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Alone With Goffman: Impression Management and the TV Series

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Alone is an American reality television series on the History Channel. The show features 10 contestants who are vying to outlast each other while living off the land. Notably, there is no camera crew, and the contestants must film themselves everyday; the production team creates a weekly program that marks the journey of each individual. This study sought to understand the degree to which participants are able to shape their public identities through the video footage they shot and that was subsequently edited in Alone's cutting room. The research team employed an explorative case study methodology, which allowed them to watch hours of publicly available official video clips from the History Channel's Alone YouTube channel. The analysis was driven by theory (Goffman's *The Presentation of Self* conceptual framework) and an inductive thematic analysis, which took place in a cyclical fashion through interpretation meetings at the end of each of the six series that were watched. The findings first showed that the contestants were performing to multiple audiences, such as their families, the public, the producers, and even God. Second, the boundary between the frontstage and the backstage was highly blurred. Third, the contestants were able to continue shaping and "repairing" their identities through their own social media outlets after the program. Finally, the theme of gendered approaches to living outdoors shone through in ways that were very complex, overlapping, and non-binary. There is an undeniably strong "impression management tension" between the selves that participants wanted to project and the narratives that were constructed by the Alone program's producers.

Keywords: Alone, Goffman, reality television, YouTube, impression management

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Alone At Last

Alone is an American reality television series that runs on the History Channel. The show features a group of 10 highly motivated and skilled, but otherwise "ordinary" contestants, who are individually placed alone in a wilderness area (e.g., northern Vancouver Island). Their challenge is to stay out longer than the other competitors, with whom they have no contact.

With a strictly limited amount of equipment, contestants must deal with challenging weather conditions, wild animals, hunger, and their own solitude. While they are alone in the wilderness, they have an emergency phone to call for help or "tap out," should they wish to be brought back to civilization. The show premiered in June 2015 and, at the time of writing, has run for seven seasons—each of which lasts 10–13 weeks.

Over the course of the program's life, the conditions and challenges have gradually been made harder, as the locations have moved from Vancouver Island and Patagonia (seasons 1–4) to Mongolia and the Canadian Arctic (seasons 5–7). In season 4, the concept involved pairs being "alone" in the wilderness, and in season 5, the contestants were all former participants. Season 7 was promoted as the "Million Dollar Challenge," where any participant staying for 100 days would win the money. In previous seasons, only the winner would claim the prize of $500,000 USD.

The participants are given basic equipment by the production team, and as a supplement, they can choose 10 survival tools (e.g., an ax, a saw, and fishing hooks and line). Getting enough food is generally the biggest challenge, and all participants lose quite a lot of their body weight (often 25–35%) during their time on the program (often 70–90 days for the winners). Participants are sometimes required to leave the show if their body weight becomes dangerously low. They have no idea how the other participants are faring.

Through an impressive array of camera equipment, participants video-record their own experiences for up to 5 h a day. The production team then edits the material, chooses interesting parts, and creates audience-friendly episodes. The participants are shown in a wide range of circumstances, which elicits footage that shows them being variously confident, reflective, worried, elated, depressed, and emotional. The program often focuses on contrasts between the participants' different approaches to survival and usually ends with one of the participants tapping out and returning home.

Participating in the show represents an enormous event in their lives. They are exposed to millions of people and, crucially, have the opportunity to win half a million dollars. Both of these factors have the capacity to significantly alter their life situation. Most of the participants—especially in the later seasons—are either professional survival skill instructors or highly experienced homesteaders. Many have their own companies and associated YouTube channels that are dedicated to their practice. Performing well on Alone thus becomes a higher stakes proposition.

The traffic and comments on the History Channel's Alone YouTube channel show a devoted fan base who admire the contestants' amazing bushcraft skills, ingenuity, fortitude, bravery, and deep connection to the natural world. A successful performance on the show will likely lead to increased social status in the survival world, which may pave the way for increased income and opportunities. The ultimate prize is the half a million US dollar payout for the winner of each series (1 million for series 7). Together, these factors appear to reflect the American dream of being financially successful and providing for one's family, through hard work, skills, and strong character.

Alone is promoted as the "most intense survival series on television," where the contestants must endure harsh conditions and deal with "aggressive predators" (History Channel, 2021). The degree to which the show is authentic has been debated (Celebrity Facts, n.d.), as some have questioned the remoteness of the locations and inconsistencies in the participants' permitted equipment. The participants' identities are central to the program's ethos, and there is a strong focus on their lives before and after the time on the show. Audience members thus gain a view of each participant's family, home, and occupation. A useful overview of the Alone program, its seven seasons, the show locations, and the participants, can be found on Wikipedia (n.d.).

