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Co-opting small stories on social media: a narrative analysis of the directive of authenticity

Abstract Small stories research has recently been extended as a paradigm for critically interrogating the current storytelling boom on social media, which includes the designing-spree of stories as specific features on a range of platforms. This algorithmic engineering of stories that integrates them into the spatial architecture of platform affordances has led to the hugely popular feature of Stories on Snapchat and Instagram (also Facebook and Weibo): sharing through Stories has now overtaken sharing through feeds. In this article, I offer a methodology for studying such designed stories, underpinned by a technographic, corpus-assisted narrative analysis that tracks media affordances, including platforms’ directives to users for how to tell stories and what stories to tell, discourses about stories as platformed features, and communicative practices. I specifically focus on the directive of authenticity in the storytellers’ self-presentation with data from Influencers’ Instagram Stories. I show how authenticity is attestable in the values underlying the design of stories, the affordances offered, and the storytelling practices that these commonly lead to. I single out three constituents of authenticity vis-à-vis each of the above: the design of stories as vehicles for ‘imperfect sharing’ and an amateur aesthetic; visual and textual affordances for sharing life-in-the-moment; the deployment of specific genres of small stories that anchor the tellings onto the here-and-now. These, I argue, enregister a specific type of teller as one who offers a ‘real’ and believable account of themselves and their life through affording eye-witnessing quality to their audiences and access to their everyday.

Keywords stories as features, social media, formatting, directives, values in design, authenticity, sharing life-in-the-moment, showing the moment.

1. Introduction: Stories on social media as designed features

Since their inception, social media companies have been keen to evolve their features in ways that offered users facilities for telling stories. Facebook notably introduced the important feature of check-ins as a way for users to locate their stories. The widely recognized power of storytelling for presenting ourselves, making sense of our experience and connecting with others has been duly harnessed by social media. Early features and prompts, such as ‘what
are you doing right now?’ (on Facebook) or status updates as the main function of Twitter, 
began, however, to direct users to a type of storytelling that is associated with sharing their 
experiences in the here-and-now and in short bursts, as opposed to producing lengthy 
accounts about the past. This early coupling of storytelling with sharing the moment has been 
crucial for how storytelling facilities have evolved on social media. (Georgakopoulou 2017a) 
In a longitudinal study of stories on social media, I have identified a close link between 
specific media affordances – mainly portability, replicability and scalability (cf. 
amplification) of content – and what I have described as small stories. (Georgakopoulou 
2007) Seen through the lens of conventional narrative studies, small stories are atypical: they 
tend to be brief or signaled elliptically; they are about very recent, ongoing (breaking news) 
and/or future events, and they are open-ended and transportable. They are also multiply 
authored and contested, often across contexts, thus destabilizing the close link between one 
teller and their experience. Finally, there is a tendency for reporting mundane, ordinary and 
even trivial events from the teller’s everyday life, rather than big complications or 
disruptions.

Given these features, which have by now been well-documented as characteristic of much of 
online storytelling, (e.g. see Giaxoglou 2020; Page 2012), I have argued that small stories 
research is well-positioned to be extended to social media, so as to offer alternative tools and 
concepts for the inquiry into stories. (2016a) I have also identified certain key phases in the 
development of facilities for posting small stories, in particular in so-called ego-centred 
platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. (2017)

The latest phase I have identified is characterized by big platforms turn to designing stories as 
distinct features, integrated into their architecture, and named as such. The introduction of 
this hugely popular feature of stories began on Snapchat (2014), followed by Instagram 
Stories (2016), Facebook (2017), Weibo (2018) and lately, Twitter Fleets (2020), which are 
highly similar to ‘stories.’ This phase in the evolution of storytelling facilities online can be 
characterized as sharing the moment(s) as stories: it involves rolling out visual and video 
facilities that purport to allow users to post beyond single feeds and beyond sharing ‘a single 
moment.’ It is also part and parcel of platforms’ ongoing shift toward live streaming formats 
of sharing (cf. Abidin 2018). In this phase, platforms use and, in many ways, appropriate the 
term ‘story/stories’ as an attractive label that evokes positive associations to do with the 
‘power of stories’. As Georgakopoulou has shown (2019), the design of stories as a feature,
in fact, presents certain mismatches between such associations that are explicitly evoked by the rhetoric of platforms about stories and the actual affordances offered for them. Stories as features are notably brief, visual, i.e. photographic (e.g. 7 seconds on Instagram) and/or (live) video (15 seconds) posts, despite the fact that they are launched as facilities for telling stories in a more sustained and continuous way than feeds allow. They are also heavily designed, templatized features with bundles of menus and pre-selections, despite the fact that they are hailed by platforms as opportunities for unbridled storyteller creativity (idem).

I have set out to interrogate this story-curation phase on social media as an integral part of the current mobilization of the term ‘stories’ and of storytelling in a variety of domains (see 2 below). To do so, I employ the method of technography of stories which tracks media affordances, discourses about stories as features, and users’ communicative practice (see 3 below). I thus document the formatting of stories, that is, the processes through which certain types of stories and ways of telling them become recogniseable, normative and sought after on platformed environments. I have shown how the stories’ formatting is supported by specific directives (cf. preferential conditions, prompts) by platforms to users for how and what kind of stories to share. Our analysis has specifically brought to the fore three directives (cf. preferential conditions, prompts) to users (Georgakopoulou, Iversen & Stage 2020): these directives affect the types of stories told (i.e. sharing life-in-the-moment), the audience’s mode of engagement in them (i.e. quantified viewing) and the tellers’ self-presentation (i.e. authenticity).

