Story-formatting on social media

Ways of telling, teller identities, and audience engagement[1]

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Abstract *Stories on social media platforms, more than any other communication mode, have increasingly become designed, curated features, so that users are faced with menus of choices, pre-selections, and templates, when posting a story. Connected with this is an attested, unprecedented speedy development of normative, typified, sought after and replicable stories on different platforms, despite the fact that the users involved in such processes, more often than not, do not know of one another but instead partake in transient acts of communication. In this chapter, I draw on the ethnomethodological concept of formatting, as reworked by the late Jan Blommaert for the contextual study of communication online, and synergise it with small stories and positioning analysis. My focus is on stories as a sociotechnical engineered feature on all major social media platforms (e.g., Snapchat, Instagram, Facebook, Weibo, and TikTok). Based on the technographic method, I will first show how I have extended the notion of formatting in my work so as to examine the historicity of semiotic choices in stories. I will then tease out specific ways of telling formatted stories in their links with specific modes of tellers' self-presentation, in particular that of 'authenticity'. The formatted practice of sharing-life-in-the-moment shows power and continuity across platforms, partly by being reconfigured and repurposed. I will illustrate this with a focus on TikTok short form videos and their formatted modes of audience engagement. Finally, I will discuss the implications of story-formatting for the role of culture in stories.*

Keywords *Story-formatting; Ways of Telling-sites-tellers; Sharing-life-in-the-moment; Reconfiguring – Repurposing; TikTok Short Form Videos*

1 An earlier version of this chapter (in particular, Sections 1–4) entitled "(Un)complicating Context: The Case of Formatted Stories on Social Media" is forthcoming in the Jan Blommaert Festschrift (Arnaut et al., in press).

1. Formatting in the contextual study of online communication

Jan Blommaert's (et al.) chapter entitled "Context and Its Complications", in De Fina & Georgakopoulou (eds.) *The CUP Handbook of Discourse Studies*, (2020, pp. 52–69), discusses eloquently the ways in which online environments and the rise of social media have altered the constitution of context, and, in effect, should lead analysts to a complete overhaul of their conceptualisation of context, as this had been developed in relation to face-to-face environments. Blommaert et al.'s claim was that, despite the profound changes affected by online social life to the realities of "social structure" and to "the range and modes of everyday activities" (p. 52), analysts seem to be stuck in a sociological imagination that treats as the default of communication:

> dyadic, unmediated, spoken, face-to-face interaction in shared physical time and space and between persons sharing massive amounts of knowledge, experience and sociocultural norms within a sedentary community (an offline conversation between similar people, in short) (Blommaert et al., 2020, p. 54)

In such a scenario, various aspects of context are more easily retrievable by both participants and analysts than in online contexts.

Blommaert's proposal in all his work on online context and communication was not to completely turn our backs on 40+ years of (sociolinguistic) work on context. Instead, he urged analysts to "reimagine and refashion tools and approaches or fall back on reasonably robust tools and approaches that do not carry that bias of anachronism or that can be refashioned so as to be free of it" (Blommaert et al., 2020, p. 65). In the spirit of this, he 'reimagined' formatting, a concept that originated in the interactionist tradition, in particular in ethnomethodology (cf. Cicourel, 1974, 1992; Garfinkel, 1967). Formatting refers to the recognition of particular social actions and their features as something typical. Blommaert saw formatting as an integral part of the ethnographic tradition of studying language-as-action, in a sociology of emerging order as opposed to reproduction. Formatting allows analysts to both describe and account for the unprecedented speedy development of norms and the recognisability of what is 'typical' in online environments, despite the fact that the participants involved routinely do not know of one another but instead partake in transient acts of communication.

Garfinkel had seen recognisability as the key to understanding the social nature of interaction, insisting that it should not be equated with sharedness of norms, assumptions, and worldviews. In Garfinkel's work, it was recognition of the joint potential of specific modes of action that gave such action modes the character of "congregational work" (2002, p. 190). Blommaert rightly saw Garfinkel's work on formatting as an ideal conceptual and explanatory account of how users can generate a firm social order with recognisable roles and identities on social media, even via ephemeral participation in specific modes of action.

