicit or even subconscious information. For example, the McGill Illness Narrative Interview (MINI) was specifically developed in order to capture individual experiences of patients suffering an illness and understand the impact of such experiences on other aspects of patients’ lives (Groleau et al., 2006). Daley et al. (2019) used fictitious scenarios to study how patients with heart failure process information from implanted devices and how such information affects their health-related decisions. Masip and Herrero (2013) employed a fictitious story approach in their research by asking their participants to imagine themselves either guilty or innocent in a serious crime and used questionnaires to evaluate the effectiveness of the Behaviour Analysis
Interview indicators. However, to our knowledge, photo elicitation, narrative interviews, and fictitious scenarios have not yet been applied to studying photo sharing in social media, despite their evident relevance to the respective research area. Additionally, the novelty of our method lies in the unique combination of the above techniques, which provides participants with a rounded storytelling experience, guided by fictitious narratives and relevant imagery.

Consequently, the authors of this study designed a scenario-based semi-structured interview schedule, which incorporates photo elicitation, narrative interviews, and fictitious scenarios. The idea behind the technique lies in establishing an open conversation with participants by giving them an interesting task that would stimulate their creative thinking process and allowing participants to adopt an imagined persona in order to facilitate their free expression and remove any constraints that might be caused by their self-consciousness, shyness, and their fear of self-exposure. The method uses researcher-found images and specific scenarios in order to elicit a photo sharing narrative from participants and to understand the considerations and important aspects of their decision-making process.

A semi-structured scenario-based interview schedule was designed for this purpose. All photo materials employed in the research were obtained from an open source photo repository (Unsplash, n.d.), and are available from the first author on request.

The participants were presented with a story about two fictional characters who took photos during a camping trip and decided to share some of these images on their social media. The participants were navigated through the story with the help of alternative scenarios and questions, such as what photos their selected characters would choose to share and why, and how these characters would react to different types of received feedback. All scenarios were purely hypothetical, no actual photo sharing or feedback reception took place during the interview sessions; however, while talking about their imagined actors and their decisions, the participants often referred to their personal experience in order to explain their answers and choices. This transition from the imagined persona to one’s own self represents an important aspect of the new method. Assuming a different character leads to users’ interested and engaged participation in an interview and allows for starting deep and personal conversations. However, all interviewees of this study used their own experiences to justify their story choices and often made diversions from the main narrative to relay their reflections and explain their own social media behaviors.

At the beginning of each interview, the participants were offered six photos showing people of different gender and ethnicity and had to choose two as their main actors and define the type of relationship between these characters, for example, friends versus a couple (e.g., Figure 1).

Following the choice of the story actors, the participants were told to imagine that these people went on a camping trip in the mountains. The interviewees were also provided with a photo representing a referential environment (Figure 2).

As the first step, the interviewees were asked to describe how their couple would feel in these surroundings and what emotions they would associate with it. Subsequently, the participants were provided with 28 photos and had to choose the one that their couple would share on their social media profiles after having returned home from their trip. The participants also had to explain their selection and talk to the interviewer through their decision-making process.
After the discussion of the chosen photo, the conversation moved to the sharing itself. The interviewees explored different meanings they assigned to the action of posting a photo on social media and various motivations that drove this act of sharing.

At the main stage of the interview, every participant was given three alternative feedback-related scenarios. In the first scenario (“the usual feedback”), the story characters get their usual number of likes, and possibly some positive comments from the same people as always (100 likes). In the second scenario (“the unusual positive feedback”), they get twice more likes than usual (200 likes), and in addition some positive comments and direct messages from the people who do not normally leave comments or send messages to these characters. In the third scenario (“the absence of usual feedback”), the actors get much fewer likes than normal (20 likes), and no comments and direct messages from people at all. In each situation, the interviewees had to comment on how their actors would react to the feedback and how that particular instance might influence their future sharing behaviors.

In the final part of the interview, the participants were asked to go through all 28 pictures again, comparing them to their chosen photos and explaining their selections. At the end of each interview, the participants were also asked general questions about their age, nationality, and gender and a few individual ones related to the interviewees’ ideal affect states and personalities.

Sample
Overall, 24 interviews were conducted, audio-recorded, and transcribed. The interviews lasted around 45 min on average. Interviewees were recruited through personal connections and snowballing technique. The two requirements for participation were being over 18 years old and having an active social media account on Facebook and/or Instagram.