The Alone series is of particular interest to viewers, as it appears to be a version of reality television taken to the extreme, in terms of location, "on set" conditions, the lack of interference from directors, and the fact that participants have no human contact except for occasional medical checks and battery/memory card swaps for the video cameras. It appears that many Alone watchers are curious to know how "real" the program really is (Celebrity Facts, n.d.). The series is of interest to researchers as well, as no peer-reviewed work has examined the ways in which it is confected by producers and participants alike. Our research question is thus the following: *How are participants able to shape the way they are perceived by their TV audiences?*

Reality TV: Truth or Staged?

Reality TV as a genre has a long history, dating back to the early days of television. The hidden cameras which filmed people in funny and strange situations appeared for the first time in 1948 on the show Candid Camera, which is considered by some to be the first reality television (Slade et al., 2014). During the 2000s, a slew of reality television programs became global successes and were copied in different countries. Shows such as Idol, Big Brother, The Biggest Loser, Got Talent, and Top Model have been international hits and distributed to over 30 countries.

Ebersole and Woods (2007) asked why people watch reality TV and found five factors that explain program choice preference: personal identification with real characters, entertainment, mood change, to pass time, and vicarious participation. Reality TV concerns much more than what goes on during each episode, however. Indeed, contemporary reality shows represent a multimodal media scene with TV, tabloids, and social media intermingling and often working in concert with each other (Slade et al., 2014). In many cases, the most popular participants from the series (usually winners or at least finalists) begin new careers as actors, program directors, and social "influencers."

Outdoor survival is a subgenre within reality TV, and the Alone program has a number of representatives in this genre, which include other shows, such as Man vs. Wild, Naked and Afraid, Alaskan Bush People, and Get Out Alive with Bear Grylls. The Swedish program *Expedition Robinson* started in 1997 and became an international success, which was later re-branded as *Survivor*. The idea of competition and elimination was the primary focus, and to be the "last person standing" was what all participants strived to become. Survivor was very popular, and in 2000–2001, it became the most watched TV show of the season in the United States, with over 51 million viewers tuning in for the last episode (Ebersole and Woods, 2007).

A precursor to Alone was The American Sportsman (1965–1986), which aired on ABC and filmed celebrities hunting, fishing, rock climbing, and scuba diving. Using nature as a backdrop and framework for reality television thus has a long history. During the 1990s, the new camera technology enabled completely different and better recording options. The affordances of video recording—such as the lower weight, being easier to

operate by a non-expert, and lack of need to develop film—permitted the participants themselves to be involved in capturing the material for the show. In the Alone program, the participants film themselves through video cameras that are both manual and automatic, and handheld and mounted. Through the absence of a film crew, the producers position the show as being highly authentic, as they are "on this journey" with the participants (History Channel, 2016).

Reality TV usually involves "ordinary people" being placed in unusual circumstances, with the assumption that exciting and entertaining footage will result. In Alone, all the participants film themselves for up to 5 h a day; it is then up to those in the editing room who, from an enormous bank of raw footage, reduce, select, and re-constitute the material that is used on each program. Shawn Witt, Alone's executive producer, claims that "it requires months of screening and a team of more than 25 associate producers to log the thousands of hours our participants capture" (Cynopsis, 2018). One important question remains unanswered and that is the following: With all of the footage to choose from, *How much of the drama is created in the editing room?*

One telling example comes from season 2, when one of the last participants, Jose Martinez, made the call, asking to be rescued. When the help crew arrived, Martinez was still standing out in the river (perhaps an hour after making the call), freezing cold, with his arms holding his homemade canoe. He asked for assistance, and the rescuers helped him get out of the water and on to the shore. This scene, shown on YouTube on the History Channel (which owns Alone), was heavily criticized by viewers in the comments section. Other websites asked why he waited in the cold water all by himself, rather than on the shore, and questioned how "real" the show really was (Celebrity Facts, n.d.). Indeed, it would appear that he moved back into the water after making his phone call. This is an example of "staged authenticity," where the actual scene is supposed to be real, but the scene is apparently edited to create more dramatic and hazardous feelings. Reality TV thus seems to be fundamentally about impression management.

Goffman's Presentation of Self Framework

The theoretical framework for this inquiry almost chose itself. A set of social circumstances where the principal actors spend several hours a day filming themselves in the knowledge that close to a million people will see some of their footage points very clearly toward the Erving Goffman (1959) masterpiece, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Our challenge, then, was to draw on a widely applied, theoretical framework and to employ it in a manner that would reveal a deeper understanding of the complexities, nuances of how Alone contestants managed public impressions of themselves during the program. As we learned during our inquiry, this "impression management," as Goffman called it, began before the contestants were dropped off and continued long after they had returned home.

