The Frontstage Never Ends: Affective Self-Revisitation on Instagram as Recursive Impression Management among Dutch Young Adults

Aaron de Bruijn[1*], Kelsey Alspeer[2]

[1]MSc Sociology, [2]Msc Sociology

[*]Corresponding author. Email: aaron.de.bruijn@student.uva.nl

Abstract

Happiness in contemporary Western societies has increasingly become a cultural imperative, shaping how individuals display and manage emotion on social media. While prior research has examined how users curate positive self-presentations, little is known about how people later return to these curated memories or how such revisitations shape emotional experience and possibly self-understanding. This study addresses this gap by naming and examining affective self-revisitation (ASR): the practice of revisiting one's own previously posted Instagram content, whether intentionally or not, in ways that become emotionally or narratively meaningful. Based on four semi-structured interviews with Dutch young adults, analysed through thematic coding, we show that ASR is rarely a conscious mood-regulation strategy. Instead, it emerges as an incidental, emotionally ambivalent, and temporally layered encounter with a previously performed self. Participants' revisitations were shaped by platform-specific feeling rules through which a platform-specific positivity norm, rooted in broader cultural happiness imperatives, gets enacted, resulting in memory archives that are selectively filtered before they are revisited. We argue that ASR constitutes a form of narrative identity work structured by emotional norms, revealing how digital platforms mediate not only the presentation of the self but also the ways individuals return to and reinterpret their past. The study opens pathways for future research into the emotional and temporal dynamics of digital memory.

Keywords

digital memory, self-presentation, social media practices, Instagram, happiness, affective self-revisitation

Introduction

Various scholars have argued that in contemporary Western societies, happiness has shifted from an inner feeling to an imperative. Individuals are expected to be happy and to perform happiness and positivity as evidence of living the 'good life' (Ahmed, 2010; Bruckner, 2011; Rose, 1998). Earlier exploratory work by one of the authors of this project raised a conceptual question on how individuals not only present happiness to others but also become audiences of their own emotional performances on social media. Noting the relative under-

theorisation in sociology of how people engage with their own posted memories, this study seeks to address this literature gap.

Previous research suggests that social media revisitation can 'feel good' to users (Jungselius & Weilenmann, 2023), though this has rarely been examined beyond psychological perspectives on mood repair. We identify a sociological gap in understanding how revisiting one's own digital content, which we propose to term 'affective self-revisitation' (ASR), operates within broader cultural norms of positivity (Ahmed, 2010), dramaturgical self-presentation (Goffman, 1956/2022), the positivity bias on social media (Lin & Utz, 2015; Thelwall et al., 2009; Bazarova, 2012; Schreurs & Vandenbosch, 2020), and platformed memory (Van Dijck, 2010; West, 2012). Does looking back at past social media posts make people feel better when they feel down, or does it evoke other, unexpected emotional experiences? And assuming that Instagram posts are curated under a positivity bias, what effects does revisiting these memories have on self-understanding and identity?

These questions formed the foundation of this current project, leading to our central research question: *How do Dutch young adults revisit past Instagram posts, and how does this practice relate to emotional experience and self-understanding within the context of the platform's positivity norm?*

In this study, we explore ASR not merely as an individual emotional regulation strategy, but as a socially situated practice shaped by feeling rules (Hochschild, 1983), the cultural happiness imperative (Ahmed, 2010), and Instagram's platform environment. Our objective is to analyse how emotional experience and identity are co-constructed through the revisitation of curated digital memories, and to examine the implications this has for emotion and self-understanding within a positivity-oriented digital culture. To address these aims, we conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with Dutch young adults, arguably among the most active social media and Instagram users (CBS, 2023, p. 50; Afix & Van Tiel, 2025) and prone to share mostly positive content (Bailey et al., 2020). We asked them to reflect on their Instagram posting and revisitation practices, emotional experiences, and identity, and situated their individual narratives within broader cultural and platform logics of positivity, self-presentation, and memory.

This topic is relevant to sociology because it shows how the affective self is shaped by cultural norms surrounding happiness, which extend into the digital platforms that mediate and discipline emotion and memory. We show how positivity norms structure not only what is performed to others, but also what is available for self-reflection and self-understanding. Our contribution is thus twofold. Empirically, we provide insight into how Dutch young adults engage in ASR as an everyday emotional and identity practice. Theoretically, we attempt to extend dramaturgical and emotion sociology by showing how impression management can stretch across time, and how digital memory practices are shaped by positivity norms. Our findings provide insight into the layered affective dynamics of a culture where happiness is expected both in public display and in private self-consumption.

Theoretical Framework

This section begins by examining happiness as a social imperative, followed by an exploration of the positivity norm on Instagram and its influence on digital memory practices. Together, these perspectives provide the conceptual foundation for proposing ASR.

Social expectation of happiness

Against the backdrop of rapid developments in technology and media, and with the expansion of self-improvement tools to videos, smartphone apps, and personal development courses (Hyman, 2014, pp. 3, 20), contemporary Western societies are characterised by a deepening focus on the self and inner emotional life. This is accompanied by an increasing influence of psychology (Wright, 2008, p. 321) and a widespread preoccupation with happiness and well-being (Hyman, 2020), which together suggests a social expectation that individuals actively pursue and optimise their happiness.