Using data from a *Facebook* update, Szabla and Blommaert (2019) showed how the process of formatting goes through the stage of 'recognising' an activity as typical of a specific situated interaction and then 'framing' it as one that imposes and enables specific forms of interaction, that is, 'orders of indexicality' (see the introduction to this volume for further details). They also demonstrated how tracking these stages of formatting allows analysts to move beyond the often researched micro-macro dichotomy for the identification and analysis of different types of context, and instead to look at how (plural and scaled) contexts come to bear in a situation in a sort of "evolving 'synchrony'" (Blommaert et al., 2020, p. 59): A process that "hides layers of nonsynchronous resources and folds them together into momentary and situated instances of making sense. We call this process synchronisation because the highly diverse resources that are deployed as context are focused, so to speak, onto one single point in social action" (Blommaert et al., 2020, p. 59).

In Blommaert's reimagining of formatting, there is scope for spelling out the methodological steps of an ethnography of online communication that identifies and documents recognisability processes. There is also scope for the exploration of the possibilities for alliances with other practice-based ways of analysing communication.

In the remainder of this chapter, I show how I have drawn on formatting as a conceptual apparatus for the description and accounting of the links amongst affordances, discourses, and practices that result in the development of typical, recognisable, normative, replicable, and sought after stories on (different) platforms.

I focus my empirical exploration on stories as a sociotechnical, curated feature on all major social media platforms (e.g., *Snapchat*, *Instagram*, *Facebook*, *Weibo*, and currently *TikTok*). Multi-modal stories are the single most prevalent type of posting across platforms, having rendered social media as storified environments par excellence. What I have described in previous work as

small stories (Georgakopoulou, 2007) have formed the basis of the creation of 'formatted types of storytelling' (story-formats) on social media. This means that certain stories and ways of telling them become recognisable, normative, and sought after on platformed environments. The formats, I argue, are powerful enough to be 'repurposed' within a platform, so as to suit different types of user and content demands, as well as being 'reconfigured' across different platforms, so as to suit different affordances.

Below, I will first present the technographic method, as a 'reimagined' ethnographic method, that I employ to document stories as formatted activities. Technography allows me to explore stories as socio-technical activities, on the intersection of affordances, discourses, and practices. It also allows me to capture the historicity of storytelling modes and to document in real time their continuities, shifts, and reconfigurations. This aids the work of identifying the synchronisation processes of different scales in specific acts of communication. Based on the technographic method of identifying the interplay between social media affordances (including algorithms) and users' practices, I will present key aspects of a particular formatted practice of storytelling that I call 'sharing-life-in-the-moment'. I will show the links of this practice with specific modes of tellers' self-presentation, in particular, that of 'authenticity'.

I will then illustrate the current reconfigurations of the formatted practice of sharing-life-in-the-moment with a focus on *TikTok* short form videos, which represent the latest 'pivotal' phase of platformed storytelling design (Georgakopoulou, 2017, 2024b). I will show that authenticity is being reconfigured as relatability through sharing-the-moment practices. Formatted modes of audience engagement routinely do recognisability and validation of the story's framing as a relatable account.

By bringing together formatting processes with small stories research modes of analysis, I forge an alliance that shows the potential of the concept of formatting for enriching the analysis of language and identities, including positioning analysis, one of the gold standards of examining identities in storytelling, in a way that suits online contexts. Going forward, it can provide a way for assessing the role of cultural identities in online storytelling.

2. Technography as a method for the study of story-formatting

My starting point in the contextual exploration of stories on social media has been that a key parameter of context that needs to be factored in is that of media 'affordances', that is, of the perceived possibilities but also constraints for action that online environments offer to users (Barton & Lee, 2013, p. 3). For contextual sociolinguistic work on social media, three "high-level affordances"[2] (Bucher & Helmond, 2018, p. 240) pose specific challenges: (a) context collapse, the result of the, often unforeseen, audiences that may tune into a specific post, (b) amplification and scalability of content, and (c) distribution and recontextualisation of content (see Blommaert et al., 2020; Georgakopoulou, 2017; Marwick & boyd, 2011). Jones (2004) notably talks about 'polyfocality' online, the intricate layering and expansion of multiple co-occurring contexts in online discourse. Based on these affordances alone, we begin to see that sharedness that hinges on users' physical proximity, regular interactions or stable community becomes a rare commodity on social media. At the same time, the amplification and scalability of content combined with the promotional machinery that platforms have at their disposal, result in the development of recognisable and normative scripts for social action at an astonishing speed, a point which Blommaert often stressed in his work including in the Handbook chapter (also see Georgakopoulou, 2021).