Participants were approached and asked for a study participation individually. This selective approach allowed for a diverse sample in terms of age, gender, and nationality. The breakdown of the interviewees’ profiles is represented in Table 1. Each interview participant was given a pseudonym in order to preserve their anonymity and confidentiality.

Data Analysis
In order to analyze the data, we followed a thematic analysis approach outlined in Braun and Clarke (2006). The interviews were transcribed and stripped of all the elements identifying the participants: 17 interviews were conducted in English language, while 7 interviews were conducted in Russian language. Russian interviews were translated into English by the first author.

Following the transcription and translation stages, the interviews were analyzed using an open coding line-by-line technique (Goulding, 2002; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) in the NVivo 12 software (QSR International, 2018), resulting in over 510 initial codes. The codes are identified as “‘the most basic segment, or element, of the raw data or information that can be assessed in a meaningful way regarding the phenomenon’” (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 63) and subsequently used to construct the themes which serve as the main units of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The saturation point was initially reached at around 20 interviews, as the interviewer stopped receiving new pieces of information from the interviewees. The saturation point was further validated during the data analysis stage based on Urquhart’s (2013) definition of it as the inability to produce new codes during the data analysis. The new codes diminished significantly around the 20th interview. During the analysis of the 24-hr interviews, no new codes were identified.

Hence, the most elementary data categories (i.e., codes) were identified, revised, and combined into six major themes consisting of relevant subthemes and representative of different aspects that influence photo sharing behaviors in social media. After the authors reviewed and examined the initially identified themes, they were further assessed against four core constructs explored in the present study: impression management, emotions, imagined audiences, and

Figure 2. Example photo of the place in the story.
feedback expectations. The themes were reanalyzed and rearranged one more time in order to identify their areas of overlap and to explore their influence on photo sharing behaviors on Facebook and Instagram. The resulting main themes and subthemes of the study are presented in Table 2, together with their relevant constructs.

Findings

Adopting Audience’s Perspective for Successful Self-Presentation

Positive Feedback as Successful Self-Presentation. The study found that the participants were driven by impression management when they posted images on social media, with positive feedback being an important indicator of successful self-presentation. The interviewees of the study acknowledged that they presented the best aspects of their lives in their posts:

Yes, there is a bit of fakeness in your Instagram identity . . . no, it is not fakeness, you just show your best side, your best angle, best clothes, best and strongest emotions, and the most beautiful places you go to. (Diana)

The quotes above were made by the participants during their diversions from the main narrative. When asked why their characters would post a photo on social media, the interviewees often mentioned self-presentation and deliberated on its authenticity. In order to explain why they assigned certain behaviors to their couple, the participants would frequently resort to their own experiences and knowledge of social media. As such, Diana’s and George’s quotes represent their personal reflections on social media photo sharing.

It must also be noted that the choice of language (e.g., using “you” instead of “I”) represents the effectiveness of our method. The distancing initiated through the adoption of imaginary persona often transitioned into generalization that allowed the participants to draw on their experience and voice their opinions without feeling vulnerable or judged. To put it simply, the participants were more likely to state something controversial and provoking, if they were talking generally and in the second person, instead of talking about themselves in the first person.

Furthermore, the received feedback serves as an important tangible indicator of self-presentation success, and the participants displayed a tendency to deliberately seek it out in their posts:

It is a universal question: why was Instagram invented? To brag to other people, and not just to your friends, but actually you want everyone to see it or have the opportunity to see it. Let’s assume, their Instagram profile is public, and it has not got a restricted access, so that others can see it, not just their closest people. You wouldn’t really send this photo to your good friends and some acquaintances, but then here it is in your feed, and it is just like showing off: ‘look at it and like it, likes are the currency of estimation, and this estimation is important to me.’ (Sofia)

The quote above shows Sofia’s general deliberations on receiving feedback on social media and the meaning of likes. As a result of such considerations, the interviewees paid special attention to receiving likes and positive comments, interpreting them as tokens of appreciation and signals of social recognition:

When people see photos, they give appreciation, or comment on it, or something. They like the photo, and [it gives you] that sort of enjoyment and recognition. (Afzal)

