

# The Imagined Audience in Social Media: A Systematic Review

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## Abstract

Determining the audience for social media posts is complex due to platform algorithms and mixed audiences. The "invisible audience" and the collapse of distinct social contexts challenge users' capacity to manage their social circles effectively. This systematic review, adhering to PRISMA guidelines, identified 17 relevant articles through a structured search and screening. It outlines study backgrounds, sample characteristics, data collection methods, and highlights factors influencing audience categorization, aiding the understanding of imagined audience formation. The review discusses the impact of imagined audiences on user behavior and emotions, distinguishing these effects and enriching existing research. It aims to enhance users' audience awareness, improve privacy management, and support technology and literacy efforts related to social media privacy challenges.

**Keywords:** imagined audiences, audience types, privacy risks, risky self-disclosure, social media, systems literature review

## 1. Introduction

Social media offers individuals a novel way to communicate across the boundaries of time and space, and it has become a primary platform for people to construct their personal image and stay connected with others. Research suggests that social interaction is a significant motivation for social media use (Kelly et al., 2020; Gilbert & Barton, 2013). Given that interaction is at the core of social media, who are people thinking of when they post on social networks? Who is their intended audience? In offline settings, people often use their understanding of the audience to help shape their performance of identity (Goffman, 1959). Visual, linguistic, and non-verbal cues all help individuals adjust their behavior to suit specific audiences. In online environments, particularly on social networking sites (SNS), even though the cues available in face-to-face interactions are limited, the need to understand the audience remains (Vitak, 2015). It is difficult to determine who is viewing posts on social media, as interface designs and algorithms obscure the actual audience by blending different groups and concealing the specifics of who sees the content (Yao et al., 2024). In other words, when disclosing information on social media, individuals find themselves simultaneously engaging with multiple audiences within their social network (e.g., family, colleagues, acquaintances), a phenomenon known as "context collapse" (Boyd, 2008; Marwick & Boyd, 2011; Vitak et al., 2015). Faced with this challenge, social media users must rely on their imagination to construct their performance targets, a concept referred to as "the psychological conceptualization of whom we are communicating with" (Litt, 2012; Marwick & Boyd, 2011). The imagined audience has become an essential perspective for understanding user interaction in the context of context collapse. In face-to-face communication, individuals adjust their self-presentation in real-time to meet the expectations and norms of their audience (Goffman, 1959). However, on social media, self-presentation must address multiple audiences, posing challenges for individuals in maintaining different social circles (Yao et al., 2024).

### 1.1 Conceptualizing the Imagined Audience

The "imagined audience" refers to the psychological conceptualization of the people we are communicating with (Litt, 2012). This concept has long guided individuals' thoughts and behaviors in writing and public speaking. In face-to-face interactions, according to self-presentation and impression management theories, individuals adjust their behavior based on the real audience to help control the impressions others form of them (Goffman, 1959). Thus, an individual's audience provides a basis for their "performance." The audience serves as a cognitive guide, always participating in

communication as a model, object, assistant, or even adversary (French & Bazarova, 2017). The fewer or less familiar the actual audience is, the more individuals rely on their imagination. Research suggests that, in determining behavior, the imagined audience can be just as influential as the real audience (Baldwin & Holmes, 1987). While individuals have long interacted with imagined audiences, the characteristics of social media and its vast scale have increased the difficulty of understanding communication and the audience. Understanding the needs of the audience remains a critical point in online communication, and the complexity of audience issues continues to grow.

In offline environments, individuals typically interact with small, clearly defined audiences. They rely on real, visible, and audible audiences rather than their imagination. However, on social media platforms, the interface design and algorithms make it difficult for users to discern their actual audience. After posting a status update, a person may potentially engage with dozens, hundreds, or even thousands of people (Litt, 2012). Due to the lack of clear audience information and cues, communicators on social media must navigate different social norms and expectations from various audience circles within the context of context collapse. The discrepancy between the imagined and actual audiences, along with failures in boundary management on social media, can lead to severe consequences, such as broken friendships, unemployment, and decreased well-being, among other outcomes (Litt & Hargittai, 2014).

*1.2 Research Objectives*

Despite the expanding body of research on imagined audiences, three significant gaps remain in the existing literature. First, prior studies have examined the concept of imagined audiences from various perspectives, including geographical context, sample characteristics, research methods, and social platforms used (Litt, 2012; Litt & Hargittai, 2016). This multifaceted approach has contributed to a lack of coherence in the field. Therefore, synthesizing and summarizing these research characteristics is essential to offer a comprehensive and unified overview.