In this article, I focus on the directive of authenticity in the storytellers’ self-presentation. I show how authenticity is understood to be legible in the values underlying the design of stories, the affordances offered, and the storytelling practices that these commonly lead to, with a focus on female Influencers’ stories on Instagram. Specifically, stories are designed as vehicles for sharing life-in-the-moment, with tools that support the construction of an amateur aesthetic. Drawing on these tools and affordances, Influencers deploy specific genres of small stories so as to anchor the tellings onto the here-and-now, e.g. breaking news, updates, behind the scenes. These features enregister a specific type of teller as one who offers a ‘real’ (i.e. non-edited, genuine, believable) self-presentation through affording eye-witnessing quality to their audiences and access to their everyday. The construction of an authentic self thus hinges on the construction of ordinariness and in turn flattens differences
amongst different types of users. I conclude by proposing the socio-technicity of stories and the role of media-afforded directives in their production and engagement with them as a point of entry into the study of the current instrumentalization of stories, especially as vehicles for truth-telling, in a number of public domains.

2. **Context: Stories and authenticity as buzzwords in the digital era**

The mobilization of stories by social media platforms and their integration into the economy of sharing is linked to the *age of life-stories*, also referred to as the *age of the witness* and *testimony*. (Jensen, 2009) This mobilization is part and parcel of a post-truth, ‘story-positive culture’ (Gjerlevsen & Nielsen 2020), specific to the Western world, where stories are celebrated as liberating, therapeutic activities, central to an individual’s personal growth. The term ‘story’ has become somewhat of a buzzword, a powerful evocation of stories’ ability to engage on an emotional rather than on a rational level, and to persuade on the basis of personal experience. (Georgakopoulou, Giaxoglou & Seargeant 2021; Mäkelä 2018; Mäkelä et al 2021) As Fernandes shows (2017), from legislation, production and circulation of stories in legal hearings, to electoral processes and voter canvassing, stories have been commodified and refashioned since the turn of the millennium within a business model, so as to bring capital to organizations. Fernandes’s critique of this commodification of stories points to a reduction of the vastness of narrative practices and the fullness and complexity of individual experience, in favour of scripted performances (ibid).

The current social media curation of stories can be seen as a continuation of such contexts of story-commodification. That said, it also needs to be recognized as a technologically afforded stepping up, an extension that is bound to reduce the variation of storytelling even further, on account of the platformed affordances of portability and distribution that facilitate the wide availability of ready-made, pre-selection templates for storytelling. In similar vein, such affordances are conducive to the standardization of specific types of stories as normative. The potential for standardization is also facilitated by the abundance of sophisticated, more or less visible to users, metrics and analytics, which accompany the platformed design of stories. The proliferation of how-to-guides to ordinary users and brands alike for posting ‘great’ stories and the wide adoption of stories by Influencers suggest that there is already recogniseability of what constitutes a typical story on different platforms, alongside a well-developed machinery for the creation of normativity. Finally, the unprecedented popularity
and replication of stories as a feature across platforms and types of users, from ordinary users to businesses and influencers, in the Global North and South, also attests to a process of consolidation of specific ways of telling as typical and valued, at the expense of others.\(^1\) All the above make apparent the need for studying stories as deliberately designed and platformed features within the current storytelling boom.

Stories online are increasingly being promoted by social media and advertising companies as the ideal vehicle for presenting an authentic self. While authenticity is routinely associated with ‘realness’, its specific definitions and conceptualizations at specific points in time and in specific environments have a traceable, historicised heritage and they are shaped by socio-cultural values (Coupland 2003). Within the current association between stories and authenticity online, the prevalent definition of authenticity is that of ‘genuine’, ‘not fake or manufactured’ self and life (Marwick 2013), which presents no gaps or discontinuities in relation to the offline life. In turn, this definition of authenticity online, often referred to as ‘mediated authenticity’ (e.g. Enli 2015), as the genuine presentation of one's offline reality, is historically linked with the erosion of the audiences’ ‘organisational trust’ in traditional broadcast media and its gradual replacement by a ‘personal trust’ in individuals worth following (Enli 2015). At the level of language, mediated authenticity has been found to be expressed with amateurishness, and a conversational, immediate style of communication, in distinction from the formal style of traditional broadcasting. (e.g. see Tolson 2010, in relation to YouTube vloggers). At the level of self-presentation, in particular in the case of Influencers, mediated authenticity is linked with sincerity and believability of postings which in turn render Influencers familiar and relatable to their followers (Abidin 2017).

The association of mediated authenticity with storytelling as its primary vehicle is particularly evident in the case of brand storytelling, where it is promoted as a way for brands to connect with their customers. (e.g. https://neilpatel.com/blog/create-authentic-brand-story/). Market research similarly shows that the majority of customers value authenticity when they are deciding what brands they like. Similarly, users are more inclined to evaluate positively the brand endorsements of Influencers who come across as authentic, in the sense of sincere and believable (Jung Ah Lee & Eastin 2020).