Various scholars (e.g. Bruckner, 2011; Ahmed, 2010) argue that we operate under an imperative to be or appear happy. We would perform happiness to meet this pervasive cultural expectation, transforming happiness from a private feeling into a personal duty (Bruckner, 2011). Nikolas Rose (1998, p. 157) observed that individuals are urged to treat life as a personal project by shaping emotions, relationships, work, and sexuality to create a lifestyle aimed at self-worth, happiness and fulfilment. In *The Promise of Happiness*, Sara Ahmed (2010) describes the pervasive social expectation that participating in what society deems 'good' will make us happy, and that by being or at least performing happiness, we will also please others. She notes that people often 'pass as happy', performing happiness to maintain social harmony (p. 59). Negative emotions, by contrast, tend to be treated as deviant, disruptive (Ahmed, 2010), undesirable, or are even medicalised (Dworkin, 2001).

Although 'positive' and 'negative' emotions are multifaceted and complex concepts both in sociology and psychology, it is often affective experiences such as amusement, awe, compassion, contentment, enthusiasm, love, and pride that are included as positive and happy experiences (Keltner & Cowen, 2021, p. 217; Piff & Moskowitz, 2017, p. 903). In psychology, the concept of 'negative' emotions is problematic, as it oversimplifies the diverse roles and evaluation of emotions (Kristjánsson, 2003, p. 361). They are often linked to fear, frustration, anger, boredom, sadness, shame, embarrassment, or guilt (Rowe & Fitness, 2018, p. 1), and while public discourse often views them as detrimental, they can actually be beneficial in certain circumstances, making their collective label as "negative" unhelpful (Kristjánsson, 2003, p. 361). Whilst psychology and sociology complicate the definition of positive and negative emotions, this rarely is the case in public discourse, where the definitions of negative and positive largely seem to follow what psychology defines them to be.

We can follow this through by looking at the culture of positive thinking that has become widespread across different areas of society (Ehrenreich, 2021), resulting from the unwritten imperative to live life oriented towards joy and positivity, what Ahmed (2010, p. 59) calls happiness scripts. Happiness is often used to measure societal well-being, linked to economic, political and social indicators (Veenhoven, 1988), and success across life domains like work, relationships and health (Fisher, 2009, p. 399; Ramsey & Gentzler, 2015; Steptoe, 2019). Research in social and emotional psychology confirms that people increasingly internalise this emotional norm (Tsai, 2007, p. 245; also Carver & Scheier, 1990; Rojas & Veenhoven, 2011). In other words, happiness is not only valued personally, but also collectively through culture and both local and (inter)national measurements, suggesting that happiness is a highly public and performative emotion that is governed and politicised by social pressures, and not merely a private emotion.

The idea that societies establish norms guiding how individuals should behave and express emotions in public is well-established. In fact, classic sociology of emotion supports this view. Ahmed's (2010) notion of happiness scripts connects closely with Arlie Hochschild's (1983/2012, p. 56) concept of feeling rules, which refers to social

norms that guide how we should feel and express emotions in different social contexts. We learn there are 'right' and 'wrong' emotions for certain situations and adjust our feelings accordingly. While originally applied to the emotional labour in jobs, like customer service, feeling rules clearly shape everyday social life and social media. For instance, when someone shares a post about graduating or starting a new job, they are expected to frame it positively through smiles, celebratory captions, or emojis. If the same moment is shared with a caption expressing anxiety, doubt, or sadness, it might prompt confusion or concern from followers. This further shows how emotions are social phenomena regulated and enforced through interpersonal cues and reactions, rather than merely private and internal.

Under these feeling rules and happiness scripts, happiness can emerge as a socially expected emotion. This contributes to a cultural environment where individuals may feel pressure to appear happy to friends, family, or colleagues, as happiness is often treated as a default emotional state that typically requires little justification, unlike expressions of negative emotion (Linzbach & Suojanen, 2020, pp. 211, 214–218).

Positivity norm on social media

These cultural feeling rules and the affective social expectation of happiness powerfully manifest in social media networks (SMN), especially on image-centric platforms like Instagram. Several studies point towards a positivity *bias* on SMN: positive emotions are posted more commonly than negative emotions (Lin & Utz, 2015, p. 30; Tehlwall et al., 2009, p. 190–194) and they elicit more positive feedback than negative emotions (Bazarova, 2012, p. 827). Additionally, SMN users tend to curate their posts in such a way to present more favourable or successful images of themselves (Lin & Utz, 2015, p. 3; Schreurs & Vandenbosch, 2020, pp. 329–330), suggesting how personal life is turned into a curated display of positivity.