Second, literature reviews reveal that while many studies categorize imagined audiences, there is notable variability in the types of audiences identified across different studies. This review seeks to uncover the underlying reasons for these differences and provide clarity on this variability.

Finally, although the impact of imagined audiences on users has been explored (e.g., Cingel et al., 2015; Stoltenberg et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2021), few studies have systematically detailed the influencing factors involved. The diversity in research contexts and variables highlights the need for a comprehensive analysis of the current state of knowledge in this area.

This paper aims to bridge these gaps through a systematic review of the literature on imagined audiences. The contributions of this paper to the existing body of knowledge are threefold. First, by summarizing prior research, it identifies existing deficiencies in research contexts and methodologies, guiding future investigations. Second, by analyzing the variability in audience classifications, this study offers researchers a deeper theoretical understanding of the development of this phenomenon. Lastly, by synthesizing the impacts of imagined audiences on users’ expressive behaviors and mental health, this work seeks to provide relevant organizations and platform operators with targeted intervention strategies to address related digital health concerns.

**2. Methods**

*2.1 Search Strategy*

This review aims to establish a comprehensive foundation of existing literature on imagined audiences, focusing on studies published over the past 11 years (2013-2024). To ensure a thorough data collection process, four major academic databases were utilized: Web of Science, Scopus, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar. Web of Science, Scopus, and ScienceDirect were chosen as primary data sources due to their extensive coverage of scientific research (Adriaanse & Rensleigh, 2013; Falagas et al., 2008). Google Scholar, known for organizing a broad range of publications (Falagas et al., 2008), was used as a supplementary source to enhance the comprehensiveness of the search.

The selection of these four databases was based on their capacity to encompass diverse interdisciplinary research, thereby ensuring the relevance and depth of the literature search on imagined audiences (Shiau et al., 2021). This study adhered to the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines to structure the systematic review process. The PRISMA framework was particularly valuable for defining inclusion and exclusion criteria and for guiding the examination of a substantial body of peer-reviewed literature across various scientific journals within the specified timeframe. Relevant keywords associated with the research topic were identified and employed during the search process.

Table 1. Search strings used during systematic reviews

Databases	Keywords
Google Scholar, Web of Science, Scopus and ScienceDirect	( Online OR Network OR Internet OR Social media ) AND (Imagined Audience OR Invisible Audience) AND ( Outcomes OR Consequences OR Impact)

2.2 Selection Process

Following the search, this review established a set of inclusion and exclusion criteria. Articles were restricted to those published between 2013 and 2024 (11 years). In addition, we defined criteria based on the type of literature, language, and availability of full text. Specifically, the inclusion criteria were: 1) reviewing the titles and abstracts of all included articles to ensure the topic is related to imagined audiences; 2) the article must be a research paper published in a peer-reviewed journal; 3) the article must be written in English; 4) the full text must be accessible. We then examined all articles related to the research topic within the four databases. Both quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-method studies were considered. The search, conducted in August 2024, yielded 697 results.

Table 2. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Criterion	Eligibility	Exclusion
Literature type	Journal (research articles)	Journals (systematic review), book series, book, chapter in book, conference proceeding
Language	English	Non-English
Timeline	Between 2013-2024	< 2013 and >2024

To this end, the researchers first removed duplicate entries across databases (n=387), leaving 310 articles. Next, by reviewing the titles and abstracts of these articles and applying the inclusion criteria, 268 records were excluded. The remaining 42 articles underwent full-text review. Based on the exclusion criteria, 24 studies were further removed. The selection process resulted in 17 articles for inclusion in the current systematic review.