The significance of positive feedback frequently led the participants to take the perspective of their audience when

| Table 1. Participants Profiles. |
|--------------------------------|
| Pseudonyms | Age | Gender | Nationality | Social media               |
|------------|-----|--------|-------------|-----------------------------|
| Katya      | 18  | Female | Belarusian | Instagram                  |
| Sofia      | 22  | Female | Belarusian | Instagram                  |
| Julia      | 24  | Female | Belarusian | Instagram, Facebook        |
| Olivia     | 25  | Female | American   | Instagram, Facebook        |
| Cariya     | 27  | Female | Turkish    | Instagram                  |
| Amelia     | 25  | Female | British    | Instagram, Facebook        |
| Vera       | 24  | Female | Belarusian | Instagram                  |
| Egor       | 23  | Male   | Belarusian | Instagram                  |
| Afzal      | 27  | Male   | Pakistani  | Instagram                  |
| Diana      | 41  | Female | Swiss       | Instagram, Facebook        |
| Laura      | 22  | Male   | British    | Instagram                  |
| George     | 24  | Male   | British    | Instagram, Facebook        |
| James      | 22  | Male   | British    | Instagram                  |
| Marwan     | 31  | Male   | British/   | Instagram, Facebook        |
|            |     |        | Libyan      |                             |
| Thomas     | 39  | Male   | British    | Facebook                   |
| Kai        | 24  | Male   | Chinese    | Facebook                   |
| Arina      | 24  | Female | Belarusian | Instagram                  |
| Nikos      | 26  | Male   | Greek      | Instagram, Facebook        |
| Klara      | 30  | Female | German     | Instagram                  |
| Chunhua    | 24  | Female | Chinese    | Instagram                  |
| Audrey     | 36  | Female | British    | Facebook                   |
| Tingting   | 29  | Female | Chinese    | Instagram                  |
| Yang       | 28  | Male   | Chinese    | Facebook, WeChat           |

I think everyone’s got a desire to feel special and to be what people aspire to be. If you upload a photo that you think is really good, like “Wow this is a really nice photo, I look really cool in this, it’s a very cool location, look at this backdrop, this is amazing,” and then no one even acknowledges it really . . . You want that approval, you want people to think “wow, yeah,” and you want to know that people are saying and thinking that, and that is what likes do for you. (George)
deciding on which photo to share. The interviewees assigned great importance to receiving likes and feedback and made a deliberate attempt to see and interpret their preferred photos from the viewpoint of their audience. This behavior was aimed at tailoring content to the tastes and interests of one’s viewers and accompanied by a clear expectation of receiving positive feedback as a compensation for the effort invested.

**Attracting Feedback by Provoking Questions.** In practice, the selection of the right photos was often based on the simple mechanism of choosing images that would evoke the imagined audience’s interest. According to the participants, the more questions you ask about the post, the more attention it would receive:

[The post] opens itself up to questions: where are they, what have they been doing, is this safe, how do you get there, is this the kind of place where you have 50 people just out of shot and you had to crop it like that or is this genuinely “wilderness” kind of place. (Thomas)

The quote above reflects the mental exertions and the amount of effort the participants put into considering the photos from their audience’s perspective. This is consistent with the theory of self-presentation, according to which individuals carefully consider what information they want to convey to other people. Respectively, the more time the interviewees spent deliberating on the content, the higher was their expectation and anticipation of positive feedback:

If they are boasting to impress someone, they want to see what he or she would say or how they would react or anything. (Marwan)

Therefore, it stands to reason that receiving positive feedback constitutes an important part of social media photo sharing, especially when it is driven by impression management. Accordingly, the participants of the study paid great attention to sharing photos that their target audience would deem intriguing and interesting. As such, they often contemplated what affective reactions their chosen photos would evoke.

**Conveying Emotions to Attract Feedback**

**Attracting Feedback by Conveying Excitement.** The previous section established that individuals engaged in impression management and self-presentation through photo sharing on

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**Table 2. Themes and Subthemes of the Study, Together With Their Relevant Constructs.**

| Theme | Sub-theme | Constructs |
|-------|-----------|------------|
| Adopting audience’s perspective for successful self-presentation | Positive feedback as successful self-presentation | Self-presentation, Imagined audiences, Feedback expectations |
| Conveying emotions to attract feedback | Attracting feedback by provoking questions | Imagined audiences, Feedback expectations, Emotions, Feedback expectations |
| | Attracting feedback by conveying excitement | Feedback expectations, Emotions | |
| | Avoiding emotionally neutral photos | Feedback expectations, Emotions | |
| Reacting to the unforeseen positive feedback | Happiness from more than expected feedback | Feedback expectations, Emotions | |
| | Selective replication of successful posts | Self-presentation, Feedback expectations, Emotions | |
| Reacting to the absence of expected feedback | Disappointing disconnection from the audience | Self-presentation, Imagined audiences, Feedback expectations, Emotions | |
| | Rationalization and feedback dismissal | Feedback expectations, Self-presentation, Emotions, Imagined audiences | |
| | Replicating the post to avoid previous mistakes | Feedback expectations, Self-presentation, Imagined audience | |
| Changing the style of content | Self-presentation, Imagined audience, Feedback expectations | |
social media, the ultimate goal of which was the reception of expected feedback. In order to receive such feedback, it was crucial for the interviewees to draw the attention of the followers and evoke their interest. Hence, when deciding on what photo to post, the participants often considered whether their imaginary audience would be able to perceive the same emotions and connect with the image in a meaningful way.