As we will see below (section 3), the intimate links between stories as a platformed feature and authenticity build on the above associations of mediated authenticity but they also extend
and add new dimensions to them, as authenticity becomes an integral part of the technological story-design.

3. Methods

Technography

An interrogation of the design of stories on social media necessitates what can be called, adapting Bucher’s terms (2018: 60), a technographic approach to stories: a type of ethnography that attempts to trace the workings of technology and the affordances offered for the design of stories, establishing the (dis)continuity of any choices and updates. This requires an element of historicity, that is, tracking and identifying choices and values in the design of stories in the context of antecedents. A technographic approach allows the analyst to document the processes of the stories’ formatting: this refers to the recognizability of jointly achieved social actions in specific settings, in this case, digital communication, where large numbers of users, geographically dispersed and unknown to one another, enter communication ‘stages’ without any prior shared history. (see Blommaert et al 2020: 55-57) The key to formatting is, according to Blommaert et al, users’ repeated exposure to specific social actions. As will be shown below, such actions include the platforms’ repeated directives (prompts, preferential conditions) to users, in their promotional material and in the actual design of stories, for what types of stories to post and how.

Technography allows us to identify the design facilities, tools and functionality of stories. There is increasing recognition within social media studies, in particular in the fields of science and technology studies and of platform studies, that the design of features is imbued with values. (cf. ‘values in design’ perspective; Flanagan and Nissenbaum 2014; also see Bucher 2018) Social media develop their architecture on the basis of ideas about who their intended users are and what they would like those media to accomplish. (e.g. Langlois 2012; van Dijck 2013) The technographic approach thus entails uncovering the views and ideologies underlying a given design. These are encoded in promotional material, companies’ briefs and blog posts, documents that outline technical specifications of new features, media reports and interviews with CEOs, and in occasional disclosures of how part of their algorithms work. Such material cumulatively produces a widely circulated discourse about a
feature, while also including clues of hidden agendas, regarding its marketing and monetization.

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 meanings and associations that are salient yet not obvious to naked eye and which can be established only by seeking out patterns of occurrence in a body of texts. (Taylor and Marchi 2018: 61)

We specifically employed advanced Google search facilities on the words ‘stories’, ‘Instagram’, ‘Snapchat’ and ‘Facebook,’ and the search engines Google, Bing and DuckDuckGo, so as to compile a corpus of material (c. 1,213 articles, excl. duplicates, c. 1.000.000 words) related to Snapchat Stories (2014) and Instagram Stories (2016). The main types of sources in the corpus (henceforth the EgoMedia Stories Corpus) include: a) Instagram and Snapchat blogs (https://instagram-press.com/blog, https://www.snap.com/); b) reviews of stories as a feature on a variety of online media such as tech, business and marketing magazines and blogs (e.g. BuzzFeed, The Verge, TechCrunch, Wired, Sprout Social, etc.). Using corpus compilation and analysis procedures, we identified keywords and key-semantic domains, collocates so as to explore the textual behaviour of keywords, and concordances so as to explore patterns of lexical associations. The insights from the corpus-assisted analysis in turn led us to the next phase of data collection and analysis, namely Influencers’ stories.

Overall, the use of technography has enabled me to uncover the directives employed by platforms in the stories’ design and in their promotion and marketing. Directives can be seen as prompts to users for engaging in specific posting practices and relational actions. They are supported by an app’s tools, features and functionality: these elements facilitate and activate certain actions at the expense of others, weigh more and prioritize certain types of content, and so they render specific types of posting, interaction and behavior by users as more valued and better-suited to ensuring popularity for said users.

Stories as communicative practices
It is by now a familiar claim that apps evolve in a mutually feeding relationship with users’ practices: far from being passive adopters, users strategize, circumvent constraints and even game any perceived algorithmic manipulations. (Bucher 2018) That said, due to affordances of amplification and scaleability and the algorithmic pressures for users to be popular (ibid), the potential for directives to lead to compliance on users’ part and, in turn, to specific communication practices becoming normative and widely available, should not be underestimated. Influencers4 as hyper-popular power-users were the first point of entry of this study into storytelling practices for two reasons: the style and content of their communication, including their stories, are emulated by ordinary users; features of the apps tend to evolve in response to both the practices of such users and their resistances. (cf. Abidin 2018). On Instagram, Influencers are clearly positioned as MVPs (Most Valuable Players), as their privileged access to story-analytics and other exclusive features shows. (see Georgakopoulou, Iversen & Stage 2020: ch 4). Influencers therefore play a key role in the authorization (cf. naturalization, legitimation; Jaffe 2011) of story-directives, serving as model-setters and cultural mediators between the apps’ promoted template stories and the users.

The ongoing study of Influencers’ Instagram Stories has involved distinct phases of automatic collection period during which Stories, as multi-modal data with their metadata, have been mined (with Python command lines and Instaloader) from two, largely representative, cases of female5 Influencers. This collection has generated a corpus of c. 5000 stories. Here, I draw on findings from the 406 stories collected in Phase 1 (January 2019) and the 1854 stories collected in Phase 2 (April-June 2020) from Lele Pons, (https://www.instagram.com/lelepons/?hl=en), American-Venezuelan Instagram and YouTube celebrity, former top female Viner, a top-ten storyteller (with the most watched Stories in 2016 & 2017), according to Instagram’s released figures. The coding of stories on NVivo12 has included: metadata (e.g. time of posting), types of captions, language of choice in captions, interactive elements (e.g. Swipe up features, stickers), format of Stories (e.g. live, photos, videos), mentions of others and in stories of others, et cetera. We have also coded the type of experience or happening that the stories report: e.g. good morning/good night, travel, outings with friends.