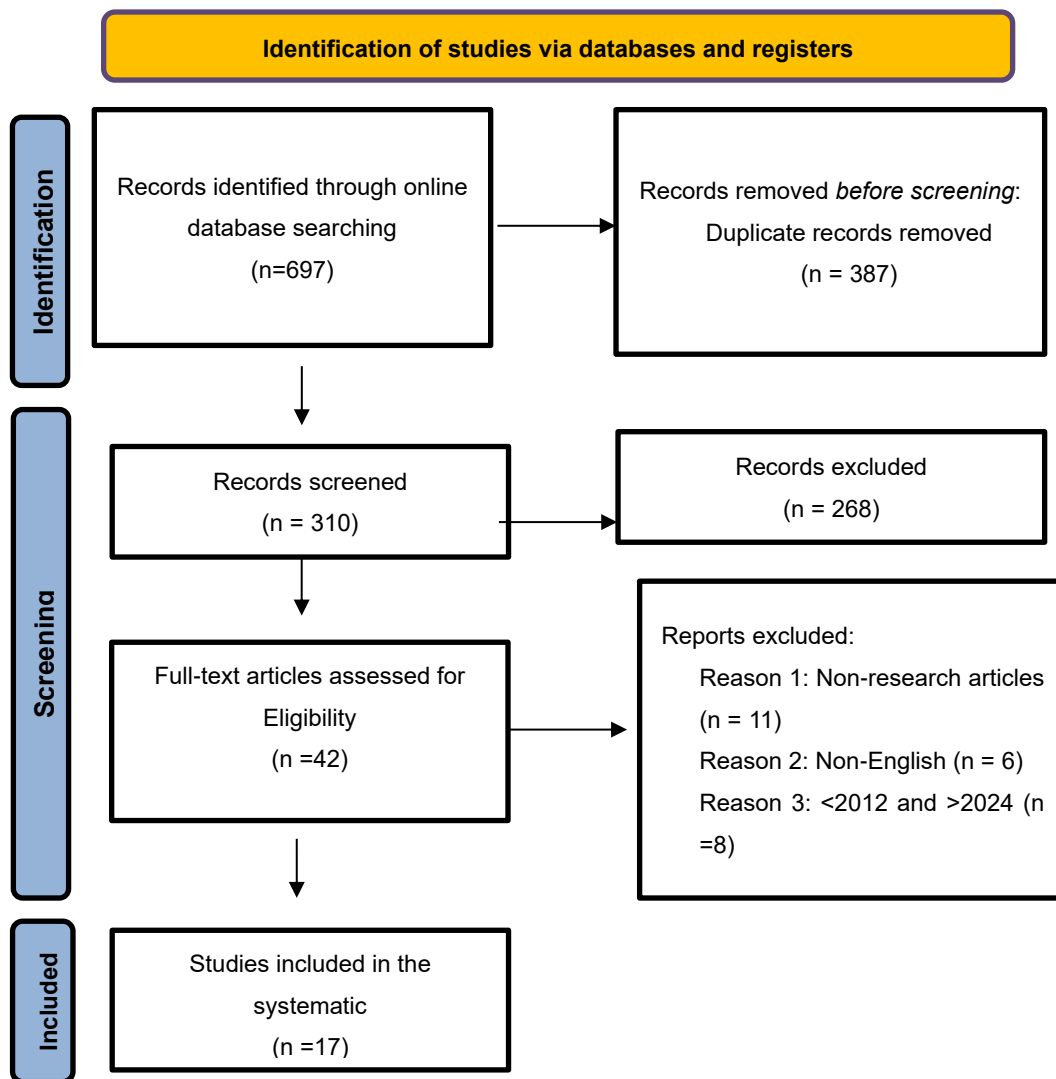


Figure 1. Screening process of research literature

### 2.3 Data Coding

The researchers coded the following information from the 17 articles: 1) author(s); 2) publication year; 3) country; 4) sample description and size; 5) research methodology; 6) social media platforms used; 7) classification of the audience; and 8) impacts of imagined audiences. The coders performed cross-checks on the coding results to ensure reliability and accuracy. Discrepancies in coding were resolved through discussion, and the final information presented in the article reflects the consensus of the researchers.

Table 3. Summary of study characteristics

No.	study	Sample description	Study method	Platform	Nation
1	French & Bazarova (2017)	118 undergraduate and graduate students (18-37 years old)	Quantitative research	Twitter, Instagram, Facebook	United States
2	Litt & Hargittai (2016)	A diary study (N=119) and follow-up interviews (N = 30).	Mixed-method study	Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn	United States
3	Ranzini & Hoek (2017)	Facebook users 268	Quantitative research	Facebook	Netherlands
4	Cingel & Kremer (2014)	260 adolescents (9-26 years old)	Quantitative research	Facebook	Null
5	Hodson et al. (2022)	Facebook users 27	Qualitative research	Facebook	Canada
6	Stoltenberg et al. (2022)	105 Twitter users	Qualitative research	Twitter	Berlin, Germany
7	Vitak et al. (2015)	26 Facebook users	Qualitative research	Facebook	United States
8	Yao et al. (2024)	Instagram user 536	Quantitative research	Instagram and Stories	United States
9	Zhang et al. (2021)	301 WeChat users	Quantitative research	WeChat	China
10	Kremer et al. (2015)	Facebook Youth users 381	Quantitative research	Facebook	Netherlands
11	Bernstein et al. (2013)	Analyzed audience logs of posts made by 222,000 Facebook users over a one-month period	Qualitative research	Facebook	Null
12	Jang et al. (2021)	Study 1: 224 Facebook users; Study 2: 104 Facebook users	Quantitative research	Facebook	United States
13	Su et al. (2022)	1425 social media users	Quantitative research	SNS	USA, Japan, Korea, China
14	Marder et al. (2016)	A semi-structured interviews (n=28) and a 2*2 between-subjects experiment (n=80)	Mixed-method study	SNS	United Kingdom
15	Kelly et al. (2020)	300 university students	Quantitative research	Facebook and Instagram	United States
16	Stsiampkouskaya et al. (2021)	Facebook and Instagram users 24	Qualitative research	Facebook and Instagram	Null
17	Cingel et al. (2015)	216 Facebook users	Quantitative research	Facebook	United States and Netherlands