The participants of this study indicated that positive high-arousal emotions, such as excitement, were easily perceived through imagery and could be effectively translated between the sharer and the receivers of the photo. The interviewees believed that this connection triggered the interest of the target audience and resulted in receiving positive feedback, thus achieving the participants’ self-presentation goals:

*It looks dangerous, and it looks exciting, and it looks fun, you know, not everyone would do it, only a few people would, and that is why it would probably get a lot more likes as well.* (Harry)

To put it simply, if a person wants to connect to their audience and impress their followers, they will choose a photo that can convey certain emotions to the audience and will not lose its meaning during the transaction. If the conversion of emotions is successful, the audience can participate in the sharer’s open memory and hence will send direct and indirect communication tokens through likes, comments, and messages:

*This one would receive quite a few likes, because it is a rather dangerous photo, and many people would comment on that, because not everyone would dare to do so because of the height, and it is like the most common fear, one of the main phobias.* (Katya)

Furthermore, the interviewees assigned value to the fact that such photos were perceived as unusual and uncommon by their imagined audiences. There is a strong element of originality, creativity, and irreproducibility in these photos which was supposed to impress the audience and stimulate their feedback provision (Figure 3).

**Avoiding Emotionally Neutral Photos.** Similarly, the participants displayed a tendency to avoid emotionally neutral photos, as they believed that such images would result in a disconnection from their imagined audience, and therefore, would receive fewer likes and comments than emotionally charged photos:

*I think the guy would not post this photo, he is very contemplative and strange here, probably he just did not sleep well, it is not a particularly merry photo, and he does not look like he is well there. I think he had not slept well and was saying something like “do not take pictures of me please.”* (Diana)

This finding is consistent with the concept of emotional contagion, which states that a person can perceive, interpret, and become “infected” with emotions conveyed through the facial expressions of their communication partner (Wild et al., 2001). Posting a photo with a neutral expression would not activate any emotional contagion, and therefore, the viewers of the image would be more likely to skip it and not provide any feedback (Figure 4). This finding also highlights...
the importance of emotionality in photos as a tool for achieving more feedback.

Nonetheless, emotions represent a complex and multifaceted element of social media photo sharing. While emotionality of photos plays an important role in attracting feedback from the audience, emotions are also associated with feedback reception. The participants of this study entered certain affect states on seeing how many likes and comments they have received for their fictional post. Consequently, these affect states influenced subsequent sharing behaviors. The identified emotional and behavioral responses to the unforeseen positive feedback and the absence of expected feedback are reported below.

Reacting to the Unforeseen Positive Feedback

Happiness From More Than Expected Feedback. The interviewees targeted their characters’ posts at specific imagined audiences, and, as a result, they expected certain feedback from these imaginary viewers. At this point, the participants were presented with two different feedback scenarios consecutively: the unforeseen positive feedback (or better than expected feedback) and the absence of expected feedback (or worse than expected feedback).

In the first case, when a person received more likes and comments than they initially anticipated, they felt happy and excited. The reason for this reaction lay in the perceived success of the sharer’s impression management; for example, the more likes and comments were received, the more imaginary viewers were impressed with the post, thus adding to the perceived popularity and good reputation of the sharer:

They would think that it was very cool that this photo had received this feedback and people liked it. If it were as usual, they wouldn’t be surprised, but as it caused some strong reaction, they would be happy and glad. (Vera)

Interestingly, the participants experienced happiness only when actual feedback exceeded expected feedback. This finding demonstrates an interesting implication for self-presentation theory. It is logical to assume that receiving expected feedback is a sufficient signal of achieving a desired impression; and yet, the participants indicated a strong positive response to feedback only if it exceeded the anticipated number of likes and comments:

They would think that it is actually not a lot, they put so much effort into taking this picture, and now they only have their standard 100 likes. Hence, they would think they should wait longer. (Sofia)

Drawing on self-presentation theory, it stands to reason that social media users should try and replicate their successful posts in future, to achieve the same positive impression. However, according to the participants of this study, the actual social media behavior is more complicated and less one-dimensional. Particularly, the interviewees considered posting similar content only after a lapse of time and in appropriate circumstances. The reasons for this decision are explained below.