The inclination to display happiness and positivity on SMN may find root in a broader desire to maintain favourable self-images and gain social approval (Pounders et al., 2016, p. 15, 36–38, 41–47; Spottswood & Hancock, 2016, p. 252). Erving Goffman's work on self-presentation helps to further explain this. In his classic work *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman (1956/2022) paralleled social interaction to dramaturgy: people, like actors performing roles for an audience, actively manage how they are perceived by others. He used theatre metaphors to explain the contrasts between an individual's 'frontstage' and 'backstage' behaviour. In everyday life, people engage in frontstage self-presentation through choices in clothing, hairstyles, or brands, tailoring their appearance to suit particular contexts, as well as how they carry out the role. However, what Goffman could only anticipate in the analog era has, arguably, been exponentially amplified by social media. Individuals increasingly communicate online, constructing and performing their identities online as well. Additionally, the self is not merely presented, but iteratively constructed and displayed in ways that prioritise visibility, validation, and aesthetic affect, resulting in the typical SMN user's tendencies of sharing personal highlights, smiling selfies, vacation photos, and omitting or obscuring negative emotions (Masciantonio et al., 2025). Simply put, the self-presentation described by Goffman has become even more curated and continuous.

SMN like Facebook, Instagram, and X (formerly Twitter) collapse the private and public realms. Users are thus invited to engage in 'condensed performances of the self' before multiple audiences (Papacharissi, 2012, p. 2). Each update, photo, story, Snap, or Tweet can be considered a mini-performance, signaling who we are, carefully tailored to balance social rewards of connectivity against the risks of visibility (Papacharissi, 2012, p. 2;

Livingstone, 2008). Since positive display is favoured, positivity itself becomes a safe and appealing aesthetic currency that tends to yield more positive feedback than negativity. In contrast, expressions deviating from this norm risk being labelled as oversharing, as 'firmly outside of [one's] boundaries of what belongs in these spaces,' or dismissed as 'attention seeking or self-indulgent' (Annabell, 2020, p. 2). This does not mean that negativity is fully banned from Instagram; it is often allowed when framed humorously or given a positive spin (Annabell, 2022). Thus, users learn, consciously or not, that showing happiness or positivity is part of a successful online self-presentation.

Because users observe which behaviours are most common or socially accepted on SMN, they become socialised into particular posting practices, shaping what they share and how they behave on the platform (Boczkowski et al., 2018, p. 246; Tandoc et al., 2018, p. 27). New users often mimic the emotional tone of others, reinforcing this norm without explicit instruction (Smoktunowicz et al., 2023, p. 1353). This dynamic can also be understood through Goffman's (2003) concept of face, which describes how individuals manage their presentation to maintain social approval. On Instagram, where self-presentation is central (Alhabash & Ma, 2017; Sheldon & Bryant, 2016), displaying negative emotions may risk a 'loss of face' if such posts are met with resistance, disinterest, or are ignored by the audience.

Bringing this together, we suggest that SMN, like Instagram, function under a positivity *norm* that encourages an emotionally selective self-presentation. Previous research (Lin & Utz, 2015; Tehlwall et al., 2009; Bazarova, 2012; Schreurs & Vandenbosch, 2020) primarily describe this tendency as a positivity bias; that is, the empirical observation that positivity is posted more frequently and receives more favourable feedback than negative posts. In this study, we conceptualise positivity as a normative expectation rather than merely a descriptive pattern. We propose that positivity on SMN is socially expected, anticipated, and learned as the appropriate emotional register for participation. We understand this positivity norm as a platform-specific manifestation of broader cultural expectations surrounding happiness. While cultural happiness imperatives and expectations establish positivity as desirable and expected (e.g. Bruckner, 2011; Ahmed, 2010), SMN translates this into concrete norms affecting online self-presentation. Importantly, this norm does not originate solely from the platform's algorithmic design, nor solely from user culture, but emerges from their interaction. On the one hand, users bring culturally learned expectations about happiness and emotional appropriateness into the platform, shaping what they post, omit, or anticipate will be well received. On the other hand, platform affordances such as *likes*, filters, algorithm-driven visibility, and feedback metrics actively amplify positive content by making it more visible and rewarding. Together, these dynamics socialise users to 'keep it positive' in order to 'fit into' the platform. We suggest that these processes operate at the interactional level as platform-specific feeling rules (Hochschild, 1983): situational emotional expectations through which users learn which emotions are appropriate to express, which should be downplayed, and which are best excluded or archived. In this sense, feeling rules function as the mechanisms through which broader cultural happiness imperatives and the platform-specific positivity norm are enacted and enforced within the socio-technical environment of SMN, shaping not only practices of self-presentation but also what ultimately becomes available for later self-revisitation.

Positivity as memory archive condition

SMN do not only serve as sites of presentation, but also archives of personal history (Good, 2012, p. 557). Platforms like Instagram allow users to look back on lived events, effectively turning personal memory into a

networked, mediated archive. However, this archive is not a neutral or complete chronicle, as it is curated through the lens of social norms.