## 3. Results

### 3.1 Research Background

The included articles span from 2013 to 2024, covering a period of 11 years. The analysis reveals a significant increase in the number of articles on imagined audiences in recent years. Notably, during the global COVID-19 pandemic, research on this topic accounted for nearly half of the total sample (n=8). Additionally, as shown in Table 3, research on imagined audiences is primarily concentrated in the United States (n=8), followed by the Netherlands (n=3) and China (n=2). There are also studies from the United Kingdom, Germany, Japan, South Korea, and Canada. Three studies recruited participants through Facebook or Instagram and therefore did not specify a particular country.

Table 3 describes the data collection methods used in the reviewed studies. Most studies (n=10) employed quantitative

research methods, with sample sizes ranging from 118 to 1425 respondents. In these 10 quantitative studies, researchers used cross-sectional surveys. Among the reviewed articles, there were 5 qualitative studies, including semi-structured interviews (n=4) and diary studies (n=1). Thus, research on imagined audiences predominantly uses quantitative methods to examine statistical relationships between variables and predict user behavior on social media. Qualitative research methods provide valuable in-depth insights for theoretical development on this topic. Additionally, two studies employed mixed methods approaches.

### 3.2 Factors Leading to Variations in Audience Classification

After the review process, it was found that 9 out of the 17 studies involved the classification of audiences on social media. These studies categorized audiences based on factors such as platform characteristics, audience size, intimacy, expectations of interaction, and social relationships. These factors can be summarized into two main aspects: platform characteristics and user characteristics.

#### 3.2.1 Platform Characteristics

The study by Hodson et al., (2022) suggests that the characteristics and cultural norms of different platforms determine how users distinguish their audiences and influence their sharing behaviors. For example, on asymmetric platforms like Twitter or Instagram, users can follow others without needing consent or reciprocity, whereas on symmetric platforms like Facebook or WeChat, contacts must be accepted as friends. Consequently, on asymmetric platforms, users may be more inclined to view their audiences from a broader, more abstract perspective, and their sharing practices differ from those on symmetric platforms, where users might distinguish their audiences from a more interpersonal perspective. Hodson et al. (2020) categorize imagined audiences into "peers similar to me," "audiences with specific backgrounds," and "abstract audiences."

French & Bazarova, (2017) argue that in the realm of SNS, people recognize cultural differences between platforms based on imagined and normative uses. For example, an individual might describe Instagram as a venue for art and food, while Twitter is seen as a community for sharing ideas. People's impressions of platform cultures reflect the purposes for which they use social media. Communication on Twitter, compared to Instagram and Facebook, is often more public. The study finds that people describe Twitter as an information tool rather than a communication tool. In contrast, Instagram and Facebook are seen as more interactive than Twitter. Therefore, the study categorizes audiences in SNS as "specific audiences" and "imagined audiences."

Additionally, some studies categorize audiences on social media into "imagined audiences" and "neglected audiences." Due to users' limited cognitive abilities and underestimation of the platform's audience size, there is often a gap between the imagined and actual audiences on SNS (Bernstein et al., 2013). From the perspective of users' sharing goals, SNS audiences can also be divided into target and non-target audiences. Target audiences are the groups users intend to share information with, while non-target audiences are those users do not wish to disclose information to. Therefore, (Zhang et al., 2021) classify audiences into four subtypes: imagined non-target audiences, imagined target audiences, neglected non-target audiences, and neglected target audiences.

#### 3.2.2 User Characteristics

Litt and Hargittai (2016) classify audiences into "abstract imagined audiences" and "targeted imagined audiences." According to their survey, over half (51.7%) of the respondents reported that they did not think of any specific individuals when sharing posts on social media, which is termed "abstract imagined audiences." Conversely, 48.3% of users considered more targeted audiences when sharing posts, referred to as "targeted imagined audiences." Targeted imagined audiences are further divided into four categories: personal relationships, community relationships, professional relationships, and imagined relationships. The interviews revealed that the key factor in determining audience composition is whether users are aiming for sharing or interaction.