Selective Replication of Successful Posts. As stated above, the unforeseen positive feedback does not always lead to the replication of successful content. Social media users place a lot of emphasis on keeping their imagined audiences interested. The participants of the present study often indicated that they would share a different type of photo next time and would only attempt to post similar content after a certain amount of time has passed. The interviewees also noted that they would add an appropriate caption in order not to appear boring or attention-seeking:

They won’t do it straight after, they will probably do it a month later. When they get busy with their lives, they might post something like “take me back” or “throwback Thursday,” this type of thing, so they would do it as a happy memory, in a funny way, like they want to go back or they just celebrate it, but they wouldn’t do it like two or three days in a row, or two weeks in a row. (Marwan)

Hence, it can be concluded that the social media users in this study would only try to replicate their previous success after an extended passage of time, when the replication
attempt would be less obvious. In addition, they would employ captions to change the overall tone of the post. According to the participants of this study, if a user posted a photo similar to the one that had attracted more than expected feedback, it might be seen as feedback chasing. This behavior was not considered appropriate by the interviewees, as they thought it made the sharer look attention-seeking. However, by withholding the replication for a period of time and adding an appropriate caption to a post, the participants thought that they could change the perceived intention of the post to nostalgic self-oriented sharing. This type of posting was considered more suitable for successful self-presentation.

Furthermore, participants’ responses suggested that there was an element of the fear of failure. Once the post has done well in terms of receiving feedback, the expectation for this type of content was high and involved more emotional investments. According to the quote below, posting a similar photo and receiving fewer likes and comments could diminish the value of the original photo, as it would not be perceived as popular anymore. In other words, it would seem like the first instance of unusually positive feedback was just a coincidence, and there was nothing outstanding about the original photo. Therefore, some interviewees preferred not to attempt the replication at all, probably due to the apprehension of not being able to achieve the same result:

Let’s say, sometimes there is one certain photo in the profile where everything is great, all is good with it, and it receives the highest number of likes in the profile, and it is your best photo. In this case, you wouldn’t really want something else to outshine it, and I don’t know how you can simply control it, but there are situations like that, and that is why I don’t think there would be any aspiration to do better than the last time. (Egor)

Overall, the participants of this study often identified with their characters in the feedback reception scenarios. As a result, they experienced happiness after receiving more feedback than expected. However, they did not consider immediate replication of successful content. The participants stated that they would only post a similar photo after a certain passage of time. In addition, they would add an appropriate caption to it, as they wanted to avoid being perceived as attention-seeking.

Rationalization and Feedback Dismissal

The participants of this study often responded to “the absence of expected feedback” scenario with a detailed analysis of possible reasons for the failure of the post. This desire to understand why the photo did not succeed in yielding feedback led to what some interviewees called “rationalisation” and “hunting for excuses.” Specifically, this process included listing various external (i.e., not content-related) explanations for not receiving the expected numbers of likes and comments:

Let’s hypothetically say, they are talking about it [the absence of feedback]. They might check the privacy settings. Did they put it on private or friends only by mistake instead of public? They might discuss whether there is a big football game going on that might distract people from looking at their photo, or maybe they are in a different time zone—things like that, to justify the situation as a first step. (Laura)

As seen from the quote above, the primary reason for feeling sad and disappointed was the failure to get the expected attention. In other words, the participants often perceived that they failed to connect to their imagined audience. The interviewees felt dissatisfied not simply because they did not get personal gratification and appreciation from feedback, but also because they felt misunderstood and isolated in their tastes, preferences, and even experiences:

The audience considered it to be a common photo. It could have meant nothing for them, because for them it is just a photo, whilst for the couple this photo is associated with some significant moment. In other words, the couple has a story behind this photo, but people on the other side of the screen, they don’t know this story, and that is why they wouldn’t experience the same emotions that the couple had, so it would be a disappointment for the couple. (Katya)

They would just think maybe the picture wasn’t that good or people were not interested. (Afzal)

They liked this photo, and they got very upset that only a few people understood them. (Arina)

Furthermore, the participants also indicated that they employ two distinctive coping mechanisms to deal with negative emotions arising from the absence of expected feedback—rationalization and feedback dismissal.