4. The directive of authenticity in self-presentation
As discussed above, the links between online stories and authentic self-presentation pick up on the prevalent definition of mediated authenticity as being genuine, real, not fake. The expression of a “true self” in stories as a sign of authentic self-presentation has a longstanding tradition in narrative studies as well as corresponding with lay conceptualizations of authenticity. In turn, the definition of authenticity as the teller’s presentation of a true self tends to be sought in the accuracy, believability and credibility of a story’s events (e.g. Labov 1997). For the narrative analyst as well as for the storyteller, authenticity as truth and realness, poses from the outset a tension between the inevitably subjective (re)constructions of experience and their tailoring to the here-and-now, in ways that ensure their reportability in a given context. From this point of view, authenticity has been recognized, especially within constructionist views of narrative, as inevitably ‘staged’ and ‘strategic’, part of a teller’s intricate identity work and sensitive to the context of a story’s telling (e.g. Ochs & Capps 1997; Coupland 2003). An authentic self-presentation in stories thus needs to be seen through the prism not of the naïve presentation of an essentialist self but of the facilities that allow the staging of a self that will be perceived as authentic in a given environment. Indeed, as it has been shown, constructions of authenticity require orientations towards certain semiotic resources that are recognised as emblematic of an authentic self (Blommaert & Varis 2011). As we will see below, the deployment of semiotic means that anchor the stories onto the present and achieve immediacy of tellings are such emblematic features. Blommaert & Varis argue that, for an authentic identity to be recognizable, any emblematic resources of authenticity need to be supported by regulatory discourses on how to be authentic in specific environments (idem). The Internet, they aptly claim, is rife with such discourses.

Values in design: Imperfect sharing

In the case of stories as a platformed feature, a key-discourse, directive to authenticity, is that of imperfect sharing. Promoted by Kevin Systrom, Instagram CEO at the time of the launch of Stories (2016), as a key-communicative function of theirs, imperfect sharing was equated with the presentation of ‘real’ (non-polished, non-filtered), ‘silly’, and ‘goofy’ selves. With its “Stories” feature, Instagram incorporated Snapchat’s successful introduction of stories as a tool for ephemeral sharing of silly and playful aspects of everyday life into its own platform design. (see Kofod & Larsen 2016) I have shown how imperfect sharing on both platforms grew out of the backlash against posting ‘glossy, perfect lives.’ (Constine
Template stories offered by the platforms as part of their launching documents and how-to-guides encourage sharing off-the-cuff, everyday moments (e.g. outings with friends; for examples, see https://buffer.com/library/instagram-stories). Similarly, many of the stories’ tools (e.g. animal filters, the boomerang looping effect, Superzoom, a ‘party hard’ visual effect) and editing features are designed to help posters add funny elements to their stories. Such fun elements are promoted in how-to guides as ways of producing creative, original and authentic stories. It is indicative of this conceptualization of authenticity that the words ‘creativity’, ‘authenticity’ and ‘originality’ were strongly associated in the EgoMedia Stories corpus. Research on how Instagram Stories are perceived by users is scarce: a notable exception is Kreling, Meier & Reinecke’s study (2021) which has shown that users perceive stories as more authentic than posts, in that they afford a more spontaneous self-presentation. This finding provides evidence for the alignment between the branding of stories as vehicles for authentic self-presentation and users’ perceptions of them.

In addition, the built-in ephemerality enables a sense of authenticity in self-presentation. By lasting for 24 hours and then disappearing,7 and by being brief, stories promise users the ability to share in the moment, without worrying about over-posting or about spending too much time on editing. As has been argued, the ephemerality of stories has incorporated a new dimension in the concept of ephemerality, a temporal time-bound logic, whereby the ephemeral both refers to the consumption of content in seconds and to the fact that a story can be viewed for a specific amount of time (Vázquez Herrero, Direito-Rebollal, & López-García 2019). In this way, the design of stories has drawn on the ‘oral paradigm’of ‘in-the-moment and momentary’ (Bayer et al 2016: 960, cited in Vázquez Herrero, Direito-Rebollal, & López-García 2019). This enhances the immediacy of the feature and, in turn, its potential for an authentic self-presentation, as we will see below.
Authenticity through imperfect sharing is closely associated with an ‘amateur aesthetic’ (cf. Abidin 2018), which is promoted by minimal simple static graphics, and the facility of brief captions that can be overlaid upon the images. According to Abidin, an amateur aesthetic ‘feels less staged and more authentic,’ given that ‘the live, moving image affordances of streaming apps tend to enable for little modification and the basic editing affordances restrict modification to preset filters and stickers.’ (91) The tools provided for this amateur aesthetic build on and are reminiscent of vernacular style photographic visual tropes: (cf. Morton 2017) for example, image grain (favoured by Kim Kardashian), skewed composition and unflattering poses. Such tropes have been described as ”endemic to a diaristic image-making that has become associated with inherently authentic and real, in-between, moments.” (ibid: 16). In the data at hand, the association of the authentic with ordinariness and an accessible aesthetic mode has the added effect of creating a level-playing field for all users, be they ordinary, influencers, or businesses.