Personal memory has always been socially shaped. Maurice Halbwachs (as discussed in West, 2012, p. 2) argued that individuals recall the past through collective frameworks (e.g. family, religion, nation), which provide the cues and schemas for remembering. This means that memory is not purely individual, but recursively shaped through social interactions (West, 2012, p. 2); even childhood memories are co-constructed through shared narratives and mediated artifacts like family photos. With social media, this interdependence becomes immediately visible. Building on Halbwachs, José van Dijck (2010) argues that personal memories are always mediated by technology and culture, meaning that what we remember and share is guided by social frameworks. On Instagram, the dominating framework of the positivity norm results in a memory curation skewed towards positivity. It thus follows that Instagram's positivity norm appears to have profound implications for how our memories are recorded. What is remembered and looked back upon tends to be selectively curated to reflect moments of joy, composure, and positivity, rather than the full range of lived emotional experiences that a SMN like Instagram theoretically allows to be expressed. The archive is a selective, self-presentational act and also an anticipatory, emotional practice. Courtney Hopf (2012) refers to this as 'pre-emptive memory-curation': individuals actively decide not only what others should remember them by, but also their future selves. Given the cultural pressures surrounding happiness, the identity most people want to display is a positive one. We may understand this as Goffman's dramaturgy across a longer time scale: impression management is not only in the moment, but reaches into the past and future, and, most importantly, individuals manage the memory of their impressions as well.

Introducing affective self-revisitation

While the impression is often that SMN are directed at an external audience, posts also form part of users' own affective repertoires. This brings us to the under-researched practice of engaging with one's own curated digital memories, often during emotionally challenging or ambivalent moments (described in everyday terms as negative emotions). In this study, we refer to this phenomenon as affective self-revisitation (ASR). We define ASR as an individual's affectively charged engagement with their previously posted online content, through which they reconnect with past emotional states, self-presentations, and moments of perceived happiness. Importantly, while previous research documented how individuals use Instagram or other SMN as personal archives (Good, 2012; Zhao et al., 2013) in order to look back to their past posts as a way 'to feel good' (Jungselius & Weilenmann, 2023, pp. 7–8), we do not presuppose ASR as always with deliberate intent. While some instances may involve intentional revisitation, our focus is on how such engagements, whether intentional or unintentional, become emotionally and narratively meaningful within a positivity-oriented digital environment. With this, we attempt to extend this phenomenon by situating the practice within a sociological perspective on affect, memory, and normativity.

At first glance, ASR may resemble what psychology refers to as emotional self-regulation: the deliberate adjustment of emotional states through various strategies (e.g. Cole et al., 1994; Thompson, 1994). This study, however, builds on and departs from that view by situating ASR within a sociological understanding of emotion and memory. We depart from a purely intentional regulatory strategy by conceptualising ASR as a socially situated emotional practice that becomes meaningful through its affective and identity-related consequences, which can occur without explicit planning or deliberate emotional goals. The focus is on how emotional experience and self-

understanding are co-constructed through social norms and digital memory systems (e.g. Van Dijck, 2010, pp. 402–403).

Method

This study explored how Dutch young adults revisit past Instagram posts and how this practice relates to emotional experiences and self-understanding within Instagram's positivity norm. A qualitative approach was chosen because this research aimed to capture subjective meaning-making and emotional reflection on social media practices, for which qualitative methods are particularly suited (Clark et al., 2021, p. 475).

Scope and operationalisation

Given the limited scope and timeframe of this project, this article does not aim to exhaustively theorise, empirically prove or formalise the concept of ASR. Rather, it aims to provide a sociological entry point into its contours and implications. Accordingly, as we worked with a small qualitative dataset, we focused on conceptual clarity and analytical depth rather than empirical generalisation. This approach allowed for a more grounded exploration of sociological questions concerning emotions and memories as mediated and shaped by SMN.

The key constructs of the theoretical framework have been operationalised as follows:

Positive social media posts: Drawing on Ahmed's (2010) conceptualisation of happiness as a form of world-making that orients individuals towards objects and experiences promising a good life, we trace the framework by Annabell (2020, p. 2) to define positive social media posts as those that depict or describe moments, objects, or themes associated with happiness. This includes posts described by participants that highlight friendships and relationships (e.g. photos or captions expressing affection, love, gratitude, or companionship), celebrations and events (e.g. birthdays, graduations, weddings, (religious) festivals, achievements), holidays and landscapes (e.g. travel posts, nature appreciation, scenic photography with positive framing), and everyday joyful moments (e.g. enjoying food, leisure activities, simple pleasures, humour). Such posts reflect orientations towards what is perceived as contributing to a happy or 'good life' (Ahmed, 2010), including both extraordinary and ordinary experiences framed positively. This also follows our theoretical understanding of the positivity norm on social media.

Feeling rules: Defined by Hochschild (1983, p. 56) as socially constructed expectations regarding which emotions are appropriate to feel and express in particular social contexts. This concept was operationalised by examining participants' references to expectations about appearing happy or positive online (e.g. 'You don't post sad stuff on Instagram'). We also attended to the absence, deletion or archiving of negative content, hesitation to share posts expressing negative or vulnerable emotions, and the framing of positivity or happiness as a normative baseline or social obligation in participants' reflections on their own profile or feed. This also follows our theoretical understanding of the positivity norm on social media.

Digital memory practices: Following Van Dijck (2010; West, 2012), this involves the ways individuals curate, revisit, and emotionally engage with personal content stored on SMN in the form of images, captions, stories, or other relevant media. This can be indicated by the frequency and manner of archiving, highlighting, and/or saving content by participants, but also their mentions of social media as a memory tool, diary, archive, or repository of

personal meaning. Contrasts between public curation and private revisitation behaviour are also considered under this operationalisation.