Reacting to the Absence of Expected Feedback

Disappointing Disconnection From the Audience

The absence of expected feedback elicited a complex reaction from the social media users in this study. The affective response would usually involve either sadness or disappointment or even both:
considered as a first step to tackling the unsuccessful sharing instance. Furthermore, it was much less common for the interviewees to consider potential flaws of the photo. Once the photo was chosen, the participants remained relatively adamant about the overall quality of the image:

Maybe they would try to explain the situation because they could have posted it at the wrong time when no one is on Instagram, and the photo just got lost among other content, and no one saw it, although this photo is very cool and very cheerful and positive. (Arina)

Therefore, the interviewees often employed rationalization to cope with disappointment and sadness. However, if this approach did not work, the participants frequently resorted to feedback denial as a psychological method of dealing with negative emotions arising due to the unsuccessful sharing instance:

Speaking of these 20 likes, well, they personally do like the photo, so who cares if others don’t? This would be the message of this post then. (Diana)

Interestingly, those interviewees who had been originally concerned with the outcome of posting a photo, shifted their perspective completely from audience-oriented to self-oriented. They argued that they were sharing the photos only for themselves and not for any audiences. This could be interpreted as a defensive mechanism that helped them deal with negative emotions.

The aforementioned change in the perception of one’s own sharing motivations might eventually result in the disconnection from one’s audience and lead to a total alteration of posting habits. The sharer might start focusing more on their own experiences and less on the ways to impress and communicate with their imagined audience. The ensuing separation between the followers and the poster is likely to shape sharing behaviors that are primarily driven by intrinsic self-oriented inspirations and individual aesthetic preferences. Nonetheless, feedback dismissal represented a rather extreme approach, and the participants resorted to it only after all other methods of explaining and improving feedback failed.

**Replicating the Post to Avoid Previous Mistakes**

The absence of expected feedback is not easily accepted by posters, and therefore, it is not surprising that the social media users in this study considering putting an extra effort into avoiding similar situations in future. The participants’ two most common behavioral responses to unsuccessful sharing were re-sharing the photo and changing the style of content.

As outlined in the previous section, the interviewees were searching for any potential explanations for the absence of expected feedback. Once they identified the potential issues with the post, they attempted to fix them. For instance, posting at a wrong time was a recurrent theme in the process of rationalization, and the participants often mentioned re-sharing the photo at a different time to see whether it would receive more feedback:

Maybe some people do so [delete the unsuccessful photo] because they would post it again after some time, for example, they would share it in the afternoon, when initially they posted it either in the early morning, or in the late evening, when not so many people in their audience browse Instagram, so they would either change the time of posting, or edit the photo somehow, but anyway they could take it down and then share it again after a little bit of editing, and then they would expect their usual number of likes. (Katya)

While the interviewees rarely changed their original opinion of the chosen photo, they still considered editing it to attract more likes when sharing it for the second time. This finding is consistent with the self-presentation theory, as it demonstrates that the participants of this study posted photos to receive positive feedback and social approval, even when doing so meant to contradict personal preferences and tastes.

**Changing the Style of Content**

If similar content was shared several times and did not receive the expected numbers of both likes and comments, individuals displayed a tendency to completely change the style of the images they posted. For instance, if someone was posting close-up portraits and they did not attract the desired feedback, this person could decide to start posting landscapes and sceneries instead:

I think, maybe, [she would feel] upset. If she shared it several times and got the same results, she would give up sharing pictures like this on Instagram or would swap to other styles of photos. (Tingting)

Therefore, it can be concluded that there are two common behaviors that the social media users in this study employ to deal with the absence of expected feedback. First, they identify the problems with the failed post and then re-share it avoiding their previous mistakes. If this approach does not work, they are likely to abandon this style of content and start posting other types of images. Likewise, if they posted a similar picture and it also did not prove successful in yielding desired feedback, individuals were likely to shift to other posting styles in future, thus avoiding the type of content that continuously failed to attract likes and comments.

**Discussion**

The results of the present study contribute to the understanding of the formation, alteration, and adoption of social media photo sharing behaviors. Specifically, the article explores the
role of imagined audiences, emotions, and feedback expectations in social media photo sharing and identifies how these aspects relate to impression management and self-presentation in social media.

