

A narrative practice approach to identities: small stories and positioning analysis in digital contexts

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Abstract

This chapter discusses *small stories* and *positioning* as epistemological and analytical tools for the study of identities and affect in digital contexts. We start by discussing the shift from views of narrative as a textual mode of communication to stories as embodied communicative practice associated with identity *positioning* at different levels. We then move on to illustrate positioning analysis as an empirical framework for investigating how *narrative identities* are emploted and updated, reiterated and sedimented as *ways of telling* and as *types of participation*. Drawing on our respective work on sharing emotion and the self in social media, we call for the extension of identity positioning analysis to the study of *affective positioning* practices in light of their heightened importance in the performance of ‘authentic’ identities in digital contexts. We show how a YouTube vlogger enacts her affective positioning through specific sets of linguistic, paralinguistic, and embodied markers that cue her affective orientations at different levels of her vlogging narrative activity. We conclude by foregrounding the continued relevance of positioning analysis for the study of identities in digital contexts and the need to keep updating it in response to ‘new’ tensions and dilemmas arising from emerging narrative and identity modes.

Introduction

The power of stories for (per)forming identities is attested in the broader cultural turn to narrative as a tool – and a pre-requisite, even – for answering the question ‘Who are you?’ (Bamberg, 2012). In the context of largely confessional and therapeutic cultures (Illouz, 2008), story-telling is abundant in everyday and professional life, but also in the media and social media, where it is often equated with the presentation of an ‘authentic’ self and experience. Celebrated as much as critiqued (see Atkinson, 2009), storytelling is by now recognized as a key site for the situated construction and negotiation of identities.

In this chapter, we outline the principles of approaching *narrative as practice* for the analysis of identity construction and negotiation. This mode of analysis attends to the different levels of *positioning* that storytellers take up in relation to the storyworld, their interactants, their self, and the world. As Bamberg (ibid, pp. 104-105) suggests, a narrative practice approach to identity research addresses long-standing dilemmas in this line of work, namely dilemmas of:

- (a) *constancy and change*: how one’s sense of self balances moment by moment on a continuum of *no change at all* to *radical change*;
- (b) *uniqueness and conformity*: how tellers negotiate the degree of their sameness to or difference from others;
- (c) *agency and construction*: how tellers navigate their sense of self as actor or under-goer on a continuum of *low* versus *high agency*.

In the first part of this chapter we summarize the key principles of a *practice approach to narrative* and outline the main elements of *small stories* and *positioning* for the study of identities. In the second part, we illustrate positioning as an empirical framework for examining how narrative as well as affective identities are employed and updated, reiterated and sedimented in digital contexts.

Throughout this chapter, the term ‘narrative’ is used to refer to theoretical approaches, while the term ‘stories’ and ‘storytelling’ are used interchangeably to refer to aspects of story practice and performance.

Stories as/in practice

The abundance of narrative and its importance in diverse domains of social life is matched by a diversity of approaches to its study over the years. An exhaustive summary of the intellectual *roots* and *routes* of narrative research is beyond the scope of this chapter, which takes as its starting point the *stories as/in practice approach* (for more detailed discussions of narrative turns, see De Fina and Georgakopoulou, 2011). This approach has emerged out of narrative ‘waves’ variously enacting the narrative turn in the social sciences and the humanities and developing views of narrative as:

- a mode and way of knowing (Bruner, 1987);
- a cognitive-semiotic system used as a resource for problem-solving (Herman, 2017);
- an epistemology and method of inquiry (Riessman, 2008);
- a patterned text, which indexes sociolinguistic variation (Labov, 1972);
- an ethnopoetic way of speaking (Hymes, 1989) and performance (Bauman, 1986);
- a mode of communication and social interaction (Ochs & Capps, 2001)

Approaching stories as/in practice is grounded in the recognition that a particular type of stories, namely stories focused on the (re)telling of past events, had become the privileged object of analysis, leading to the neglect of interactional storytelling as a significant site of subjectivity and identity processes. Inspired (mainly) by insights from (qualitative) psychology, interactional sociolinguistics, and linguistic anthropology, the analysis of stories as/in practice called attention to the process of story-making as an interactionally-achieved performance and a site of identity construction that can provide insights into “the messier business of living and telling” (Georgakopoulou, 2007, p. 154).

Also referred to as *small stories*, *story-telling in interaction*, or *storytelling practice research*, this line of research has by now emerged as an epistemology and a critical framework for narrative and identity analysis, challenging dominant idioms about the self and the life-story. The small stories research paradigm challenges essentialist links between stories and identities and brings to the fore *counter-stories*, i.e. silenced, untold, devalued, and discarded stories in numerous institutional or research-regulated (e.g. interviews) contexts (see chapters in Bamberg & Andrews, 2004). The analysis of such story practices focuses on the communicative ‘how’ of (counter-) stories and their association with more or less fleeting and resistant identities - as opposed to a focus on the biographical content and the ‘what’ of stories

(Phoenix & Sparkes, 2009, pp. 222–223). This requires attentiveness to identities as emergent and jointly drafted by participants (e.g. accepted, upheld, contested, negotiated, etc.) in contextualized moments of narrative contradictions and dilemmas.