ASR engagement: As defined in the theoretical framework as the affectively charged act of revisiting one's own previously posted (positive) content, which may occur intentionally or incidentally, and which can involve processes of mood regulation, emotional repair, or identity anchoring. ASR engagement was identified when participants described returning to their own posts, stories, highlights, or archived content and reflected on the emotional responses this evoked (e.g. comfort, reassurance, nostalgia, longing, ambivalence) or the meanings attached to these moments in relation to their sense of self. Intentionality and use of saved content or self-curated highlights as emotional reference points are also considered. Emotional context (e.g. boredom, stress, sadness, or reflective moments), degree of intentionality, and the use of saved or curated content as affective or identity reference points were treated as analytic dimensions of ASR rather than defining criteria.

Further, it should be remarked that we recognised the theoretical complexities around labelling emotions as 'negative' (Kristjánsson, 2003). However, for clarity with participants, we used common positive and negative labels often used in public discourse (see Rowe & Fitness, 2018, for typical psychological categorisations of these emotions). Additionally, because our analysis focuses on participants' emotional relationships to their past posts rather than on analysing the content or aesthetics of the posts themselves, happiness scripts (Ahmed, 2010) were not treated as a separate analytical category. There were also concerns that they would overshadow the analysis of micro-level practices with macro-level ideological critique.

Instagram was selected for its popularity among Dutch young adults (Afix & Van Tiel, 2025) and its public visual memory functions, which are suited to studying emotional self-presentation and revisitation. These include posts (which remain permanently visible on a user's profile until deleted or archived), Stories (which are available for one day and do not appear on the user's profile, but can be shared publicly or with a selected list of 'Close Friends'), Story Highlights (Stories saved in curated folders on a user's profile and permanently accessible unless deleted), and the post archive (where posts are removed from the public profile and stored in a private folder accessible only to the user). These affordances enable users to curate, store, and revisit personal content over time, thereby providing a structured environment in which practices of ASR can emerge.

Snapchat, another very popular SMN among Dutch young adults, was considered, but Snapchat's private exchanges often involve more emotionally complex or socially transgressive content (e.g. grief, anger, violence, or sexual material) that is less common in Instagram's curated environment. In addition, Instagram's visible posts, Stories, and Highlights enable meaningful reflection on how individuals construct and revisit their public emotional selves over time. Other platforms (e.g. Facebook, Twitter/X, BeReal, WhatsApp, or Pinterest) were excluded due to their lack of strong visual memory functions, their primary use for text-based information exchange rather than self-curated memory, or due to a low young adult Dutch user base.

Data collection

The analysis was based on semi-structured in-depth interviews (N = 4), a method offering the necessary flexibility to explore participants' personal experiences in depth, allowing participants to reflect on emotional regulation in a private and open setting (Clark et al., 2021, pp. 1383-1385). An initial interview guide was structured around three key themes: (1) posting practices and emotional regulation (i.e. posting behaviour); (2)

affective self-revisitation (i.e. looking back on past posts); and (3) emotional curation and digital memory (i.e. participants' profiles). This interview guide was designed to investigate the relationship between Instagram practices, emotion regulation, and the cultural norms shaping online self-presentation, by situating the micro (Theme 2) in the macro of broader emotional norms (Theme 1) and the framing/restructuring of memories on social media (Theme 3).

Following Clark et al. (2021), participants were recruited using purposive convenience sampling, as this allowed for faster recruitment within the limited timeframe of the project (pp. 391–392), from both researchers' personal networks. While this approach enabled efficient recruitment, it may have introduced selection bias by favouring individuals with similar social, educational, or cultural backgrounds to the researchers. As a result, the sample is not representative and the findings may reflect experiences more typical of our networks. Participants were included based on their age (young adults aged between 20–30 years old), country (currently residing in the Netherlands), Instagram activity, and their potential for posting and revisiting memories on Instagram. The sample was purposely constructed to include both male ($n = 2$) and female-identifying ($n = 2$) participants to enhance the credibility of the results and to capture a wider range of perspectives (pp. 692–693).

To maintain consistency in interviewing techniques and avoid variation in interpersonal dynamics, all interviews were conducted by Alspeer. Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' oral consent. The study adhered to ethical guidelines for student research in the social sciences: participants were informed about the aims and contents of the research with the ability to opt out at any given moment, and all interview records were fully anonymised prior to transcription (Clark et al., 2021, pp. 147–150). All interviews were held in Dutch to allow interviewees to express themselves more freely and fully, without the cognitive burden of responding in a second language. It also prevented overly cautious or filtered answers and enabled a more natural conversational flow, which in turn supported richer, more emotionally nuanced responses. All quotations included in this paper have therefore been translated into English with attention to clarity and accuracy.