To study stories as socio-technical activities, I have specifically developed and adapted for narrative analysis the 'technographic' approach (cf. Bucher, 2018, pp. 60–62). Bucher talks about technography as an extended ethnographic method that allows the analyst a reverse engineering, so as to capture the technological workings of platforms. In Bucher's work, technography is closely associated with tapping into interviewees' own representations of how platforms work, including their algorithmic imaginary vis-à-vis different platforms. But by bringing technography together with small stories research, I have been reworking it as a more multi-layered, methodologically integrational framework, that cuts across qualitisation and quantification (for details, see Georgakopoulou, 2024b).

Technography has involved a systematic real-time and time-critical tracking of the triptych of 'discourses', 'affordances', and 'practices', for stories, which I consider essential for a thick description of context. In Silverstein's

2 There are numerous 'low-level', platform-specific affordances, too, that, as I will show below, should be established through contextual work.

terms (1985), this facilitates the examination of the 'total linguistic fact'. 'Discourses' (often referred to as 'capital D discourses') encompass widely circulating ideologies, views, and theories about what stories are and how they should be designed and used. These are mainly evidenced in the platforms' own design affordances, but they are also articulated in the proliferating promotional texts by influencers, media, launching documents, and so on, as well as in instances of users' own metapragmatic reflexivity, which abound in online contexts (Deschrijver & Georgakopoulou, 2023). 'Affordances' comprise high-level, low-level but also users' perceived affordances, as these are revealed through their practices. Affordances cover a wide range of design features and capabilities, including interface metrics and analytics, tools, images, filters, and numerous invisible and opaque metrics, such as algorithms (Georgakopoulou et al., 2020). Finally, users' communicative 'practices' encompass the diverse, multi-semiotic ways of telling at various levels: for instance, visual choices, language choices, story genres, practices of distribution of stories, and so on.

These interconnected facets of communication draw on previous practice-based approaches, for instance Hanks's (1996) forms, activities, and ideologies and Scollon and Scollon's (2004) nexus analysis, and my previous heuristic of 'ways of telling-sites-tellers' (Georgakopoulou, 2007, 2022). As such, they provide possible points of entry into the study of communication and the opportunity for prioritising certain questions and angles, depending on what emerges as crucial at a specific point of the research. That said, no facet, examined on its own, suffices for a thick approach. The task for the analyst is, regardless of what their point of entry is, to forge links amongst these facets. Technography, like previous forms of ethnography, is not aimed at producing exhaustive accounts. Its inductive nature has meant that there were times in my research when my point of entry into a thick description were affordances, others when it was users and their practices, and still others, when it was the platforms' discourses about stories.

In the spirit of discourse-centred online ethnography (Androutsopoulos, 2008) and blended ethnography (e.g., Tagg & Lyons, 2021), technography works with multiple data-points and methods. But in contrast to earlier versions of online or digital ethnography (for a critique, see Varis, 2016), it also shifts its focus from affordances to practices or discourses and vice versa, when necessary. In this way, it seeks to cut across the distinction between platform-centred and participant-centred research, instead making it possible to use

both as anchor points for observations and data collection, at different points in research, and for different reasons.

Technography allows us to identify the design facilities, tools, and functionality of stories. To uncover platforms' discourses about stories and the values in their design, I have employed corpus-assisted discourse analytic methods, as one facet of the technographic approach to stories. Corpus methods allow us to retrieve any hidden meanings and associations, by seeking out patterns of occurrence in a body of texts (see Taylor & Marchi, 2018).

I see the links between affordances, discourses, and practices, in the spirit of any practice-based approach to communication, as mutually feeding rather than as unidirectional and deterministic. That said, the claim is that, in social media environments, we cannot conceive of stories outside of a 'contingently obligatory' even if not 'logically necessary' relationship with technologies, to borrow Deleuze and Guattari's (1993) conceptualisation of the concept of 'assemblage'. The emergent relationship that arises from a connection between stories and technologies, exactly as quantum physicists have claimed vis-à-vis sub-atomic particles when entering relationships of 'entanglement',[3] reveals itself at tiny scales. As we will see, the entanglement of stories with discourses and affordances is evidenced in the types of stories but also in tiny, micro-level semiotic choices that include linguistic features in captions, emojis, visual choices, camera placement and angle, and so on.

My initial questions in the study of stories online, drawing on ethnographic, practice-based perspectives on everyday life storytelling in conversational contexts, were mostly to do with how face-to-face everyday life storytelling gets reconfigured and adapted in connection with affordances for story-sharing. Similarly, I was interested in exploring how users, as more or less agentive actors, engaged with and navigated affordances.

It was the result of my real-time technographic study and the evidence of a speedy creation of norms about posting stories online that I had to shift my questions to in the examination of how shared evaluations and ways of storytelling develop online. In particular, I set out to explore, as part of the recognisability of stories:

- What becomes amplified, widely available and what/who (types of lives, identities, subjectivities) gets silenced? What becomes normative/recognisable, how, and why?