In photographic terms, Instagram stories present a vertical format, departing from the earlier square format of pictures on Instagram that evoke polaroid pictures, and moving more to the direction of video. (Their size and ratio are the same as those of full HD video). This is yet another design choice with authenticity in mind. Stories are more immersive than anything else on the app, as users can view them full-screen on their smart phones. This format enhances the qualities of immediacy of viewing and the illusion of eye-witnessing, which are important constituents of constructing authenticity, as I will show below.

The constant rolling out of features and tools that allow users to link their stories with other stories, mention other users in their stories, add location stickers and hashtags as well as engage with stories enhance the sense of interactivity around stories, adding to the creation of authenticity. It is notable that adding a CTA (call to action) in a story is promoted in how-to guides as one of the ingredients of authenticity in storytelling alongside ‘honesty (not faking it).’ Elsewhere, we have argued that such features are part of a hybrid style of design in stories that allows users’ connections on the one hand while, on the other hand, paying lip service to the platforms’ agenda of quantification of every single aspect of a story. (Georgakopoulou, Iversen & Stage 2020) This suggests that the ways in which authenticity has been fashioned into the stories’ design serve the twofold purpose of supporting stories as both creations and consumables, often linked with advertising. Influencers’ management of
the tension between presenting themselves as authentic and self-promoting, as will be discussed below, capitalizes on this hybrid functionality of stories.

**Storytelling in the moment**

The presentation of storytellers and their lives as ‘authentic’ was found in the data to go hand-in-hand with sharing life-in-the moment. In the EgoMedia Stories corpus, the lexeme ‘moment(s)’ is one of the top 50 keywords. The most frequent modifiers for moment(s), especially the terms ‘everyday, little, casual, daily’ suggest a strong association with spontaneity and the mundane, and, in turn, with authenticity. The association of the word ‘moment’ with sharing everyday life is missing from our reference corpora: in the British National Corpus, for instance, moment is associated with ‘an opportune and specific occasion’ (e.g. at the last/crucial/right moment).

In similar vein, the analysis of the key-semantic domains suggested that immediacy is a salient, top 20 domain in the corpus, associated most frequently with words that locate a story’s events in the present, such as ‘(right) now, update, daily, current, today’. Immediacy notably collocated with spontaneity and authenticity: the concordance lines suggested that their connection was located in the behind-the-scenes feel that sharing in the moment affords.

<Insert Table 1 “Top 10 collocates for ‘authentic’ (ranked by logDice score)” here & Figure 1 Examples of concordance lines of ‘authentic’ here>

Immediacy and spontaneity are also closely associated with authenticity in how-to-guides for brand storytelling. A salient distinction there is between ‘of the moment’ and ‘scheduled’ content: the first is deemed as authentic, while the latter as ‘too perfect’ and thus alienating for the audiences (Osman 2020).

Sharing-in-the-moment in Influencers’ stories is closely associated with specific types of small stories well-suited to reporting on the here and now: These include breaking news, countdowns, behind the scenes, good morning/good night stories and updates. All these
formats of stories have lay names, recognizable to and often employed by the posters themselves. One third of Lele Pons’ stories in the 1st phase of collection (406) are explicitly labelled (cf. captioned) as countdowns, behind the scenes, and good morning/good night stories. There is a strong element of storytelling on-the-go in all of these formats: the teller moves about with their phone and captures snapshots of travels and everyday outings with friends, but also of their domestic environment, thus diarizing the everyday. Brief captions are recruited to provide an assessment of what is going on as a narrator’s voice-over, leaving the visual or video modality routinely in the role of the depiction of the here and now. (Out of 406 stories, 264 comprise photos and 366 contain captions). This on-the-go posting that invites viewers to follow the storytellers around privileges the depiction of the mundane rather than of complications: e.g. only 5 of Lele Pons’ 406 stories report a complication (e.g. ‘broke my whole nail!!!!!’, ‘I’m still a little sick:/’).

Another common thread in small stories of the everyday is the prevalence of temporal marking, linguistically expressed (e.g. with time-stamps, temporal adverbs such as ‘just’, ‘now’, durative aspects of present tense verbs, etc.). 59 of Lele Pons’ 406 stories are linguistically marked as being of ‘the moment;’ in addition, there is no use of past tense in any of the stories’ captions, except for cases when a temporal marker of immediacy precedes the verb: e.g. ‘just posted a video.’ This signposting ensures the stories’ anchoring in the here-and-now, on the one hand, and generates the algorithmically preferred live streaming and timeliness quality, on the other hand. Given that stories last for 24 hours, one day is seen as an organizational unit for sharing moments as stories in its duration. This explains the frequency of good morning/good night stories, which punctuate the beginning and end of postings for a given day. In addition, such stories as the first and/or last post for the day, are a perfect opportunity for depicting the poster in intimate surroundings, e.g. in her bedroom, half-awake and face semi-covered by a duvet or blanket, with no make up or filters: another depiction of a ‘genuine self’. (Only 2 out of 17 such stories show landscape to indicate the time of the day as opposed to Lele Pons being in bed).