Participants

All participants have been anonymised through assigning generic pseudonyms. For this research, we interviewed Anne, a 26-year-old teaching assistant with a professional (HBO) bachelor's degree; James, a 28-year-old credit controller with an MBO degree (VET-equivalent); Claire, a 26-year-old university teacher and entrepreneur with an academic (WO) master's degree; and John, a 26-year-old internal communication officer with a professional (HBO) associate's degree. Except for John, who lives in the area of Rotterdam, all participants live in the area of Amsterdam.

Analyses

All anonymous interview records were automatically transcribed using NotebookLM and then manually cleaned by De Bruijn to ensure accuracy and readability for coding and analysis. Four transcripts were coded by both researchers. The fifth interview provided limited relevant material due to recording issues and what remained did not yield sufficient analytical depth on ASR and was thus omitted.

We followed a two-phase iterative coding process using Atlas.ti (Web, v9.18.0). We used thematic analysis for iteratively reviewing and categorizing qualitative data to identify recurring themes and patterns that help explain participants' experiences (Clark et al., 2021, p. 935). In the first phase, both researchers independently

coded two transcripts using an initial codebook primarily derived from the interview guide. In the second phase, De Bruijn conducted an open coding phase, allowing new codes to emerge, whilst Alspeer prepared relevant quotes into emerging patterns for the actual analysis.

After coding, considering the time constraints, both researchers drafted their own analyses, which were then later discussed and merged. This approach also made it possible to compare interpretative angles and codes that might otherwise have been overlooked.

Findings

Across the interviews, three key patterns emerged that help us understand how emotional norms, memory practices, and identity work intersect on Instagram. These patterns reveal that ASR is not simply a matter of looking back to feel better. Rather, it happens within a broader emotional culture that encourages the performance of positivity, the curation of digital identity, and the internalisation of platform-specific affective expectations. ASR is a layered emotional and narrative practice, situated at the intersection of social norms, selfhood, and memory.

The positivity norm as emotional filter

All participants described Instagram as a personal archive where one could revisit memories and create a visual narrative of the self. Claire (26, university teacher and entrepreneur) noted: 'For me, it's really a medium where people can instantly see who I am as a person.' However, this archive is curated through an emotional lens deeply shaped by the positivity norm. Participants consistently described a reluctance to share emotional vulnerability, political opinions, or expressions of sadness, anger, or failure. These were seen as either inappropriate or attention-seeking, even within more private spaces like Close Friends stories or private profiles. Anne (26, teaching assistant) remarked: 'Then I thought, okay, maybe it's actually not good to share that, because [...] it almost seems like I'm crying out for help, even though I'm really not.' Rather than functioning as neutral platforms for expression, Instagram profiles were experienced as stages for emotional composure and social desirability. As James (28, credit controller) put it: 'Instagram is for the good things, not for the bad things.' This reflects not only internalised affective expectations, but also a form of emotional governance: Instagram's affordances and social norms encourage users to rehearse, regulate, and restrict certain feelings in ways that resemble Hochschild's feeling rules. Even moments of grief or hardship were seen as inappropriate. John (26, internal communication officer) noted that during a trip where a friend was pickpocketed, he still posted a beautiful image from the vacation, omitting the uncomfortable part. The logic of curation extended into what Hochschild (1983) might call feeling rules: unwritten emotional expectations that govern what is shareable and acceptable in a given social space. In Goffman's (1956/2022, 2003) terms, this reflects the management of face where individuals curate content to express themselves and to maintain a consistent and socially appropriate emotional presentation in the 'frontstage' of Instagram.

This curation wasn't limited to public audiences. Participants still exercised restraint in private or semi-private spaces, such as Close Friends stories. What emerged was a form of affective discipline: a filtering of emotion that carries from frontstage to backstage, shaping even the internal archive. Anne sometimes archived old posts because they no longer "fit" with her present identity, aesthetic, or relationships. James: 'If I think it's important to me, but

not necessary for the people around me, then I archive it. Because, like I said, it's for me, not for the world.' Even this personal memory space is shaped by earlier judgments about what was acceptable to share, creating an emotional archive pre-filtered by normative expectations of Instagram's feeling rules (Hochschild, 1983). This suggests a contamination of the backstage by the frontstage: the space meant for private reflection is already structured by the public performance previously curated for others (Goffman, 1956/2022).

Ambivalence as result of incidental revisitation

While it may appear intentional, ASR was rarely described as a conscious form of mood repair. Contrary to models of deliberate emotional regulation, which emphasize purposeful strategies to alter affective states (e.g. Cole et al., 1994; Thompson, 1994), participants often encountered their digital archives in unplanned ways, complicating the findings of Jungselius & Weilenmann (2023). These moments were frequently triggered by platform features such as story highlights, casual conversations with friends, or emotional drift during periods of boredom or sadness. James recalled: 'I was on the phone with one of my best friends and we were talking about old messages, about old things, how much times have changed.' Claire described scrolling through her gallery in low moments and unexpectedly confronting old photos: 'Then you just look back at my photos every now and then and think: Okay, you know what, actually, it's fine, you look good, and maybe it's just this day that you're feeling this way.' Although these moments might seem solitary or introspective, they often unfolded within socially entangled spaces, such as during conversations or while navigating apps, structured around visibility and audience awareness. The boundary between private reflection and public performance became blurred. These revisitations did not occur in a separate backstage space, but in a context better described as an overlap between backstage and frontstage (Goffman, 1956). ASR was not detached from interaction, but embedded in it. A memory might resurface in response to a friend's message, a resurfaced story, or even a new like. These subtle social cues prompted renewed reflection, functioning as mini-performances that revisited past selves. This aligns with Papacharissi's (2012) idea of social media posts as condensed and stylized expressions shaped for networked audiences.