3 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quantum_entanglement

- What are the implications of socialisation into a specific type of 'autobiography' for the target group of Generation Z?

It was at this point that formatting provided a valuable interpretative lens for the links amongst affordances, discourses, and practices that result in the development of typical, recognisable, normative, replicable, sought after stories on (different) platforms. Yet, formatting is part of a social interactional tradition and to combine it with a practice-based small stories perspective, I saw it fit and necessary to extend its remit. In particular, in my work, it is not just social actions that get formatted but also recurrent story practices ('story genre', 'story types'). As I will show below, sharing-life-in-the-moment is an overarching formatted story practice supported by specific story-types.

In addition to these points, as explained above, technography allowed me to complement the synchronic focus of formatting on specific, here and now contexts of communication with the 'historicity of typification'. This longitudinal angle on formatting is a way of bringing in scaled contexts onto the here and now of communication, allowing us to move beyond the often critiqued, narrow conceptualisation of context as 'co-text'.

3. Analysing stories as multi-semiotic practices

To micro-analyse stories, I have postulated a heuristic (Georgakopoulou, 2007) that explores the connections of three separable but interrelated layers of analysis: (1) 'ways of telling' (i.e., semiotic resources), (2) 'sites' (social worlds of the stories' tellings and tales), and (3) 'tellers' (in the broad sense of communicators). In online discourse, this dictates a combined focus on online postings and various types of engagement with them, including transposition across media and sites, without, however, pre-determining what from each of the multi-layered ways of telling, sites, and tellers will be of analytical importance and how their relations will be configured in different stories and media environments (2017). Recognising the multi-modal nature of stories, I have been bringing together the analysis based on this heuristic with multi-modal analysis as it has been reworked and adapted to online discourse (e.g., Jewitt, 2017; Page, 2018). I have specifically been documenting any recurrent and iterative choices across different modes as well as links across levels. In particular, I have focused on if and how any verbal patterns in the captions of photographic or video stories enter any salient, recurrent interactions with sound-tracks, vi-

sual, video, and embodied modalities, in a spectrum of aligned-disaligned relationships across them.

To forge links between the ways of telling, sites, and tellers of stories-in-context, I draw on positioning analysis in its connections with small stories (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008). With positioning analysis, I establish how characters are presented in the tale world, their relations, evaluative attributions, activities, and overall placement in time and place ('Level 1'). For a multi-modal story, an analysis at this level may include visual aesthetics, graphemic choices, emojis, linguistic choices in captions, but also camera placement, type of photograph, and so on. I also look into how a story is locally occasioned and distributed. Who participates and how? Who ratifies, legitimates, or contests which part of the story? Who co-authors, what, and how? How is self positioned vis-à-vis actual, intended, and imagined audiences? ('Level 2').

Finally, I am interested in what aspects of the key character(s), events, and narrated experience are presented as generalisable and holding above and beyond the specific story? ('Level 3'). How is self positioned as a continuous entity above and beyond the here and now of this storytelling? What kinds of identity projects and circulated storylines are invoked as shared, promoted, or spoken against and resisted, and how?

Overall, positioning analysis examines how moral and evaluative scripts shape a teller's identity, serving as recognizable signals of self-presentation in response to 'Who am I?', a question inherently addressed in storytelling.

4. Story-formatting and/as sharing-life-in-the-moment

The tracking and analysis of links amongst affordances, discourses, and practices, as described above, has led me to document 'story-formatting' as hinging on a story's design, the directives (i.e., prompts) to users about what types of stories to tell and how, and the authorisation of these, that is, the promotion and naturalisation of specific stories by specific users (for details, see Georgakopoulou, 2022). Influencers, I have found, play a key-role in this. The analysis of story design, the platformed directives, and their authorisation in a study of influencers' *Instagram* Stories (see Georgakopoulou 2021, 2022) have shed light on the scaled, non-synchronous contexts that come to bear on the synchrony of joint social actions, as described by Blommaert et al. (2020). Part of recognising and framing specific acts of communication as typical involves

in this case users' prior awareness, exposure, and familiarity with specific affordances and design aspects and what their indexicalities are. It also involves recognition of certain participation roles as being more in line with platformed directives that in turn ensure users' popularity and visibility.