The roots of Goffman's *The Presentation of Self* (PoS) framework were sown during the 12 months he spent doing ethnographic field work in Scotland's Shetland Islands, between 1949 and 1951. On the first page of his doctoral dissertation, Goffman (1953) claimed that his findings would be "useful in studying interaction throughout our society" (p. 1). Goffman's principal interest was, of course, face-to-face interaction and what can be considered "the minutiae of ordinary talk and activity" (Smith, 2006). Of course, in 1950, the technology did not exist to enable multiple cameras filming banal activities and interactions for hours each day. Herein lies our first extension of Goffman's POS framework to Alone: the interactions that the contestants had was, apart from brief medical check-ups with staff, not face-to-face with other human beings. Footage from Alone shows that the contestants have conversations with the imagined TV audience, their families, the producers, God, and, of course, themselves.

Goffman's book, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, was first published as a monograph in 1956, before being picked up and printed on a mass scale by Anchor Books in 1959. Goffman (1959) famously wrote that "the world's a stage" (p. 254), and the wilderness settings for the Alone contestants were that stage. Central to the PoS framework is individuals presenting fronts. Fronts are used to "define the situation" for both actors and audiences and are conveyed through a person's clothing, gestures, speech, and so on. This "expressive equipment" may be either "intentionally or unwittingly employed" (Goffman, 1959) in order to help construct an image of ourselves (Fine & Manning, 2003).

Goffman (1959) regards these fronts as having a certain moral element to them and features actors making claims to their audiences about who they really are, with the expectation that their fronts will be taken seriously. Audiences thus expect a "confirming consistency" between a performer's appearance (what they look like) and manner (what they do) (p. 24). These ideas around appearance and manner being presented as the basis of moral claims to identity through the presentation of fronts were of central importance to our analysis of the Alone program. In Goffman's originally conceived framework, however, actors are usually able to see the reactions from their audiences and thus gauge the effectiveness of their performances. In Alone, this interaction with others is largely one-way.

For Goffman (and for researchers), impression management becomes much more interesting when there are inconsistencies between an actor's appearance and manner—between the moral claims made by actors to identity initially and their subsequent abilities to act in accordance with those claims. Goffman (1959) explains that human beings are constantly managing "potential disruptions" (p. 254) to the impressions they are fostering for others. People typically employ "defensive and protective practices" to "safeguard" (p. 14) against threats to the image of themselves they are projecting.

Besides appearance and manner, fronts also include the physical setting. In many social encounters, access to private and public settings will differ. For example, in a restaurant, customers do not usually get to see what is happening in the kitchen, and at a dinner party, guests may only have access to the living room and toilet. Goffman (1959) used the terms *frontstage* and *backstage* to refer to the access audience members had to the actor's settings. During the Alone program, the cameras were rolling for up to 5 h a day, and there was probably much less of a boundary

between the contestants' frontstage and the backstage. This intrigued us, as it likely made it much for the contestants to pay explicit attention to the "over communication of some facts and the under communication of others" (p. 141).

Goffman's dramaturgical perspective is, of course, far more complex than we have outlined above. For the purposes of this paper, we are focusing primarily on Goffman's ideas projecting impressions of ourselves in the face of potential disruptions.

METHODOLOGY

The study is driven by three researchers who are each based in a different country. They draw on backgrounds in outdoor education, sociology, sports, and media. The inspiration for this project arose from a shared fascination in the program and a desire to more deeply understand the forces at work within the production of Alone. The principal question we ask is the following: *How are Alone contestants able to influence the ways in which they are perceived by their audience?*

The inquiry is positioned as an explorative case study (Flyvbjerg 2001; Robson 2002; Yin 2014), which attempts to produce new knowledge about a well-known phenomenon, based on hypotheses. Essentially, we aimed to address our research question by each of us watching all of the official, freely available material on the show while having analytical discussions about this process along the way.

After watching the available material for Alone season 1, we had a better feel of how to proceed, in terms of strict and consistent methods of data collection, analysis, and verification. We decided to watch the shortened YouTube series of the History Channel's Alone—all of which are freely available to the public. From each season, there are 20–30 clips of approximately 2 to 5 min in duration. Clips typically focus on participants introducing themselves and their home lives, presenting their "10 selected items," being engaged in action (e.g., hunting, fishing, and shelter building), tapping out, coming home, reflecting on their performance, and, for one person a season, winning. Taken together, the clips gave us a broad impression of the program's ethos.