The participants in our study indicated that posting on social media often involved careful selection of information available to their viewers. The social media users in this study often chose to share images that displayed the best and most attractive aspects of their characters’ lives. This process of cautious and deliberate sharing reflects the core tenets of impression management as outlined by Goffman (1959), Leary and Kowalski (1990), and Schlenker (1980) and is consistent with previous social media studies on self-presentation (e.g., Lyu, 2016; Manago et al., 2008; Vogel & Rose, 2016).

Leary (1996) and Leary and Kowalski (1990) identified that self-presentation is often aimed at social integration and relationship building, and therefore, targeted at certain audiences. The social media users in the study indicated that they shared photos to impress specific imagined audiences, and in order to succeed, they often took on the perspective of their target viewers. In other words, individuals considered how their potential post would be seen by their intended audience, and whether it would trigger any feedback from it.

With regard to emotions, they played two distinctive roles in the process of photo sharing. First, emotions were often employed as a tool to positively engage with the imagined audience and thus attract likes and comments. Second, the participants demonstrated a variety of affective responses to the unforeseen positive feedback and the absence of expected feedback. In agreement with the self-presentation theory (Goffman, 1959), the interviewees experienced strong positive emotions after receiving more likes than expected and negative emotions after not receiving anticipated feedback (Schlenker & Leary, 1982).

Contrary to the ideas of self-presentation and impression management theory (Goffman, 1959), the study found that users tended to replicate successful posts only under a very limited set of circumstances, such as after a long period of time and with appropriate captions. This result raises questions about the practical differences between impression management behaviors online and offline. This variation of self-presentation might be due to the permanent and more visible nature of self-disclosure online; for example, the replication of successful behavior might seem less obvious and attention-seeking to other people than it does in social media where all posts are documented and remain accessible for an indefinite period of time. Another explanation of this phenomenon might lie in the overarching social media culture of perpetual novelty. Considering the large amounts of content constantly shared on social media, it is possible that users might feel pressured into creating evermore original posts. These deliberations provide an interesting area for future investigation, which could analyze how social media culture influences self-presentation and behavioral responses to positive feedback.

Alternatively, behavioral responses to the absence of expected feedback fully supported the ideas of impression management theory (Schlenker, 2012). The decision to re-share and even edit the unsuccessful photo highlights the need for positive feedback and social approval, which are essential components of successful self-presentation. Similarly, the decision to change the style of content could be driven by the desire to post only those photos that were positively assessed by the imagined audience. This specific behavior can also be linked to the desire for social recognition, and thus constitutes impression management. In addition, changing the style of content after the absence of expected feedback might become a standard social media behavior script for some users, which in turn supports the concept of automated self-presentation (Bargh, 1996; Dijksterhuis & Aarts, 2010; Schlenker, 2012). To put it simply, users might start switching content every time they do not receive expected feedback, and if so, this behavior might eventually become automated. This means that individuals would start responding with content change to any underwhelming feedback, and that these responses would be done in a subconscious, almost thoughtless way. At some point, users might stop considering why they are changing the content in the first place, but will keep doing so anyway because this behavior has already become an automated script for them.

Furthermore, the participants employed two mechanisms to cope with negative emotions arising from the absence of expected feedback. First, they turned to rationalization, and when that approach did not work, they resorted to feedback dismissal. The latter mechanism has an interesting implication for impression management and imagined audiences. Individuals who accepted the absence of expected feedback as the lack of appreciation from the viewers tended to disconnect completely from their imagined audiences. These participants would stop considering their viewers and followers when choosing photos for future posts, thus abandoning deliberate self-presentation and resorting to self-oriented sharing.

The findings of the study also have implications for social media practitioners. For instance, social media marketers could adopt emotionally charged photographic content (e.g., facial expressions) to receive more feedback and engagement for their posts. More broadly, the approach of taking an audience’s perspective could prove effective in designing relatable and relevant digital advertising campaigns. In other words, social media practitioners should attempt to put themselves in the place of their viewers and consider what engagement points they could offer to their target audience. Furthermore, understanding how users respond emotionally to feedback, and how these affective responses impact their subsequent behaviors, could be useful for improving social media platforms and enhancing user experience on SNSs. In addition, the knowledge of how social media users interact with their audiences and react to different types of feedback
is critical for the continuous improvement and evolution of SNSs and their affordances. Thus, the results of the present study can be successfully used in social media marketing and SNSs design.