Additionally, Stsiampkouskaya et al. (2021) support this perspective. The study identifies two ways users address a diverse range of audiences on social media: one is a broad imagined audience, and the other is specific subgroups, which represent users' particular mental images of their audience on social media. The research suggests that when users share specific content online, they consider subgroups of the audience and may even tailor content according to the tastes and interests of these specific subgroups, expecting clear feedback as compensation for their efforts.

Stoltenberg et al. (2022) categorize audiences into two main types based on social relationships: general audiences and specific audiences. Specific audiences are further divided into four types: personal relationships (friends and family), shared interests (people with similar hobbies), professional relationships (colleagues), and imaginary relationships (celebrities). Most often, when imagining specific audiences, these are related to personal social relationships (Stoltenberg et al., 2022). Additionally, the study found that the degree of social closeness of imagined audiences depends on the communicator's personal characteristics. For example, individuals with higher education are more likely

to imagine professional audiences and public figures. Men are more likely than women to imagine professional audiences, which may reflect a gender disparity in internet use (Van Deursen & Van Dijk, 2014).

### 3.3 *The Impact of Imagined Audiences on Social Media users*

After the review process, it was found that 13 out of the 17 studies identified significant impacts of imagined audiences on users' external behaviors and internal emotions.

#### 3.3.1 Impact on Users' Online Sharing Behavior

Vitak (2015) discovered through interviews that SNS users, when sharing information online, are aware that their audience includes both those they actively think of and potential viewers (e.g., prospective employers). Consequently, SNS users employ a range of social and technical strategies to share information with the appropriate audience. The study found that when researchers' imagined audiences did not match the actual audience, resulting in online disturbances (e.g., controversies arising from inappropriate photos being posted), their online sharing behavior changed. In other words, imagined audiences significantly influence users' online sharing behavior.

Hodson et al. (2022) also mention that the concept of imagined audiences helps us understand why users choose to share or not share certain information. Whether people share specific information depends on their perception of their imagined social media audience and their self-perception relative to that audience. Specifically, first, users may refrain from sharing information if they view the audience as being part of the same group as themselves, termed "mirror audiences." Secondly, users might share information if they imagine a specific audience, such as relational, localized, or dialogic audiences. Finally, users may actively share information by conceptualizing the audience as a broader public community and themselves as "community members," "citizens," or "educators" who are responsible for sharing and promoting the dissemination of such information.

Stsiampkouskaya et al. (2021) conducted a particularly interesting study aimed at determining the relationship between photo-sharing on social media and imagined audiences. The study found that users decide which photos to share from the audience's perspective. Users place significant value on receiving likes and feedback and make a conscious effort to view and interpret their favorite photos from the audience's point of view. This behavior is intended to tailor content based on the audience's tastes and interests, with clear expectations of receiving positive feedback as compensation for the effort they put in.

#### 3.3.2 Impact on Users' Political Expression

In addition to influencing users' information-sharing decisions, imagined audiences have also been shown to affect users' political expression on social media. Su et al. (2022) explored the political implications of social media from the perspective of imagined audiences. The study notes that situational breakdowns and underlying algorithms have complicated the traditional concept of audience. Specifically, proprietary algorithms significantly influence the composition of both actual and imagined audiences. This mental representation of "who is listening" and "how expressions are received" profoundly affects the process and outcomes of political expression. Empirical research revealed that the characteristics of the imagined audience affect how people express their political views on social media.

#### 3.3.3 Impact on Users' Information Disclosure

Marder et al. (2016) argue that there are challenges associated with disclosing information on SNS due to the "compression" of multiple audience groups onto a single platform. Meeting the diverse expectations of different audiences simultaneously is difficult, which leads users to become more cautious about how they present themselves online, sometimes adopting a "lowest common denominator" strategy. The study also suggests that SNS users, fearing they might upset their "imagined audiences," may alter their "real-life" behavior. Meanwhile, Zhang et al. (2021) found that audiences on SNS are often vague and invisible. Due to the limitations of human cognitive capacity, users' imagined audiences rarely align with their actual audiences, increasing the difficulty of audience management and leading to online disturbances. Online disturbances are primarily caused by users sharing information beyond their anticipated audience scope. Users who experience online disturbances often perceive their disclosure behavior as inappropriate, leading to psychological stress. This stress can result in lurking behavior, where users read others' posts but rarely or never share information themselves. Bernstein et al. (2013) also note that there is a fundamental mismatch between perceived and actual audience sizes on social sites. This mismatch may affect users' behavior, including the type of content posted, posting frequency, and motivations for sharing content.