We watched six of the seven seasons, as we chose to omit season 4 due to its exceptional format of having participants in pairs—meaning they were not "alone" in that sense. Zoom meetings were held after watching each season, where notes were compared on what was deemed to be especially noteworthy and theoretically relevant. We first approached the data with pre-determined *etic* themes (see Stake, 1995), courtesy of Goffman (1959) PoS key concepts, such as front, setting, expressive equipment, and regions. Gradually, over a four-week period, *emic* themes emerged that were driven entirely by our interpretations of the data (Stake, 1995). The robust, cyclical process of data generation and analysis lent validity to findings, not least due to our own questioning of each other's views as we shaped our themes over the six seasons. Following Maxwell (2012) maxim for increasing validity in qualitative research, we asked each other the following: *How might you be wrong?* Our research methodology is captured in **Figure 1**.

Using YouTube as the principal source of data brings challenges associated with selecting the most useful information. Inspired by visual sociology (Pauwel, 2020), a qualitative content analysis working both inductively and iteratively helped us frame the core content of interest. Pauwel describes visual research methods as resting on the "premise that valid and unique insight into culture and society can be acquired by carefully observing, analyzing and theorizing its visual dimensions and manifestations" of human behavior and material culture (p. 14).

The method of data generation, analysis, and verification thus followed a hermeneutic-inspired approach (McCaffrey et al., 2012), which enabled us to develop a deep understanding of the empirical material (the selected seasons and clips) and, more broadly, of the TV show as a social phenomenon. The latter was done through initially exploring the vast quantity of post-program activity on social media by participants and survival method influencers. All of the material viewed on the History Channel's Alone YouTube space is presented in **Supplementary Table S1**.

Our observations and analysis were informed by our theoretical framework, which was Goffman's *The Presentation of Self* (PoS), as explained earlier. A list of key PoS concepts was prepared before watching the series, and this proved helpful in quickly showing us which of these were most relevant to the Alone clips we were watching. While we focussed primarily on Goffman, we remained open to other "non-Goffman themes" emerging, such as that of gendered approaches, which is our third principal findings theme.

Our analysis meetings after each round of watching and note taking concentrated on discussing similarities and differences in our understanding of the shows, which led to a common understanding of the most important issues contained within the viewed material. Each of these Zoom meetings was recorded so that they could be referred to later on and thus supplemented the existing empirical data.

The multiple rounds of data analysis were informed by the familiar, six-step approach popularized by Braun and Clarke (2006). We became familiar with the data, generated initial codes, built tentative themes, reviewed and refined these themes, defined and named the themes, and used these to construct *Findings* in this paper that features three key themes. An abductive approach to analyzing the data permitted us to consider a wide variety of interpretations of the data before arriving at our principal findings (see Charmaz, 2006). Furthermore, it allowed us to move back and forth between Goffman's etic themes and the emic ones that emerged over the course of the cycles of analysis.

The process eventually led to the decision to bring the participants' own social media platforms into the pool of empirical material, as we realized that the "managing disruptions" theme extended to when the participants returned home. In order to fully examine this crucial theme, we then needed to extend our data collection's reach by viewing clips on former Alone participants' own YouTube channels. These online spaces often provided insider perspectives that were not captured by the History Channel's episodes. Unlike the official YouTube video clips made available by the History

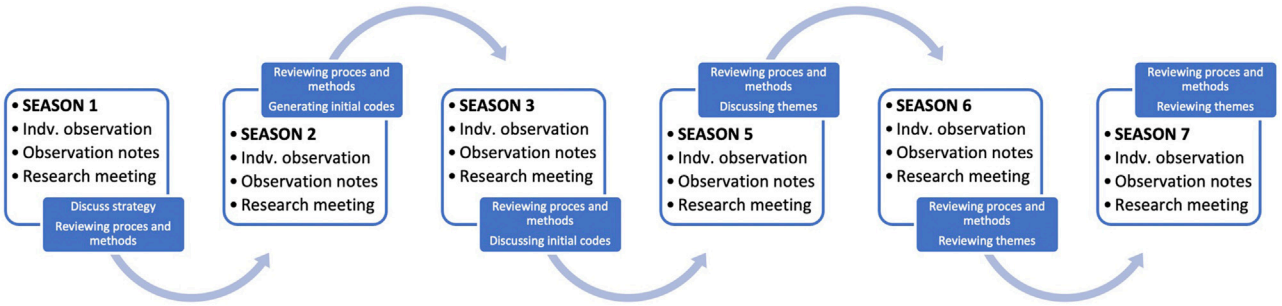

FIGURE 1 | Overview of methodology.

Channel, the number of public videos is vast. As such, we limited ourselves to skimming content that was posted by former participants that had received high numbers of views (e.g., over 100,000).