According to Bamberg (2012, pp. 101-102), the key principles of a narrative practice perspective can be summed up as follows:

1. Stories are parts of larger interactive activities.
2. Analytic attention is paid not only to textual features, but also to story-performance features (based on recorded and transcribed spoken stories and if possible, including visual display features, such as gestures, body posture, facial expression, and gaze).
3. Stories are made up of references to an inter-connected world of actors, places and events, which is open to the analysis of the theme or the aboutness of the story.
4. Stories are made up of components that follow particular culturally preferred principles of formation (*abstract, setting, problem, solution, coda*) commonly known as *plot* and which are also open to analytical scrutiny.
5. Narratives are typically told for a purpose; these purposes are tied closely to the local context of the interactive setting.
6. Story-tellers reveal aspects of who they are; they engage in identity claims with regard to how they would like to come across as well as with regard to possible answers to the ‘who-am-I’ question.

Stories as/in practices are studied through an ethnographic focus on speech events, which emerge out of specific *ways of telling, sites, and tellers* (Georgakopoulou, 2007, p. 22). This approach has proved to be an apt empirical framework for examining story-making practices and identities in digital contexts.

Sharing stories as/in practice online

Stories shared on social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, can take shape over a series of contributions often by multiple tellers in a single platform or across different platforms, drawing on a range of modalities (e.g. text, image, sound, and video) and prompting reactions from story recipients - both intended and unintended - in the form of likes, comments, and shares. Transportability and iterativity (with changes) emerge as distinctive characteristics

of digital stories, echoing the way stories are shared among peers in face-to-face interaction (Georgakopoulou, 2007).

Stories online are not necessarily fixed to social media contexts, but rather move between the online and offline. For example, Georgakopoulou's (2014) ethnographic study of adolescents' (social) media engagements in school-based peer interactions has shown the prevalence of small stories about social media activities, including *breaking news stories* of very recent ('yesterday') and/or still happening ('just now') events about social media engagements that lead to further face-to-face story telling activity relating to *updates* on the evolving events and/or *projections*, i.e. stories of events to take place in the near future (p. 230).

Three main analytical principles of stories in/as practice have proven to be of particular relevance to the study of digital storytelling:

1. *Time and place* constitute key interactional resources in storytelling for signalling the teller's orientation to the (recent) past, the present moment or the (near) future. In online stories, the most prevalent time and place configuration is the teller's 'here-and-now' in *breaking news stories* (Georgakopoulou, 2007, p. 13; see also Georgakopoulou, 2015);
2. Stories emerge as activities, which are *dialogic*, i.e. consisting of a multitude of tellers and orientations to the world, *variable* (and potentially *fragmented*), encompassing a variety of discourse activities and fleeting moments, and *transportable*, i.e. amenable to other contexts (Georgakopoulou, 2007, p. 86). All these are key aspects of storytelling activity online.
3. Narrative identities are "invoked and traced both as roles and types of participation and as ways of telling and style" (Georgakopoulou, 2007, p. 152), which are closely tied to *emplotment* – the interpretive act of arranging events by forging meaningful connections between them from the narrator's present vantage point. Emplotment and narrative identities provide a point of entry into the examination of emergent story-telling online.

As mentioned above, the study of digital storytelling has affirmed the need to revisit the basic dimensions of narrativity, including *narrative temporality* and *structure* as closely tied with processes of *identities* and *positioning*. Based on Georgakopoulou's analysis of Facebook statuses and selfies posted by female adolescents (2016a) and the examination of circulation of Eurozone-related political events on YouTube (2016b), emplotment is defined flexibly as

emergent in processes of (co-)authoring and distributing emblematic events in ways that create more or less meaningful connections among characters, events, actions and inter-actions, assessments, and/or resolutions. This situated and dynamic understanding of emplotment calls for the use of heuristics, including for example, emblematic events, key actors, assessments of key actors, and participation roles that can reveal practices of *poly-storying*, i.e. the way different – and often conflicting – plots can be combined and made more widely available in association with specific positions for tellers and audiences (see Georgakopoulou and Giaxoglou, 2018). Furthermore, the production and performance of identities and stories online have been found to be associated with conventionalized ways of staging and authenticating experientiality with and for intimate publics, attesting to the specific ways in which intimacy, rapport, and sociality online are being reconfigured (Giaxoglou, 2020). The empirical framework of positioning analysis, presented in the next section, has proved an apt framework for addressing the complexities of such performances.