A nexus of these three processes of formatting—which my corpus-assisted analysis (Georgakopoulou, 2019) of *Snapchat*, *Instagram*, and *Facebook* Stories (as a feature), combined with the aforementioned micro-analysis of influencers' stories has uncovered—is to be found in the practice of 'sharing-life-in-the-moment'. The present tense temporality is at the heart of the formatting of sharing-life-in-the-moment. It was in fact one of the first connections between affordances, discourses, and practices that I uncovered in my targeted tracking of the evolution of storytelling facilities on major, Western platforms (see Georgakopoulou, 2017). Sharing-life-in-the-moment brings together recognisable multi-semiotic ways of telling, evaluative scripts, and discourses about who the teller is, and specific ways of using affordances, as I have discussed in detail in previous work (Georgakopoulou, 2016, 2021, 2022). Briefly here, the key constituents of sharing-life-in-the-moment as a storytelling practice conducive to presenting the teller and their lives as authentic, real, raw, spontaneous, non-rehearsed are as follows:

- Linguistic/textual markers of immediacy in captioning;
- Showing, eye-witnessing narration;
- Amateur aesthetic, non-polished visual content;
- Discourse and affordances for doing 'imperfect sharing' through stories;
- Users' metalinguistic framing of sharing-life-in-the-moment as 'authentic' (see Section 6 below).

In terms of the multi-modal arrangements of stories, sharing life-in-the-moment presents particular, formatted inter-modal densities, in the ways in which different semiotic modes work together to establish recognisability of the activity. In Jewitt's (2017) terms, modal density refers to the amount of space a particular mode occupies and to how specific signs in different modes are ordered. Certain modes can be privileged in specific acts of communication, in terms of frequency of use and of functions they serve. In this case, inter-modal density refers to formatted connections amongst different modalities. To be specific, story captions seem to tell, evaluate, and assess the point of the story, while the pictures and videos show, record, enact, and perform it. In captions, there is also an added level of formatting, that of

the use of the present tense in temporalised (here and now or on a habitual basis), conventionalised linguistic formulas: for instance, 'currently at the beach' (caption of an *Instagram* Story) or 'when your mum goes on her weekly shopping' (from a *TikTok* video).

My analysis of how positioning Level 3 emerges from the above choices has shown that the inter-modal density of captions, visual, and video elements for depicting everyday life as it is unfolding, is conducive to constructing an authentic teller, a teller who invites us to be eye-witnesses of their life, allowing us access to the behind the scenes, unfiltered realities (see Georgakopoulou, 2022, 2024a). The authentic becomes equated with the real and the raw on *Instagram* Stories and, on *TikTok* short form videos, as I will discuss in Section 6 below, with the relatable.

5. Repurposing and reconfiguring story-formats

Blommaert et al. (2020) stressed that formats should not be imagined as closed boxes with transparent orders of indexicality, generally known to all participants. Instead, their indexical order is evolving and contingent upon the congregational work performed by participants. Multiple forms of action can therefore emerge within the same format and be coherent to the participants (Blommaert et al., 2020, pp. 63–65). Blommaert et al. showed this dynamic nature of formatting in specific acts of communication, synchronically. I have been able to document the evolution of story-formatting over time and across platforms, in the historicised way that the method of technography offers. I have specifically documented two connected types of evolution: 'repurposing', which is mainly user-driven and pertains to expanding the content within a specific format and strategising self-presentation in relation to algorithms and affordances, and 'reconfiguring', which is mainly platform-driven and involves enhancing, evolving the affordances, and tailoring formats to specific algorithmic environments.

To take each separately, using data from the same influencers during the pandemic, in a comparative study of their stories, I found that rather than abandoning norms and practices of sharing-life-in-the-moment to show an authentic self on *Instagram*, they repurposed them (Georgakopoulou, 2024a). This mainly involved adapting and re-casting the algorithmically preferred format of sharing-life-in-the-moment to promote new content suited to the new realities of a pandemic, particularly the physical distancing and

confinement in home settings. In doing so, tellers further consolidated and enhanced present tense, moment-based stories, and textual, visual, and video resources in them for depicting the here-and-now of their everyday lives and in turn their selves as authentic. For instance, I noted an increase in the use of amateur aesthetic visual modes, including 'ugly selfies', as resources for producing the ordinariness of users' lives at the same time as building a sense of co-presence for their followers. The analysis overall has shown the power, continuity of formatted stories alongside the flexibility of existing formats for repurposing. Below, I will illustrate the current reconfigurations of the format of sharing-life-in-the-moment with reference to my latest study of *TikTok* short form videos. *TikTok* exploded in popularity during the pandemic and has since been the platform par excellence for creating and engaging with stories in short form video that represent the latest pivot in storytelling design facilities on platforms, that I have identified in my real-time technographic tracking (Georgakopoulou, 2024b). The pivots have to do with affordances to users for sharing the moment in the format of small stories, increasingly visually and multi-modally, and with more sophisticated and multi-layered facilities.