The immediacy in the temporality of Lele Pons’ stories qualifies them for the genre of ‘breaking news,’ which I have shown to be a salient storytelling genre since the inception of social media. (2017) Breaking news stories set expectations for updates and create conditions for a trajectory of tellings in the near-future, based on the ongoingness of events and/or or audience engagement that seeks further elaboration. (ibid) In the data, this is a common
strategy for Lele Pons to segment her day into a series of small stories, linked with one another in a temporally sequential way. For instance, she announces her visit to her middle school in Miami with a story of greeting her ‘favourite teacher’, and a story that includes a picture with current students and is captioned with a durative present (‘visiting my middle school!!!!!’). These serve as the first two of several postings for the day, that update on the visit (e.g. ‘catching up with my History teacher!!’). The final story from the visit is a picture of several pupils and a caption wishing them ‘good luck’ and saying that ‘2019’ is ‘your year’. The event of the visit to her school is therefore told by Lele Pons in an episodic fashion, through a series of small stories of sequentially ordered sub-events. This type of episodic, modular telling with breaking news and updates as main formats licenses frequency of postings with the aim of retaining followers’ attention. Lele Pons, in tune with what market research has shown especially for Influencers, posts stories several times a day (every 2-3 hours).

**Authenticity and showing the moment**

By segmenting her day with stories, as discussed above, Lele Pons affords her followers a sense of eyewitnessing. She partly achieves this with manipulations of visual and video elements, including the placement of her phone’s camera, which affords her followers different perspectives and degrees of proximity to the unfolding events. These range from letting her followers ‘see’ the events *with her* to them seeing her *as a character* in the unfolding story. (Zappavigna & Zhao 2017) In all these cases, the predominance of the visual element, the *showing mode* of storytelling, allows the narrator to take a step back and let the events speak for themselves. (Fludernik 2006). This combination of visuality and immediacy adds to the sense of vraisemblance of the stories.

The (re)-designation of stories as visual rather than textual or verbal communication places a premium on specific narratorial modes, in particular, the narrator-experiencer as opposed to the narrator who steps back and reflects on the goings-on. The effect of showing rather than telling is the production of a readerly experience of an ‘unmediated’ story. The privileging of sensory roles for the narrator-recorder of their life (e.g. I see, I hear, I am experiencing now) and for the ‘audiences’ as ‘live spectators’ is evidenced in the corpus in the fact that visuality is a key-semantic domain and that the lemma story/stories strongly collocates with a visual
language (e.g. watch, view, see, hide, appear, disappear; for details on this association, see Georgakopoulou 2019).

At the level of communicative practices of stories as visual/viewable features, Lele Pons draws on the amateur aesthetic, as discussed above, with certain choices being recurrent in her stories. She specifically uses ugly selfies as a resource for imperfect sharing. She also uses Spark AR Studio filters to achieve fun visual effects. For instance, she places floating particles strategically and humorously in a story of eyebrows waxing. Bigger or different colour fonts are employed for some words or capitalization and exclamation marks in the captions for emphasis and excitement. Of emojis, Lele Pons has a distinct preference for heart emojis. All such choices are available to and widely employed by ordinary users too: a key-aspect of the authenticity that the amateur aesthetic brings to a story is that it purports to flatten any differences amongst users, creating a semblance of equal status, when in reality business accounts and Influencers enjoy privileged access to story-analytics and priority in rolling out of new features, amongst other perks.

4. The enregisterment of an authentic storyteller

Authenticity on social media has been mainly associated with (perceived) personality attributes such as believability and relatability. For example, Abidin (2016) has shown that influencers online place a premium on relatability in how they present themselves to their followers. Authenticity, in the sense of how genuine the influencer is, is a big part of this relatability, conducive to creating intimacy and closeness with their followers.

In the data at hand, the close association of authenticity with specific types of stories, as discussed above, grounds the characterization of an authentic teller both in the communicative practice of storytelling and in a specific mode of presentation of everyday life. Locating stereotypical valuations of a person (or a social group) in communicative practices has been shown in sociolinguistic research to be a process of creating stable, recognizable meanings. Enregisterment, the term for this process, therefore refers to ‘practices whereby performable signs become recognized (and regrouped) as belonging to distinct, differentially valorized semiotic registers by a population.” (Agha 2004: 81) In Agha’s description of enregisterment, reflexive and meta-linguistic processes are an integral
part of such valorizations: our corpus analysis suggests that the proliferating how-to guides online, often produced by users themselves (e.g. Lele Pons has produced guides on how to create the perfect Instagram Story), that bring together stories with authenticity, are evidence of such reflexivity.

From this point of view, we can claim that stories as designed platform features have become a performable practice for enregistering and essentially valorizing the authentic teller as a truth-teller, whereby truth is conceived of primarily in terms of experientiality rather than referentiality. The authentic teller is one who tells the truth by depicting the minutiae of everyday life, the banal, using equally banal ways of telling and inviting their followers to be witnesses of their ‘non-edited’ daily reality. As the discussion above showed, this mode of storytelling capitalizes on a specific set of semiotic resources supported by the design of stories as vehicles for imperfect sharing and an amateur aesthetic. This finding concurs with Blommaert’s and Varis’s (2011) claim that, in particular in digital environments, constructing an identity of authenticity tends to be a matter of ‘enoughness’. Enoughness is based on the use of a normally limited set of resources that are recognized as emblematic and as doing enough to produce an identity of authenticity in a given environment (idem). The perspective of ‘enoughness’ on authenticity in Instagram stories would suggest that authenticity should not be equated with ‘truth’ in a literal sense but in producing accounts of daily life that are believable, trustworthy and recognisable as ‘genuine’ and ‘true’ (cf. Gubrium, A. C., Krause, E. & Jernigan, K. 2014, for a similar point on the identification of authenticity online).