Four studies examine how imagined audiences influence self-disclosure behaviors among adolescents using social media. Cingel & Kremer (2014) suggest that adolescents' use of Facebook may be related to inherent developmental goals of adolescence. The concept of the "imagined audience" is influenced by Facebook use because users act in response to their imagined audience, thereby reinforcing their imagined audience's role.

Krcmar et al. (2015) controlled for age factors and examined the relationship between imagined audiences and self-disclosure among adolescents on Facebook. The results indicated that, except for the age group 19-22, imagined audiences are related to Facebook self-disclosure for other age groups. Additionally, Ranzini & Hoek (2017) found a positive correlation between imagined audiences and impression management. Imagined audiences significantly predicted two types of impression management strategies, with content-based impression management having a stronger impact. This suggests that adolescents' imagined audiences are related to conscious self-disclosure on Facebook. In every social media interaction, adolescents hypothesize an "imagined audience," which influences their self-disclosure behaviors.

Cingel et al. (2015) noted that imagined audiences are related to risky self-disclosure among adolescents on Facebook. Risky self-disclosure refers to disclosing information in a reckless manner on Facebook, where individuals are not concerned about the potential consequences of their actions. For example, disclosing about drunk driving or unsafe sexual behavior. The study found that imagined audiences are associated with problematic self-disclosure because individuals act in response to their imagined audience and react accordingly.

### 3.3.4 Impact of Imagined Audiences on Users' Internal Emotions

The impact of imagined audiences on users' internal emotions is reflected in their subjective well-being and alleviation of fear of negative outcomes. As demonstrated by Jang et al. (2021), this study empirically examined the relationship between imagined audiences on Facebook and users' subjective well-being. The study categorized imagined audiences into strong and weak ties based on different levels of social connection. The findings reveal that social media environments on Facebook can enhance users' subjective well-being by targeting content to weak-tie friends (whether imagined or real). Specifically, the study found that strategic self-presentation, when aimed at weak tie friends, makes users happier compared to presenting their true selves.

Additionally, Kelly et al. (2020) found that young people who imagine their close ones and ordinary friends as audiences on Facebook can effectively alleviate their fear of negative evaluation. The study highlights that Facebook is an evaluative environment where the platform encourages responses through "likes" or comments by others. The study found that on Facebook, users commonly imagine their audience as family, friends, or close acquaintances, who typically provide superficial and positive feedback. Thus, users perceive the platform as a safer space, which helps reduce their fear of negative evaluation.

## 4. Discussion and Conclusion

### 4.1 Discussion of the Research Context

On the one hand, the volume of research in this field has significantly increased in recent years. Notably, research conducted during the pandemic accounts for half of the total studies. This can be attributed to the fact that, during the pandemic, many individuals were unable to engage in face-to-face interactions due to lockdowns and social distancing measures, making social media a critical alternative tool. The COVID-19 pandemic not only accelerated the integration of social media into daily life but also highlighted the challenges and potential drawbacks of an increasingly digital social environment (Hodson et al., 2022). Consequently, scholars have focused on how people use social networks for interaction and predicting the potential risks associated with such interactions.

Most of the studies in this area have employed survey methods to examine proposed theoretical models. While these studies provide empirical support for the theoretical models, they do not establish causality. Additionally, future research in this field could benefit from integrating mixed methods. Mixed methods research combines the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative approaches, providing a more comprehensive and nuanced perspective that overcomes the limitations of single-method studies (Hennink et al., 2020).

On the other hand, research on the topic of imagined audiences has primarily concentrated on a few developed countries (e.g., the United States, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, etc.). However, only one study has been conducted in a developing country (e.g., China). Future research should explore this topic further within different cultural contexts, as cultural differences can affect the purpose of social media use, social expectations of audiences, identity construction, and privacy awareness (Miller et al., 2016).

Due to the diversity and inclusivity of social media culture, users in developed countries often present more complex and multi-layered identities on platforms, and their imagined audiences tend to be more complex as well, potentially including diverse social circles and audiences across different platforms (Witte & Mannon, 2010). In some developing countries, social media use is often closely tied to identity display and the construction of social status. When posting, users may consider specific expectations within their family and social circles, and their imagined audiences may carry more traditional social role expectations.

Users in developed countries generally have a stronger awareness of privacy and online security. They are often

conscious of the potential reach of their content, including possible exposure to governments, corporations, and advertisers, which influences how they perceive their “imagined audiences” and may lead to self-censorship. On the other hand, users in developing countries tend to have weaker privacy awareness, with many users not fully understanding the scope of their content's reach (Wyche et al., 2013; Arora, 2019). Their imagined audiences are more likely to be confined to their personal social circles, often overlooking the potential privacy risks that social media platforms can pose.