These revisitations often produced ambivalent emotional responses. While participants sometimes experienced nostalgia, pride, or joy, they also reported regret, dissonance, or a sense of alienation. Claire, for instance, reflected on the contrast between how a photo looked and how she actually felt when posting it:

> 'I think it was just a selfie or a smiling photo of myself. And obviously, when I think back to the moment I posted it, it's not like I was necessarily super happy or anything at that time. I actually don't think I was feeling very good at all.'

These moments reveal a subtle but powerful form of emotional dissonance: ASR reactivates the memory, but also the awareness that the memory was once selectively performed. In this sense, ASR is not simply a reflection of the past, but a way of re-encountering the self as it was once shaped for others.

Claire and Anne both described instances when looking back did not necessarily comfort them, but instead made them aware of who they were, or used to be. James commented on seeing his old self as 'a completely different person,' highlighting how digital memory can provoke recognition, rupture, or reflection rather than emotional resolution.

Curated continuity and narrative labour

Beyond mood regulation, ASR also emerged as a form of identity work. Participants often spoke of their profiles as personal timelines, reflective of values, changes, and milestones. James stated: 'This [own profile] describes me. It makes sure that my message takes the right form.' Here, James frames his Instagram profile not only as a personal archive but as a form of self-presentation that communicates something about who he is. His profile becomes both a reflection and a tool; a curated version of the self, intended for both self-recognition and audience interpretation. Claire emphasized that she curates her Story Highlights so others know 'what's important' to her. Anne described her profile as 'a kind of personal memory album', capturing the double function of Instagram as both an intimate record and public performance. These examples show how ASR is not merely an inward-facing emotional act but also a socially situated performance. The revisitation of past content activates a dynamic that can be understood through Goffman's (1956/2022) distinction between frontstage and backstage behaviors, as the boundaries between them become permeable: personal memory is filtered through the desire to maintain a coherent, presentable self-image. The platform collapses private and public boundaries, embedding emotional memory in a continuous impression management process. Each revisit is not just a return to a past self, but a renewed performance of identity. This performative dynamic resonates with Papacharissi's (2012) notion of social media posts as condensed, stylized performances of the self. In this view, digital memory is not neutral or static but shaped by an ongoing negotiation between emotional truth and social acceptability. What users choose to preserve, highlight, or return to reveals not only what matters emotionally but also how they wish to be seen.

This narrative function was not passive. Participants used ASR to reaffirm aspects of themselves, to trace growth, or to hold on to who they had been in difficult times. Claire remarked: 'It also just helps me put things into perspective. [...] Just because you're in this moment now doesn't mean you're always like that. I also have other things alongside it, and that is also a part of you.' This also suggests a form of anticipatory revisitation: curating content now with the expectation that it may become meaningful upon returning to it later. Yet, the emotional impact of such revisits remains unpredictable. Participants encountered moments of joy and recognition, but also longing or disconnection. ASR becomes a form of narrative identity work: a negotiation between the self once seen and the self now felt.

Conclusion

This project set out to understand how Dutch young adults revisit past Instagram posts and how this practice relates to emotional experience and identity under the platform's positivity norm. While earlier work suggests that individuals revisit their social media content to 'feel good' (Jungselius & Weilenmann, 2023), our findings complicate this view. Affective self-revisitation (ASR) rarely appeared as an intentional strategy for mood repair, but happened incidentally through conversations, platform prompts, or simply boredom. This suggests the importance of understanding this act as an affective practice rather than a deliberate emotional strategy. Additionally, it unfolded within a dramaturgical framework of impression management, emotional discipline, and curated memory. What seemed to emerge is not a spontaneous emotional uplift, but a layered encounter with the self as once-performed and selectively archived.

Instagram, described by all participants as a 'personal archive', is anything but neutral. Users construct their archive under normative expectations of emotional appropriateness and aesthetic coherence, shaped by Instagram's positivity norm and enacted through platform-specific feeling rules (Hochschild, 1983). On Instagram, these feeling rules inform what is appropriate to be shown *and*, consequently, what may be remembered. Negative emotions, described by participants as grief, anger, or sadness, were often excluded from public posts and even semi-private features like Close Friends Stories. They expressed fears of being perceived as attention-seeking, reported discomfort sharing such content, or found it unnecessary to include negativity on Instagram. This suggests a strong orientation towards socially expected modes of emotional display on Instagram. A result is that the act of looking back becomes filtered through these affective norms; what is available for self-revisitation is already shaped by Instagram's positivity norm, which is itself rooted and reinforced by broader cultural norms to appear happy (Ahmed, 2010).