6. Reconfiguring story-formatting: Spotlight on *TikTok* videos

TikTok, formerly known as *Musical.ly*, boasts over 1 billion users worldwide, offering a platform that is characterised by camera-first communication, music, dance moves, trends, and memes. Its unique, recommendations algorithm-driven nature sets it apart, shaping users' experiences and promoting user-generated content through the 'For You Page'. The data on which this discussion is based are part of a bigger, ongoing project, in collaboration with Ruth Page (Georgakopoulou & Page, forthcoming) that explores the video trend in *TikTok* which uses the phrase 'When your/my mum …' to tell stories of (presented and taken up as) recognisable and relatable family experiences, from the point of view of 'children' (young people) in such families. We investigate how, with what semiotic resources and micro-plots, the roles and relations of different family members are created and contested by young adults from different cultural contexts, and for what identity projects. Also, what scenarios are presented as de/valued, un/expected, surprising, normative, by whom, and how. Our focus on family life as shared by adolescents was prompted by the fact that

young people form a key demographic of *TikTok*.[4] *TikTok* videos of family life have been a major trend since the days of the pandemic, when domestic life provided accessible micro-plots, as part of the obligatory (due to lockdowns) move away from the 'on the go', aspirational content stories (Georgakopoulou & Bolander, 2022).

For our project, we have so far downloaded 100 videos with *Web Data Research Assistant* in an *Excel* spreadsheet with their meta-data (for instance, numbers of views, likes, comments, date of uploading). 50 of these videos are captioned as 'when your/my mum …' and the other 50 *as* 'when your/my dad …'. We have also included languages beyond English (French, Italian, Spanish, Greek), since technographic observations had suggested a replication of this and other trends across languages and cultural contexts.

To aid positioning analysis, in particular at Level 1, as discussed above, our coding so far has included verbal patterns in the captions added to the video ('annocaps') and the *TikTok* templates, alongside a multi-modal micro-analysis of video, sound, and visual choices. In addition, we have coded all hashtags used in the videos' description and any metalinguistic formulations either in the descriptions or in the annocaps that frame the activity as 'authentic' (e.g., 'real', 'relatable'). Finally, we are also in the process of micro-analysing sampled, top comments especially with a view to establishing if and how they do recognisability of the storytelling as 'real' and/or 'relatable'.

Our analysis so far suggests that storytelling in the videos is still built on the moment, still in the present tense, following then the format of sharing-life-in-the-moment. But there is an extension from sharing 'my' moment to sharing 'a' moment, indicating a shift towards temporally unspecified or habitual content and to generic stories, often in second person narration, for instance, 'when you have to call your mum's phone because she lost it again'. The format of present-tense moment-based scenarios on *TikTok* thus remains powerful, providing users with the ability to offer relatability of stories. This works well with the recommendation algorithms of *TikTok* and the 'For You Page' (FYP) which signal a move from poster-based to post-based algorithmic prioritisations. As Abidin (2020) explains, on *TikTok*, the nature of fame and virality has shifted and tends to be based on the performance of users' individual posts which can then be picked up and catalogued for the For You Page. The searchability that specific uses of sound memes, phrasing in captions, descriptions, images, and so on creates on *TikTok* pushes stories toward memefication. This

4 2 in 3 adolescents in the US report using TikTok on a daily basis (Macready, 2024).

is further attestable in the creation of trends. Our cross-linguistic data show a wide distribution and replicability of these present-tense, moment-based formats, across languages and cultures. The replicability includes direct translations in the captions of the conventionalised formula 'when my/your', depictions of the same scenario involving a parent and a child, the same type of description for the story (often referring to the story as relatable), the same visuals and lyrics, and the same type of comments, mostly validating the relatability of the story. Consider the following example (1) for instance of an annocap in English and its direct transportation in a Greek annocap:

> Example 1:
> when my mum forgets the one thing I asked for from the grocery store
> όταν η μαμά μου ξεχνάει το ένα πράγμα που της ζήτησα από το σούπερ μάρκετ

The two videos are also highly similar in visual terms: they show a young man looking in despair through shopping bags on a kitchen counter for 'that one thing'.