Overall, the study defined the role of emotions in the process of photo sharing and identified how self-presentation and impression management shape feedback expectations, which in turn influence posting behaviors on social media. The findings of the article contribute to the academic knowledge of online behavior, digital psychology, and e-marketing, and can be practically applied to the fields of social media marketing and user experience research.

**Limitations and Future Research**

The main limitation of this study lies in its exploratory character and the application of novel creative elicitation technique based on semi-structured scenario-based interviews. While such an approach allows for overcoming participants’ reluctance to reflect and share personal information and makes it possible to obtain unpredicted and counterintuitive data, it does not provide a procedure for detailed examination of such data. At this stage, it is challenging to identify which answers reflected honest considerations of the participants and which were influenced by social desirability and looking for social approval from the interviewer and potential readers. As a result, the implications of this study should be interpreted with caution, and the possibility of overly positive answers should be taken into account. In addition, most of the themes and topics arose naturally during the course of each interview, which means that the information provided might be situational and incomplete and requires further analysis. In other words, this exploratory study provides new interesting leads which need to be scrutinized using more targeted methods.

It must also be noted that when participants reacted to decision-making situations in fictitious scenarios (e.g., the unforeseen positive feedback and the absence of expected feedback), they usually spoke in the third person. However, they also displayed the signs of identification with their characters and supported their responses with personal examples, experiences, and observations. Therefore, it is important to understand that when the participants of this study spoke for their imaginary characters, they frequently conveyed their own opinions, and the decisions they assigned to their characters were often based on their own social media behavior. Most of the participants demonstrated a conscious understanding of this identification process and openly admitted that by explaining their characters’ behaviors and feelings they referred to their own experiences and emotions. In addition, the participants often used the first person when they were telling something positive about themselves and the second person when they were making controversial statements. These implications display the flexibility of our method. While this distinction between three different types of reflection might make data analysis more challenging, as researchers would need to distinguish between purely fictional data and the data provided through character identification, it could be especially effective when dealing with sensitive topics. The ability to easily switch between the first, second, and third person gives a significant amount of control to participants, allowing them to make sensitive disclosures on their own terms. Therefore, our method represents a promising data collection technique, which, however, should be tested further through future applications of the method.

The study opens an opportunity for further research in the area of social media photo sharing using both quantitative and qualitative methods. For example, future studies could examine how diverse types of imagined audiences define specific feedback expectations and influence photo choices. Detailed research can be conducted into how the discrepancies between expected and received feedback impact various aspects of photo sharing behaviors (e.g., posting frequency, photo type choice, image and profile aesthetics, time and day of sharing, and caption).

**Conclusion**

The study found that the participants were often driven by impression management and self-presentation, and as a result, they took on their imagined audience’s perspective when sharing photos on social media, deliberately choosing images that would elicit their followers’ interest. Sharers often selected emotionally charged photos, expecting their audience to have affective responses to such images and become engaged with the post in a more personal way. This intentional use of emotional photos reflects a targeted technique of attracting more feedback that was commonly applied by the participants of the study.

Furthermore, we identified the concept of feedback expectations, and analyzed how the discrepancy between received and expected feedback influenced participants’ photo sharing behaviors. When received feedback was better than expected, people felt happy and excited, but these positive emotions did not usually lead to the replication of successful content. The replication usually happened only under specific circumstances, such as posting a similar photo after a passage of time and using appropriate caption to accompany it. With regard to the absence of expected feedback, the participants often resorted to rationalization and feedback dismissal to cope with disappointment and sadness which arose due to the perceived disconnection from the imagined audience. The behavioral responses to less than expected feedback included re-sharing the photo while avoiding previously identified mistakes (e.g., wrong timing), and changing the type of content completely (e.g., posting landscapes instead of portraits).

The results of the study contribute to our understanding of self-presentation and impression management on SNSs and
clarify the roles of emotions, imagined audiences, and feedback expectations in the process of social media photo sharing.

**Author Contributions**

K.S. drafted the manuscript, designed the study, conducted and transcribed interviews, translated Russian interviews into English, and analyzed the results. K.S., A.J., L.P., and L.S. contributed to the conceptual development of the study and the novel creative storytelling method employed in it, and to the later versions and editing of the manuscript.

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**Open Science Statement**

All materials used for this work are available on request from the corresponding author of the study (Kseniya Stsiampkouskaya).

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**Data Availability**

All materials employed in the study are available on request from the first author.

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