The idea of ‘enoughness’ in authentic self-presentation also explains the potential of specific resources or genres of stories for being used as a vehicle of authenticity by different users, from ordinary users to Influencers. We can expect ‘different degrees of fluency in enregistering discursive orientations’ to authenticity by different users, as Blommaert & Varis show (2011), but at the same time the design of stories facilitates a ‘normalization of aesthetics’ (cf. Abidin 2018). This is a facilitating factor in the enregistrement of specific choices with the potential of flattening differences amongst different types of users. At the same time, we can also expect that different users put the directive of authenticity to practice in ways that suit local projects and the larger identities they want to project through stories, that is, they strategize the directive of authenticity.
5. The Influencers’ tension between authenticity and self-promotion

In the light of the above, although Influencers have been instrumental in authorizing the directive of constructing authenticity through stories, it is also notable that putting the directive to practice places them in a double bind: constructing ordinary selves through sharing ordinary life-in-the-moment creates an obvious tension with promoting themselves and their products as well as with creating power-user identities as Influencers. Two discursive strategies for self-presentation used by Influencers in my data show how they manage this tension. In brief, the first strategy is that of repurposing: this refers to the adaptation of sharing life-in-the-moment genres, e.g. countdowns, breaking news, behind the scenes, to the communicative purpose of (self)-promotion. One third of Lele Pons’ stories are promotions (140 out of 406). For instance, breaking news stories are often deployed to direct users to postings of pictures or musical videos of LelePons. “Just posted a pic. Comment if you can relate”. Or, ‘My next YouTube is my favourite ever!! This Friday!!!!”. Similarly, countdowns are often repurposed by LelePons as previews, suspense-creation vehicles for the release and promotion of a video. For example, a sequence of three stories posted within one hour serve as a countdown for the release of her video Amigos (a short video parody of the TV show Friends’ opening credits, featuring LelePons and 5 other friends and replacing the well-known Friends theme with a Latino song). The first story announced that the video would be ‘coming out in 1 hour’, the second that it would be out in 30 minutes and the third that it was ‘out now’. Similarly, behind the scenes offer glimpses of shooting music videos.

The second strategy of managing the tension between presenting ordinary selves and self-promotion is that of “commensuration”, a term that I adapt from Lupton’s (2016: 97ff) creative reworking of the mathematical notion. Commensuration refers to the systematic coming together of different qualities and properties in certain environments. This unlikely alliance tends to result in a gradual coming together of their diverse meanings. Drawing on this definition, commensuration in my data refers to the coming together of stories as a relational and affective mode with stories in their function as a vehicle for (self)-branding, marketing and quantification of audience engagement. For instance, stories that depict fun outings and hanging out with friends get blended with the genre of peer-to-peer recommendation and endorsements which Influencers use a lot. It is no accident that Lele Pons’s friends who feature heavily in her stories (e.g. Hannah Stocking, Montana Tucker, Twan Kuyper) are all influencers, well-known YouTubers or Instagrammers, and every tag
and every swipe that is added to her stories about them takes her followers to their products, videos, and so on. They, of course, reciprocate the favour. This relationality is akin to Instagram pods, the influencers’ groups who agree to comment on, share and engage with one another’s posts, as part of gaming Instagram’s algorithm into prioritizing their content and showing it to a broader audience (Abidin 2018). But what is notable for our purposes is that peer-to-peer recommendation is commensurate with the format of sharing-life-in-the-moment and the blurring of daily life and endorsements that stories afford.

This commensuration is facilitated by the Instagram design of stories and algorithms. First, the main interactive elements in stories such as location stickers, tags, swipes, any calls to action buttons are hybrid from the outset: they support the authentic presentation of daily life and the story’s interactivity, but at the same time they are resources both for quantifying every behaviour and activity that users do with stories (e.g. clicking on a sticker is metricisable) and for being used by influencers and businesses for advertising purposes. In addition, algorithms consistently flatten different types of users on Instagram, for instance by re-programming ‘friendship’ as ‘those people you interact most with.’ The relationship of fandom that followers thus have with Influencers can easily be algorithmically computed as friendship. This metric conflates intimate relations with friends a follower may know in their everyday life and with Influencers. The viewing engagements are conducive to this conflation, as stories from friends and Influencers may appear next to one another and can be viewed one after another. Commensuration therefore works at different levels: not only do Influencers commensurate their own relationships with other Influencer-friends as endorsements and self-promotions but they also commensurate their fandom-based relationships with followers as relationships of friendship.