We note then an astonishing extension of the formatting of such stories, becoming productive in specifying and deriving broader trends as well as in enregistering (Agha, 2007) specific 'characterological figures' as specific types or personas, with specific evaluative and moral attributions, for instance the 'toxic', 'overprotective', 'controlling' mother. The formatted practice then of sharing-life-in-the-moment is extending by developing multiple indexical orders, inclusive of specific audiences while excluding others, aligning with sociolinguistic typification processes.

6.1 Formatted modes of participation

My technographic study of story-formatting has also brought to the fore specific, formatted modes of audience engagement with the stories and their tellers, which cut across different types of posting and platforms (Georgakopoulou, 2016), from comments on *Facebook* status updates and selfies to comments on *YouTube* videos and currently *TikTok* videos. In particular, I have identified two key modes of the audiences showing alignment with the stories and/or their tellers (idem), which I have called 'ritual appreciation' and 'knowing participation'. Both these modes, from a formatting point of view, perform recognisability of the communicative purpose of the stories and the tellers'

self-presentation in it, in particular, that of doing authenticity. Both modes, in situated interactions, can present a spectrum from validating the teller, tale, or telling to invalidating and disaligning with it. 'Ritual appreciation':

> involves positive assessments of the post and/or poster, expressed in highly conventionalised language coupled with emojis. These semiotic choices often result in congruent sequences of atomised contributions, which despite not directly engaging with one another, are strikingly similar, visually and linguistically (Georgakopoulou, 2016, p. 182)

Doing alignment through 'knowing participation', on the other hand, "creates specific alignment responses by bringing in and displaying knowledge from offline, preposting activities" or any other experiential knowledge "specific to the post or poster" (Georgakopoulou, 2016, p. 182). My claim has been that certain storytelling activities can be expected to provide heightened opportunities for audience alignment, directing them to one or another mode.

To return to *TikTok* videos, framing stories as real and relatable, a routine practice in the videos' description, is directive to audiences doing either ritual appreciation of relating with the experience reported or knowing participation, which brings in, in more expanded terms, their own experience. This is done with metapragmatic, conventionalised references for instance, 'for real', 'relatable'. Consider a sample of comments below (Example 2 and Example 3) on a video annocaped as 'when your mum scrolls your phone', as typical of ritual appreciation:[5]

Example 2:
Sila
Nah bruh fr that's how my mom be
2023–11-21
4

Example 3:
Billy
Most relatable thing I seen all day
2023–11-25
3

5 Despite being publicly available, all visuals have been eliminated here and user-names or any other identifying information have been modified.

We note from these recurrent, replicable examples across languages[6] that conventionalised language use involves not just individual words (e.g., 'I relate', 'relatable', 'for real', often abbreviated as 'fr' and repeated) but also phrases that include a reference to the commenter's mother (e.g., 'that's how my mum be', 'my mum'), as a way of validating the authenticity of the video's micro-plot.

Knowing participation in this case involves bringing in storytelling in more expanded terms, through, for instance, second stories. In conversation analysis (Sacks et al., 1974), second stories refer to highly thematically similar stories as a preceding one, by means of which an interlocutor shows alignment with it and affiliation with the teller. In this case, a second small story involves producing a particularised account which serves as providing evidence for the relatability and truthfulness of the video's micro-plot. This can be done in various ways: by keeping to the habitual, generic action presented in the video but adding some kind of detail to it, as in the following example (Example 4), where the/a mother is presented as a speaking subject, justifying the checking of their child's phone:

Example 4:
Bilal
bruh I swear they always using that "I paid for it" line

In other cases, a second story may temporally specify a mother doing what the video may present in generic, temporally unspecified terms. In this way, the commenters construct a specific world in which the account holds and in which actions have sequenced results.

Example 5:
Ellie
My mom just went through all my texts and read EVERYTHING I'm getting all different kinds of belts tomorrow

In the above comment (Example 5), two temporal markers specify the micro-plot, namely 'just' and 'tomorrow'. By particularising their second story, this teller does a more agentive positioning than what is presented in the video. The mother's action of scrolling their child's phone in this case has consequences

6 In Greek for instance, the word 'relate' is used in Greek characters, as a common, ritual appreciation response.

and a possible resolution, rather than being a potentially repetitive, habitual action. This second storying then goes beyond doing recognisability of the tale toward offering a possible course of action for ensuring that it will not be repeated.