Goffman's (1956/2022, 2003) dramaturgical lens helps articulate this phenomenon. Instagram collapses the binary between frontstage (public performance) and backstage (private expression), turning even the supposed digital backstage (e.g. Close Friends stories, or privately archived posts) into softened continuations of the front. When individuals revisit old posts, they seem to not actually return to a private past self, but to a curated face sculpted for their social media audience, and their anticipated future self that will look back on them. ASR can thus be understood as a form of recursive impression management across time. Aligning with Hopf's (2012) idea of pre-emptive memory curation, participants curate their own affective and often idealised biographies. When they revisit posts, whether intentionally to uplift mood or incidentally through social interaction, platform features (e.g. notifications, archiving posts), or boredom, this occurs within the limits of what was once deemed emotionally appropriate to share.

This has implications for identity. While participants described their Instagram profiles as timelines or depictions of who they are, our analysis shows that these profiles function more as sites of narrative identity work across past, present, and anticipated selves. Rather than neutral archives, they reflect forms of pre-emptive memory curation (Hopf, 2012) shaped by emotional norms. In this sense, ASR is not only about what one remembers, but about what one feels able, or permitted, to remember within the constraints of platform norms, audience expectations, and cultural scripts of positivity.

Bringing these insights together, we propose ASR as a valuable lens for understanding how emotion, memory, and identity are shaped by platform-specific positivity norms that are enacted through feeling rules and reflect broader cultural imperatives surrounding happiness. Departing from the view that revisiting past posts functions primarily as a simple and intentional strategy to uplift negative emotions, ASR can instead be understood as a second-order encounter with one's previously constructed emotional self. What is revisited has already been filtered through earlier, normatively shaped decisions about what was appropriate to display, whether intentional or incidental, and does not necessarily produce emotional relief. In this sense, ASR is not only an emotional practice but also as a form of identity work through which individuals relate to, reinterpret, and maintain a sense of self across time.

This research offers three contributions to the sociological understanding of digital emotion and memory. First, our analysis illustrates how Goffman's dramaturgical lens can be applied temporally: ASR involves a form of impression management across time, where revisiting past posts can feel like re-encountering a previously

performed self. Second, we build on Hochschild's theory of emotion work to reveal how social feeling rules govern memory, not only expression; even private self-revisitation is shaped by positivity norms. Finally, we complicate the notion of digital memory as comforting or cohesive, instead showing how curated memory archives generate ambivalence, and identity fracture and (re-)negotiation. By reframing ASR as a form of normatively shaped identity work, this study contributes to broader debates on the emotional costs of self-presentation in a culture increasingly structured by digitally-platformed identities, memories, and positivity imperatives.

While this study offers an in-depth exploration of ASR among Dutch young adults, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, all participants lived in urban centres of the Netherlands' metropolitan Randstad area and were relatively highly educated. Additionally, they were recruited from both researchers' personal networks, who both occupy a similar socio-cultural position to the participants. This convenient sampling and shared positionality helped with rapid rapport building during interviews, as experiences and vocabularies (including those surrounding Instagram use, with which both researchers were familiar) often required little elaboration. At the same time, this proximity may also have shaped both the interview dynamics and the interpretation of findings, such as rendering certain platform practices or affective expectations self-evident to both researchers and participants. To address this, we approached the analysis reflexively, discussing codes and interpretations collaboratively and attending closely to moments of hesitation, ambivalence, or contradiction in participants' accounts. Rather than treating positionality as a source of distortion, we understand it as a situated condition of knowledge production that shaped how ASR was accessed, interpreted, and theorised in this project. Further, the low sample size limits the generalisability of the findings across other regions, countries, age groups, and social backgrounds.

Second, most participants later reflected that they no longer posted on Instagram as frequently as they once did, suggesting that their ASR practices may be shaped by shifting platform engagement over time. Third, the data relied on self-reported reflections, which may not fully capture nonverbal, affective undercurrents. This ties into a limitation of interview-based research in struggling to access pre-cognitive, affective registers, or otherwise bodily, fleeting, or inarticulate responses to ASR. Fourth, the time constraints of the four-week project necessarily restricted the scope of participant recruitment and analysis depth. Finally, it should be noted that our object of study is doubly-mediated: participants revisit only what they once deemed postable, which might skew the affective data before it even becomes accessible to them and the researchers.

Future research could expand on this study in several directions. First, ASR might be examined across different cultural contexts, regions, age groups, and ethnicities to understand how socio-cultural settings and backgrounds shape practices of self-revisitation, as this study provided a sample primarily from the Netherlands' metropolitan Randstad region. Further work could also investigate potential gendered differences, as well as how users vary in the frequency and temporal depth of ASR, and the extent to which they imagine or anticipate an audience when revisiting their own posts. Comparative research across platforms such as TikTok, Facebook, Snapchat, or BeReal may reveal how differing levels of ephemerality, visibility, and audience structure influence ASR. Finally, because ASR may unfold dynamically across the life course, longitudinal or diary-based approaches could provide insight into how individuals engage with revisitation during emotionally volatile or transitional periods. Theoretically, future work might also explore how ASR intersects with collective memory, grief, or political affect.

Conflict of Interests

The authors do not declare any conflict of interest.

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