The study is limited by the researchers not being able to watch and read every morsel of official and unofficial material that is publicly available. The principal empirical material was purposely limited by the content released by the History Channel on YouTube. As such, we were only able to watch and analyze the shortened YouTube clips. Watching the programs in full length might have contributed to a better understanding of the participants' actions and reflections during the show. The advantage of our chosen strategy, however, is that we were able to focus on the essence of what the media company (History Channel) wanted to offer to the public. As all of the viewed material is publicly available, we were not faced with any obvious ethical considerations. Following recommendations on conducting social media research (Moreno et al., 2013), we did not anonymize nor request consent to use material from any party.

FINDINGS

Due to the multitude of dramaturgical concepts within Goffman's *The Presentation of Self* framework, the possibility of it making too blunt an instrument to use to dissect the Alone program became apparent. Extensive discussions over Zoom in the authors' three different countries slowly revealed three Goffman-driven categories of findings, along with one category lying out with *The Presentation of Self* theory.

The first category features the interactions associated with the participants making claims to their identities. The second concerns the ways in which there was very little difference between the participants' private (backstage) performances and their public (frontstage) ones. The third comprises the strategies employed to manage disruptions to presented identities. And the fourth surrounds the gendered nature of both the participants' relationship with the ecosystems and the cultural messages being sent to the public.

Presenting Fronts

Central to the Goffman (1959) PoS framework is that human beings are continually presenting fronts that are generally based on their appearance and their manner. These fronts constitute moral claims that are made by actors to their audiences. While these claims of high levels of survival skills and mental tenacity are most often found near the beginning of the seasons, they also exist before the participants even leave their homes. Elaborate clips produced by the History Channel show each of the participants with their families, at their homes, and practicing their survival skills. Impressive videos show participants building fires, making shelters, and hunting game all over the world.

An inherent part of presenting fronts involves participants making claims about who they are (Goffman, 1959). Claims may be made subtly and unconsciously or, as with many Alone contestants, rather bold and direct. For example, in season 6, Ray claims that he is "one hundred percent confident" that he will win (6/9) [1]. Nikki states, "I'm tough. I know what it is like to suffer. I'm going to be the woman who wins Alone" (6/10). This phenomenon is epitomized by Roland, who describes himself as the "ultimate wilderness machine" and brashly states that he will "show the whole world: I'm the big bull of the northern woods!" (7/12).

The participants' manners were complemented by their clothing and equipment. In the first episodes of each season, there is a ritual where each competitor kneels before the camera and explains to the audience the 10 items they have chosen to keep with them (e.g., an ax, fishing line, hooks). The participants explain why these articles will give them a competitive advantage and very often claim that they possess the unique skills required to stay out the longest and how their life up until that point has prepared them to succeed in this show. Indeed, at the beginning of season 7, Roland finished presenting his 10 items and stated, "there's my 10 items, that's the winning team: show time!" The TV audience is certainly led to believing the fronts presented by the season's 10 contestants, and according to Goffman (1959), there is little reason for the audience to doubt them.

[1]This annotation system shows the season first and then the clip number, as outlined in **Supplementary Table S1**.

The PoS framework assumes that individual actors play different fronts for different audiences. In the Alone series, however, this notion takes on new levels of complexity. Rather than a person playing to three kinds of face-to-face audiences, such as those at home, at work, and at play, the presence of the video cameras greatly expands possibilities. While on the program, participants are having face-to-face and radio conversations with the directors and one-way conversations with the camera to themselves, the TV audience, and their families. For example, in season 5, Dave recounts to the camera how he struggles with causing animals to suffer through his hunting for food (5/5). In the same season, Larry is visibly upset—almost driven to madness—by the mice in his shelter (5/18) and is effectively thinking aloud, as if he was narrating his own movie. The star of season 1, Alan, spends hours talking about random topics (seemingly to anyone who might listen) in an effort to entertain himself (1/44). Nicole, in season 2, tells the viewers that she can communicate "not only with animals, but also with plants and ancestors and the world around" (2/20). She goes on to explain that she lost her eldest son a few years ago and was looking forward to spending time alone in nature so that she could talk with him (2/20).

It would appear that the contestants mostly speak in ways that seek to explain actions to the audience or to clarify their own feelings to themselves. For example, Dave from season 5 (clip 15) is shown upon a tree in Mongolia, where he is having a serious conversation with himself about what he values most in life and whether he should tap out. He asks, "What motivates me? It's tough to watch your muscles just disappear. It's difficult. I don't know. . ..!" Later, sitting by the water, he turns his face directly to the audience and says, "It feels very right." In the next scene of the same clip, Dave is smiling and looking very self-assured and explains matter-of-factly to the rescue team the main reason he is tapping out is due to the alarming amount of weight he has lost. Dave says, "Straight and simple: I'm proud of what I've done. I'm happy." The footage highlights Dave's journey from the uncertainty about staying, to the possible shame associated with tapping out, to a personal victory, where he has respected the needs of his body. This extended example illustrates how managing one's impression, over time, to multiple audiences is central to the contestants' participation in Alone.