#### *4.2 Discussion on Factors Leading to Differentiated Audience Classification*

The review reveals that due to platform characteristic differences, user-defined audience types are often categorized into two main groups: “target audience” and “non-target audience.”

##### *4.2.1 Platform Characteristic Differences*

The distinction between target and non-target audiences is primarily due to the design and cultural norms of different platforms, which directly influence how users construct and differentiate their audience groups.

Symmetric platforms (e.g., Facebook, WeChat) versus asymmetric platforms (e.g., Twitter, Instagram). On platforms like Facebook or WeChat, relationships between users are reciprocal, meaning that both parties must agree to become friends. This symmetry in design encourages users to focus more on personal relationships and interactions, making their target audience more clearly defined, such as family and friends (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). Since users need to actively accept or initiate friend requests, they have a higher level of control over who sees their content, leading them to be more cautious about which information to share with which individuals, ensuring that the content aligns with the expectations of their target audience. In contrast, on asymmetric platforms like Twitter or Instagram, user relationships are non-reciprocal, allowing users to follow others without the need for mutual consent. This openness results in a broader and less defined audience. In such an environment, users often have a more abstract concept of a non-target audience—people they may not know or may not even be aware will encounter their content. This characteristic of the platform sometimes leads users to be unclear about their actual audience, potentially resulting in an “abstract audience” or “neglected audience” that differs from their originally intended target audience.

Platform culture and usage. Different platforms have distinct usage cultures and purposes, which directly impact how users categorize their audiences (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). For example, Twitter is often viewed as a tool for information dissemination, where users tend to target a broader, more public audience and focus on the spread of information. In this context, users’ non-target audiences may be larger than their target audiences, including unexpected strangers or followers. Instagram, with its emphasis on visual content and focus on showcasing art or lifestyle, may lead users to imagine an audience with similar interests (target audience) while overlooking those who encounter their content due to social algorithms or by chance (non-target audience). On Facebook, which is primarily used for expanding and maintaining social relationships, users may adjust their content according to their social or professional circles to ensure the strengthening of their social connections (Hodson et al., 2020).

##### *4.2.2 Differences in User Characteristics*

Differences in user characteristics make the classification of imagined audiences quite complex. According to various studies, imagined audiences are generally categorized into two main types: “abstract audiences” and “specific audiences.” Additionally, users further subdivide “specific audiences” into several dimensions, including personal relationships (close social connections such as friends and family), community relationships (e.g., interest groups), professional relationships (colleagues, superiors, employers, etc.), and fantasy relationships (celebrities or symbolic figures).

Firstly, users' social needs influence how they construct their imagined audiences (Litt & Hargittai, 2016). For instance, users with strong social needs, who primarily use social media to build close connections, are more likely to think of target audiences such as friends, family, or professional contacts. Conversely, users with lower social needs or those who are more inclined towards self-expression tend to construct abstract audiences, focusing on sharing content without specific attention to feedback.

Secondly, the motivation behind content sharing is also a crucial factor (Stsiampkouskaya et al., 2021). If users share content to seek interaction or feedback, they are more likely to imagine a target audience and hope to engage with them. On the other hand, if the primary goal of sharing is self-expression or display, users might be less concerned with specific audiences and address a broader, more abstract group.

Moreover, the difference between weak and strong ties plays a role. When interacting with weak ties, users often imagine an abstract audience because these relationships require less personal investment and do not expect in-depth feedback from the audience (Stsiampkouskaya et al., 2021; Su et al., 2022). In contrast, with strong ties, users tend to share information with specific individuals, who are often considered target audiences.



Finally, identity and background factors into the process. Studies have shown that users with higher education levels are more likely to share professional information on social platforms, making them more prone to considering the public, peers, or professional circles as target audiences (Van Deursen & Van Dijk, 2014). In such cases, their imagined audiences are more focused on professional circles or career-related relationships, with the audience being well-defined and interaction often having professional expectations.

Currently, there is a lack of research examining personality traits as antecedent factors in the formation of imagined audiences. It is hoped that future studies will address this gap.

#### *4.3 The Impact of Imagined Audiences on Users*

The influence of imagined audiences on users' behaviors may result in a range of outcomes, affecting not only individual actions but also extending to social, psychological, and societal levels.