Often, second storying is done by tagging friends, bringing them in as knowing recipients, as further sources of validation for the story. The storying as a result develops in the form of a private chat between two commenters, who clearly know of one another, and are in a position to bring in the back-story. This is another formatted mode of engagement with stories which I found to be salient in comments on selfies on *Facebook* (Georgakopoulou, 2016). Consider the following example (Example 6):

Example 6:
Betty
@maryboo when she asked how David was like last week 😅😂
2023-3-10
1
Reply
Maryboo
MY MOM ASKED HOW BEN WAS BECAUSE NOW I NEVER TALK ABOUT HIM🇭 🇭
2023-3-10
Betty
my mom saw me hanging out w david outside of school once and i told her how i liked him and now she won't stop asking 'bout him and idk how to tell her
2023-3-10

This kind of story co-construction as a response to the 'original' story of the video shows the poly-storying (Georgakopoulou & Giaxoglou, 2018) possibilities that multi-participation modes offer on social media. Different storylines can evolve by different tellers, with different—shared or not—interactional histories. Even within this poly-storying, however, there are still discernible, formatted ways of engagement with a story. The back-story in this case is adjusted to the communicative purpose of doing recognisability of the video's story as a relatable one, adding specific examples, story-tokens, as it were, to it. A story which is presented as generic needs to be understood as holding above and beyond the specific instance of storytelling, as applicable to others too in similar circumstances. In this way, formatted stories include specific

audiences, ratifying them as primary recipients, the prerequisite being that they have to have experienced similar things. They therefore raise the task for the prospective recipients to do recognition and relatability, by 'saying so' or by offering their own particularised accounts.

7. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have shown how story-formatting in my technographic exploration of the evolution of storytelling facilities on social media platforms has emerged from ongoing inter-connections of discourses and affordances with users' communicative practices. Discourses surrounding the socio-technicity of authentic sharing in the moment, through present-tense, multimodal stories, have become intricately woven with (meta)linguistic markings, affordances provided by platforms, and the diverse practices of content creators. I presented the key-elements of the templatisation of form and content based on specific inter-modal densities. I also argued that the power of the formatting of stories is attestable in user-driven repurposings and platform-driven reconfigurations of it, bringing up *TikTok* trends and the evolution of stories as a short form video practice as an example. Teller identities have played a pivotal role in these formatting processes, with a notable shift in enregistering authenticity from ordinariness to relatability, with specific verbal and visual resources, particularly those signalling an amateur aesthetic, serving as emblems of 'enoughness' (Blommaert & Varis, 2011) for an authentic presentation of self. In parallel, as I showed, formatted modes of audience engagement with stories are currently mobilised and adapted to the communicative purpose of doing recognisability of stories in *TikTok* short form videos as being real and relatable stories.

A study of formatting processes within a framework of viewing stories online as socio-technical, engineered, curated activities, and not just the product of (agentive) users' 'congregation work', has allowed me to tease out the role of the social media attention economy and algorithmic prioritisations in the formatting of the overarching practice of sharing (everyday, ordinary) life in the moment. It has also allowed me to both uncover and account for story-formatting as an integral part of the social media drive for homogeneity and replicability of content.

Travelling stories face inherent challenges in crossing linguistic and cultural boundaries, requiring a nuanced approach to elicit empathy (Shuman,

2005). My study on formatting online has shown that users' contextualisation strategies involve working with media-afforded formats that transcend languages and cultures, often achieving transportability and empathy through memefication—a process of replicating experiences, responses, and language across different contexts.

As we navigate the intricate challenges of this type of formatted, cross-cultural storytelling, it is necessary to revisit the connections of storytelling with culture-specificity in the light of the collectivisation, wide distribution, and replication of story-formats. How does the tension between audience design and audience reach online shape what resources are selected and formatted as indexing culture? How do the multiple, ephemeral constellations of networked audiences who develop recognisability without (a necessary) sharedness of norms and attitudes constitute and redefine culture(s)?

On a more individual level, the democratisation of access to resources that story-formats allow certainly flattens any uneven distribution of resources amongst users, allowing for the repurposing of stories with the potential to effect changes in direction and content. This includes enabling stories to become powerful tools for activism and putting causes on the map. That said, the tension between the drive for homogeneity that story-formats have and the users' individual creativity and agentive power in achieving context expansion raises important questions about the future of storytelling and storytellers, especially in an era increasingly dominated by *GenAI*, which is only going to increase the drive for replication.

Reimagining concepts and modes of analysis from social interactional and practice-based approaches to communication, in connection with ethnographic methods, as this study has done, can be a productive way to scrutinise the ever-evolving entanglements of communication with technologies in the (post)digital era—one that is able to document continuities and shifts within a larger, historicised context.

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