Blurring of Backstage and Frontstage

Another reason that playing to multiple audiences on Alone is fascinating is because—as with almost all reality television shows—there is very little private space. In Goffman (1959) terms, there is an almost complete absence of a backstage, where performances are prepared, and a frontstage, where performances are presented (p. 231). Goffman also referred to these spaces as front and back "regions."

Herein lies a contrast with one of Goffman's concepts, as he stated that the backstage is the one "where the performer can reliably expect that no member of the audience will intrude" (p. 116). Because the cameras were rolling for so many hours a day, the performer had fewer opportunities to suppress facts about themselves or to drop their fronts (pp. 114–15). This is not to say that there is no backstage on Alone; rather the line between the backstage and the frontstage is somewhat thinner and blurrier than in "normal life."

These discussions of stages become further complicated by the fact that the series producers then edit the programs to limited clips which presumably reflect the episode's narrative for each contestant. It stands to reason that a reality TV program will have increasing audience appeal if it shows unadulterated "backstage material." In Alone, it is arguable that, in some instances, the backstage, where people might be lying in their sleeping bags and talking to themselves about how scared or hungry they are, has purposely or unwittingly very much become a public performance—presumably to the delight of the producers.

Managing Disruptions

For Goffman (1959), the "crucial sociological consideration" (p. 72) surrounds how people's carefully curated identities are subjected to disruptions. This happens when events take place which lie in contrast with the actor's original projection of who they claim to be. Disruptions happen frequently, and it is only by employing "defensive and protective practices" that humans use to "compensate for discrediting occurrences" can people "safeguard the impression" they are fostering for their audience (p. 25). There are numerous examples of the contestants making claims of their survival prowess before being dropped off, but later finding excuses for their lack of success finding food or their reasons for "tapping out" (i.e., deciding to leave the program). Some statements that could be regarded as defensive practices include "I'm disappointed, but not embarrassed. . . I want my son to have his dad" (1/46) and "I'm leaving feeling very triumphant, very successful" (2/31).

This notion that people are exercising power while leaving the show is highlighted in season 5 while Brooke was tapping out. The camera follows Brooke's steps from the tent where the rescue team picks her up, into the waiting van, while she explains to the camera, "This is enough hunger. This is enough cold. This is enough loneliness. It's enough of the green Monster [referring to nature]. It's like, OK, this is over. Leave with a smile on my face. And that's what I choose" (season 5, episode 24). In season 1, Josh tapped out early and looked into the camera explaining "All I did was freeze, I was scared to death. I'm not jacking around with bears. What if something happens - I want my son to have his dad" (1/24).

Managing disruptions to impressions was not something that was limited to the times that participants were on the program. After the program has finished, it is not uncommon for the contestants to continue managing their impressions to the YouTube audience. Indeed, in some cases, this audience was established long before the program began. It is through people's personally curated, public YouTube channels that people can continue to shape the audience members' understanding of the "show" they witnessed; it is through such online spaces where former participants can offer their versions of "what really happened," in a way that is not mediated by the Alone program's producers. Take, for example, Brooke from season 4, who made a video on her own YouTube channel (Girl in the woods, 2017, 0.48s-1.23s) entitled *Why We Tapped* (Whipple, 2017). The rationale for making this video was because Brooke

felt that the Alone show did not portray this aspect of participants' experiences accurately.

Woniya, from season 6, explains how she was "definitely really really disappointed in how very very many are being left out of my story. There are so many things that you don't see" (Buckskin Revolution, 2019, 1.10s)[2]. On her own channel, Woniya describes another hunting episode and some craft projects (e.g., tanning a squirrel hide) that are not featured on the program. She also outlines how she had a very serious dermatitis problem on the back of her thighs from squatting in a plant called "Labrador tea." This only healed several weeks after Woniya returned home. Dealing with this painful condition was, according to Woniya, "another secret part of my story that you're not witnessing on the show" (35.10 s).

Joe, from season 1, created an 8 min video to elaborately describe all of the obstacles and bad luck that he had encountered and which had together conspired to become so insurmountable that he had to "tap out" (Robinet, 2015). At the time of writing this paper, Joe's video has been watched more than 375,000 times, in which he claims that "these are not excuses... I could have stayed another few days for sure" (6.12 s). It is undeniable that Joe is devastated by his own performance and for, in his own words, "dropping the ball." For the purposes of this analysis, what is of interest is how the above three examples from Brooke, Woniya, and Joe demonstrate that it is they who have the final word on what happened on the show and how they felt about it, and not the producers. The producers have, through the slick History production, an undeniably large influence on the personal narratives. Still, one of this inquiry's key findings is the tension between messages delivered through the program and messages delivered after it.