Firstly, there is identity fragmentation and increased stress. Imagined audiences compel users to meticulously manage their self-presentation on social media. Since users may face diverse audiences in different contexts—such as friends, family, colleagues, and potential employers—they must adapt their online personas to meet the expectations of various groups. However, this strategy can lead to "identity fragmentation," where users feel the need to maintain multiple identities simultaneously, complicating their sense of self (Vitak et al., 2015). The prolonged role-switching and identity management may increase psychological stress, potentially leading to anxiety and confusion in self-perception. This issue is particularly pronounced when there is a significant discrepancy between users' online personas and their offline identities, exacerbating the challenge. To address this dilemma, social media platforms could introduce features such as "time-limited content," like Instagram Stories and Snapchat. This functionality caters to users' needs for sharing short-term, context-specific information while minimizing the risks of content being permanently stored or excessively disseminated. Additionally, platforms could consider incorporating a "single-view content" option, which prevents content from being screenshotted or repeatedly viewed, thereby reducing the likelihood of privacy breaches.

Secondly, reduced self-disclosure and lurking behavior. As discussed earlier, research by Marder et al. (2016) and Zhang et al. (2021) indicates that users, fearing that sensitive content might be seen by unintended audiences, tend to limit self-disclosure or even cease sharing content altogether, exhibiting "lurking behavior." This reduction in information sharing diminishes users' activity on social media and decreases their frequency of interaction with others, thereby undermining the social functionality of these platforms. To address this issue, social media platforms could leverage AI-driven content protection and notification systems. For instance, a "Content AI Protection" feature could be introduced to automatically detect and notify users of screenshooting or screen recording attempts, providing the content creator with a record of such activities (e.g., identifying users attempting to save the content). Additionally, an "AI Sharing Risk Assessment" tool could be developed to help users evaluate potential risks before posting, such as whether the content includes sensitive information or could be misinterpreted by the audience. These AI-powered features could enhance users' sense of security and reduce the psychological burden associated with sharing content.

Furthermore, self-censorship and the loss of expressive diversity. Su et al. (2022) noted that users often reduce or soften their political expression out of concern for imagined audiences, particularly superiors or colleagues. This self-censorship may lead to a decrease in both the diversity and depth of political discussions on social media, as many controversial or radical viewpoints go unexpressed or undebated. Consequently, social media platforms may become more "homogeneous," lacking the diversity of opinion essential for rich discourse.

Lastly, increased risky self-disclosure and identity confusion among adolescents. Studies have shown that adolescents may engage in risky self-disclosure to meet the perceived expectations of imagined audiences (Cingel et al., 2015). Cingel et al. (2015) found that adolescents often use such risky disclosures to conform to social media norms and elevate their social status. However, this behavior can lead to long-term negative consequences, including privacy breaches, damage to their reputation, and even adverse effects on future employment opportunities (Nesi & Prinstein, 2015). Moreover, when adolescents rely excessively on imagined audiences for self-presentation and identity formation, they may develop social anxiety, particularly when their self-presentation does not receive the expected positive feedback. This can lead to doubts about their self-worth and result in identity confusion.

### **5. Strengths and Limitations**

This study aims to provide a systematic review of the concept of imagined audiences, offering a comprehensive perspective on the current state of research in this area. Although research on this topic has been conducted for over a decade, findings have been fragmented. Therefore, a systematic review of this field is crucial.

This review summarizes the research background of all included studies, such as sample characteristics, countries, and the social media platforms involved. More importantly, it presents the factors influencing the classification of audiences and identifies the impact of imagined audiences on users' internal emotions and external behaviors. The systematic

results of this study provide both theoretical and practical implications for advancing future research on imagined audiences.

Systematic literature reviews are a rigorous and comprehensive method for summarizing and analyzing literature aimed at addressing specific research questions. Despite their design to provide high-quality, objective evidence, systematic reviews do have certain limitations in practice. On one hand, the sample includes only peer-reviewed journal articles, excluding other types of publications such as conference proceedings. Consequently, the findings may not encompass all existing research on imagined audiences, potentially affecting the comprehensiveness of the literature and introducing some biases. On the other hand, there is a language bias; this review is limited to articles published in English, which may result in the omission of research published in other languages, particularly in non-English-speaking countries where substantial research exists, thereby affecting the generalizability of the conclusions.

The review indicates that most studies on imagined audiences are quantitative in nature, and future research should encourage meta-analytic studies to provide more comprehensive and targeted conclusions.

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### **Authors contributions**

Dr. Sun Jingle was responsible for the study design, data collection, and drafting of the manuscript. Associate Professor Akmar Hayati Ahmad Ghazali and Dr. Rahman Saiful Nujaimi Abdul were responsible for reviewing and revising the manuscript. All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript. This study does not adopt an equal contribution statement, and all contributions are clearly delineated based on actual roles.

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### **Data availability statement**

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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