6. Conclusion
This article has focused on the growing and resonant phenomenon in the social media landscape of stories as a designed feature on platforms. With a focus on Snapchat and Instagram, and drawing on real-time tracking, corpus-assisted methods and a narrative analysis of Influencers’ Instagram stories, I put forward a technographic approach that traces the workings of technology in relation to the design of stories, the values underlying their design, the types of affordances offered, and the actual types of stories that they prompt. This approach has allowed me to document how, what I have described in previous work as small stories, become formatted, that is, recognizable as a specific type of communicative practice and social action. The process of formatting is facilitated by specific platform directives to users for how and what kind of stories to share. I singled out above the directive of authenticity in the tellers’ self-presentation. Building on the current close association of authenticity with storytelling and the widely circulating discourse of ‘being real’, in the sense of non-filtered, on social media, I argued that the design of stories has integrated authenticity as a core value into its affordances. In this way, I showed, authenticity has been associated with imperfect sharing, and is supported by tools for ephemerality and an amateur aesthetic in self-presentation. I also showed how this type of authenticity has become closely associated with specific genres of small stories, well-suited to providing snapshots of daily life in the moment and on the go. In particular, the format of breaking news lends itself to postings of sequences of stories intertextually linked that provide updates on unfolding events. An experience-centered, showing mode of narration affords the viewers a proximity and eye-witness quality. The storytelling is situated in the here and now, with temporal marking of immediacy and ongoingness. Immediacy therefore and mining the mundane are key to this type of telling and to creating authenticity for the teller. In this way, a specific way of telling becomes conventionally associated (enregistered) with a specific mode of self-presentation that comes with values and valuations typical of an authentic storyteller.

Finally, I put forward two strategies with which influencers navigate the tension between authorizing the platformed directive of authenticity and promoting themselves and their products which introduces a marketing and monetization element at odds with the construction of an ordinary self on a par with their followers. The two strategies of repurposing and commensuration capitalize on the fact that the design of stories supports authenticity at the same time as advertising and quantification of audience engagement with stories. We see then a parallel instrumentalization of authenticity in the broader context of the
instrumentalization of stories as hybrid features, both as content-creation facilities for sharing everyday life and and as (micro-targeted) marketing.

The present study is aimed at joining and contributing to parallel initiatives that recognize the need to critically interrogate this instrumentalization of stories, especially of personal experience, across various spheres of everyday life; this is variously referred to as a storytelling boom, a period of story-curation or a story-positive culture. (e.g. Fernandes 2017, Mäkelä et al 2021). In the light of the present findings, studies of the curation of stories on social media could benefit from combined attention to the communicative how and the socio-technic of stories. This requires technographic methods that allow us to uncover the values that underlie the design of stories, the tools that accompany stories and become instruments for their valuation, and the (in)visibilities for specific tellers and tales that these, in turn, create. It is within this nexus that agency, creativity and any empowering potentials of stories for storytellers and audiences online need to be examined.

With attention to the historicity of the platforms’ definitions of a ‘story’ and the mobilization of specific types of stories in connection with media affordances, we can uncover the processes through which norms and recognizability of specific stories in association with specific semiotic resources and modes of self-presentation develop. The present study showed this in relation to the directive of authenticity. Going forward, the intimate link between authenticity with specific ways of telling, as uncovered above, can be further investigated for any (shifting) connections of storytelling with notions of truth and credibility, in an era recognized by many as post-truth.

References

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Notes

1 In the short history of rivalry over story-facilities between Snapchat and Instagram, the latter has emerged as a winner with more than 500 million accounts using Instagram Stories every day. https://www.businessofapps.com/data/instagram-statistic
2 For details on the methods I have employed for ‘tracking’, including the technique of identifying ‘critical moments’, see Georgakopoulou 2016a.
3 The corpus was compiled in collaboration with Dr Anda Drasovean in February 2018 and it includes material published by January 2018.
4 According to Freberg et al. (2011), social media influencers constitute independent third-party endorsers or opinion leaders with access and reach to a large audience and the ability to shape their attitudes by using blogs, tweets, and other social media.
5 Although the female bias in the gender ratio of Instagram users’ has recently narrowed, six of the top 10 most followed accounts on Instagram are currently owned by women, hence our focus on two female influencers. Kim Kardashian is routinely on the top 10 list.
6 A case in point is Wilt, Thomas and McAdams’ (2019) study in which undergraduate students were tested on their conceptualization of authenticity in narrative. The analysis of the narrative content in their essays revealed ‘expression of true self’ and the contentment and independence that come with it, as predictors of authenticity.
7 Currently, users can archive or use highlights to store their favourite stories for longer, if they wish.
8 Behind the scenes is a recurrent phrase in the corpus (it occurs 179 times in total), which is indicative of the promoted spontaneity and authenticity.
9 In the case of Kim Kardashian in particular, a large number of her stories (e.g. 347 out of 632 in the 1st phase of collection) are, thematically speaking, (self)-promotions: e.g. product tutorials and endorsements.
10 My corpus analysis has shown that the meaning of the term ‘story’ itself is changing, through developing strong associations with ‘sharing’ and ‘moment’, on the one hand, and with a language of marketization and quantification, on the other hand (see Georgakopoulou 2019). Even in morphological terms, plural ‘stories’ with capital S, referring to the platformed feature, outnumbers in our corpus the word ‘story’: this, coupled with the fact that the term ‘Stories’ has entered the vocabulary of many languages without it being translated, is indicative of a process of rapid standardization for the term in its meaning as a platformed feature (idem).