Gendered Approaches

The fourth theme in *Findings* is not part of Goffman's framework and is also less well-defined. Goffman did write about gender in other work, however. In Gender Advertisements, Goffman (1979) shows how gender is coded and constructed in advertising images, through men and women being portrayed differently in advertising. Examples of this include women's body language through ritualized subordination, which is depicted by lying or kneeling while radiating submissiveness, while the men are usually portrayed as active. This research did not find any widespread binary distinctions, even though there were individual examples of traditional masculinities and femininities.

We have labeled this theme "gendered approaches" to living on the land and to approaching the competition more generally. There are several studies of gender structures in reality television (Buchanan, 2014; Hernandez, 2014), and some of them are concentrating on the construction of masculinity in the subgenre of wilderness television. Ferrari (2014) claims that reality television is an important site for projecting a "cultural vision of masculinity defined by idealizations of man's struggle against nature"; he calls this a subgenre of "Man [sic] vs" (p. 213).

Official trailers from season 1 highlight the terms "no gimmicks," "how long could you make it," "new level of survival," "10 daring men," "no contact," "complete isolation," and "last man standing." All of these examples are, to a greater or lesser extent, associated with hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1996; Radmann, 2013). Indeed, the shows in seasons 1 and 2 seemed to feature a greater proportion of contestants who demonstrated hyper-masculine traits. Many were muscular men with military backgrounds, who made bold assertions, based on their survival training or combat experience. This pattern became less dominant as the seasons went on, but persisted until season 7, when the winner (Roland) presented himself before they were dropped off, "I don't do the pacifist, all one with the wilderness bullshit" (7/12). In the same season, Mark states, "I wanna see how far I can push my body and mind. I've been drug through the dirt and the mud – blood, sweat and tears – and I've done so because of my attitude. Quitting is not an option" (7/10).

The above examples of traditional masculinity notwithstanding, when the first female contestants appeared in season 2, there appeared to be less of an emphasis on conquering or dominating nature, but rather living with it in a more harmonious fashion. This move away from seeing nature as objectified "sparring partner" to "nature as home" (Faarlund, 1993) was one that seemed to gather dominance as the program matured over the years. This shift in worldview from a dualist human/divide to one that values more than the human as much as the human (Abrams, 1996) is notable, as it signaled the arrival of what was arguably a more eco-femininist approach to living with the land (Plumwood, 1993), which was demonstrated by an increasing proportion of the contestants. As early as season 2, however, there is evidence of views that reflect less of a human vs. nature narrative and much more of the one that suggested security and belongingness. This is demonstrated by Dave exclaiming "I am home" (2/77) upon being dropped off and Nicole explaining how she "communicates with nature, and animals and plants, and the world around [her]" (2/5).

When Nicole, in season 2, shares her motivations for wanting to be on the show and explains how she wants to "show the world that women can survive in the wilderness" (2/75), she goes on to speak about the capabilities of girls and women more generally and states that Alone is a scene for female empowerment. The inference here is that male participation is the norm, so there is no pressure beyond their own individual expectations for men to perform. Indeed, it would seem absurd if one of the male participants stated that they wanted to show boys that it was possible for their sex to thrive in the wilderness.

Toffoletti (2017) discusses the roles of women in different media and sports contexts and is skeptical about the notion of increased visibility of women in media increasing female empowerment. She warns against "celebrating liberated womanhood in sport, yet normalising unequal gender power relations and upholding male privilege," which takes place through "endorsing a narrow version of white, Western, heterosexual femininity within sport settings" (p. 457). Granted, the wilds of Northern Canada is not strictly a sports setting, but the material from Alone confirms this frame of the female

[2]A more conventional citing system is used for video references that are not part of the principal empirical material found in **Supplementary Table S1**.

participants as white, Western, heterosexual women possessing "traditional" feminine attributes combined with physical strength and an outspoken belief in self. This resonates with Ferrari's (2014) work on the strict gender boundaries within the Western understanding of human–nature relationships, where the "cultural configurations of the "primitive" have, by and large, served primarily to empower men of Euro-Western descent while diminishing the status of women, non-Western populations, and people of color" (p. 215).

It is, however, a more mixed gender portrait that the data revealed to be more common, despite the persistence of some more classic, hyper-masculine characters. The empirical material shows many examples of "masculine femininity" (Halberstam, 1998) among several female participants. Some of the women present very masculine selves, which highlighted their toughness and hard-core survival skills. Michelle, in season 6, presents herself as a self-made wilderness expert who is used to rough conditions and harsh environments. She firmly states, "I come from a family of rural, tough and gritty folk and I need this money (the prize-money) to survive and not go starving" (6/36). This mixed gender portrait works both ways, however. Indeed, some men presented selves that contrasted markedly with more stereotypical masculine approaches to dominating the outdoors. Joe from season 7, for example, explained how he was an ecosystem expert and claimed that his "strengths lie in reading the landscape and understanding relationships and the ecosystem" (7/16).

The presentation of gender constructions in Alone follows a more traditional, patriarchal pattern, especially when it comes to the "right to leisure" and to spend time away from home and family. A broad literature discusses how domestic responsibilities restrict women's access to leisure and having their own free time. Indeed, Pope (2017) discusses this "ethic of care" and how many women do not feel a sense of "entitlement" to leisure (p. 20). Most of the female contestants in Alone express worrying feelings of leaving children, male partner, and family life behind when they go into the wilderness. While the data did highlight women presenting some typically masculine traits, and some men presenting more feminine traits, the Alone program perpetuates the "masculine primitive ideals seen in the "Man [sic] vs" genre," which are in keeping with "socio-historical standards of masculinity" (Ferrari, 2014).

CONCLUSION

There are four major points that we can extract from the discussion on findings, and the first three draw on Goffman (1959). First, Alone contestants are in a difficult situation, as they are presenting fronts simultaneously to multiple audiences. For example, the contestants appear to address their families, their friends, the TV audience, God, and themselves. This is a departure from Goffman's more uncomplicated explanation of how fronts are played to specific audiences in specific settings, such as to colleagues at work or dinner guests at home.

The second point of interest is how the boundary between each contestant's backstage and frontstage was highly blurred. In Goffman (1959) original conception, the backstage is a place where audience members have no access and where performances are prepared and polished. On Alone, however, the cameras are rolling for 5 h everyday, and there is very little that is kept private from the audience. This is consistent with most television programs that make a claim to be "reality TV"; there is virtually no backstage, except for instances where the contestants are going to the toilet.

The third, and perhaps most notable, finding from this inquiry is that the end of the program season is not the end of the contestants managing impressions of themselves for a very public audience. While we had initially planned to only include official YouTube clips from the History Channel, we learned that many contestants continued to broadcast material from their own YouTube channels. This enabled contestants to provide explanations for their on-screen actions and to add information that they felt was excluded by the show's producers. In Goffman (1959) language, the participants' own YouTube channels permitted actors to re-shape impressions of themselves that had been molded by the production team.

The fourth, somewhat nebulous, finding has to do with gendered representations of participants' attitudes to the competition and their relationships with the landscape they inhabited. Hyper-masculine representations and more eco-feminine views are presented by both women and men and thus do not appear to be exclusively attached to specific cultural stereotypes. There are exceptions, of course, but the data reveal no clear patterns, in terms of gendered attitudes or actions being demonstrated predominantly by men or women. This is certainly an area worthy of further interrogation.

There is one final, over-arching theme, and this has to do with the Alone program's editors taking hours of footage from each day of the contestants' time on the show and reducing this to a few minutes of footage per weekly episode. This points to the fourth key finding: the power of the production team. Brooke explains on her YouTube channel, "You never know how the editors are going to put it together... you are seeing probably less than 1% of our experience out there... You're not seeing a lot... you're not seeing the whole picture" (Brooke, 2017).

This quote from Brooke's YouTube captures the essence of this inquiry's conclusion: the product that is the Alone television program is ultimately a fusion of the impression that actors have attempted to present to a wide range of audiences with the individual narratives that have been curated by the program's producers. This combination becomes the reality that is consumed by TV viewers, though, as we have seen through the contestants' YouTube channels, this presented reality is contested in public spaces after the episodes have aired.

Smith (2006) claimed that Erving Goffman left an "indelible mark on the history of sociology" (p. 14). We agree completely and argue that his work remains as relevant as it was 60 years ago, despite being applied to circumstances that he could not have imagined. Toward the end of his book, he states that the concepts within *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* "can be applied to any social establishment" (p. 239). Ten contestants attempting to outlast the others in a wilderness setting, along with an expensive array of video cameras, have shown this.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/**Supplementary Material**, and further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

ETHICS STATEMENT

Written informed consent was not obtained from the individual(s) for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article, as all data was in the public domain.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors listed have made a substantial, direct, and intellectual contribution to the work and approved it for publication.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

The Supplementary Material for this article can be found online at: https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fcomm.2021.676555/full#supplementary-material

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