Levels of positioning analysis

The idea that others are variously placed or *positioned* in relation to ourselves in a way that keeps changing was already noted by Marcel Proust (2006) in Volume II of *Remembrance of Things Past*:

Other people never cease to change places in relation to ourselves. In the imperceptible but eternal march of the world, we regard them [people] as motionless in a moment of vision, too short for us to perceive the motion that is sweeping them on. But we have only to select in our memory two pictures taken of them at different moments, close enough together however for them not to have altered in themselves – perceptibly, that is to say – and the difference between the two pictures is a measure of the displacement that they have undergone in relation to us (Proust, 2006, p.357).

The way that others are perceived to be changing by actively producing themselves in different and changing ways in the world became a prevalent object of study in social and cultural psychology and the concept of *positioning* - defined as “the discursive production of a diversity of selves” (Davies & Harré, 1990, p.47). This concept became an integral part of systematic approaches to the study of selves and identities, foregrounding the importance of ‘rights’ and ‘duties’ in the organization and management of social action taken up as positions.

While initial theorizations of positioning assumed a straightforward and self-evident connection between identities and sets of beliefs and roles, more recent scholarship on

positioning has shown the importance of local understandings and negotiations in the context of complex performances (see Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008; De Fina, Schiffrin, & Bamberg, 2006; De Fina, 2003; Wortham, 2000). Identities are, thus, recognized as multi-layered, dynamic, and often ambiguous, as social actors can project a number of different, sometimes conflicting positions and can have their positions interpreted by others differently than they had intended.

In addition to the acknowledgement of the emergent and dynamic nature of positioning acts, the careful analysis of empirical data has also foregrounded its ties to narrative practice. Narrative positioning has afforded analysts specific tools for investigating the inter-animation of the here-and-now telling worlds with the narrated taleworlds uniquely involved in stories (Deppermann, 2015; Georgakopoulou, 2007). The stories' plots, the types of events and experience that they narrate, the ways in which they are interactionally managed during the telling, are all important in this respect. So are the intertextual links of the current story with other, previous and anticipated, stories.

In stories in/as practice research, positioning has become a powerful metaphor of identities as ways of locating oneself and others (Georgakopoulou, 2007, p. 124). The three levels summarized below have commonly served as heuristics for this line of analysis:

Positioning Level 1: the level of the story or *taleworld*, i.e. the representation of characters through their description and evaluation in event sequences. At this level the analyst asks 'how are the characters positioned to one another within the reported events?';

Positioning Level 2: the level of interaction or *storyrealm*, i.e. the interactional uses and rhetorical functions that aspects of the story construction are used for. At this level the analyst asks 'how does the speaker position him/herself to the audience?' and 'how does the speaker address the question 'who are you?';

Positioning Level 3: the level of the self, i.e. the establishment of a sense of self. At this level the analyst asks 'how do narrators position themselves to themselves?', how do tellers address the question 'who am I?' and 'what kinds of alignment or disalignment with related dominant discourses or master narratives about related social and moral

identities do these acts of positioning index?’ (see Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008; De Fina, 2013).

Positioning at these three levels captures aspects of representation, action, and performance, as well as biographical dimensions of identities. It also makes it possible to link tellers’ identity claims to broader socio-cultural discourses and norms. These refer to socially-based group conventions, which guide how people enact specific identities and how they assess their own and others’ behaviour, as for example, in the case of tellers assessing their own or others’ behaviour as ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ in alignment with societal moral norms. Such links can be pinpointed by the analyst through ethnographic work that pays attention to common assumptions and themes that appear in related stories and broader Discourses that can be said to have an impact on (re)presentations of experience and the self in specific contexts, for example in research interview contexts (see De Fina, 2013). In this line of research, “the actual unit of analysis is the practice, not the story” (Bamberg, 2012, p. 107).

The study of the third level of positioning has raised discussions around the nature of identity as stable and continuous or as changing and fluid. Georgakopoulou (2013) has pointed out that positioning is an iterative process, which involves repeated constructions of social roles and identity formations that often become associated to certain contexts, activities, and types of stories. To analyse positioning, then, access is needed to multiple kinds of data and sites, for example across online and offline contexts, so that the analyst can answer the question of ‘why this type of story and this type of positioning here and now’.

Ethnographically-informed refinements to positioning analysis have also invited a more systematic reflection of the researcher’s role in participants’ identity projections, especially in the case of the analysis of interviews, pointing to the need to also focus on the researcher and her positioning in the data collection and elicitation process. In the case of the use of interview methods for the study of identity, for example, this involves a reflexive approach to the researcher’s motivation, questions, and methods and a careful consideration of ways of intervening in, interrupting, or supporting the interaction (De Fina, 2013). In cases that involve ethnographic observations of identity performance, the researcher is invited to bring in the analysis relevant aspects of their own roles and relationships with participants as part of a form of auto-phenomenology (Georgakopoulou, 2016a).

Positioning cues

The analysis of positioning is based on *iterativity*, i.e. the identification of recurrent language and narrative choices used by tellers, also known as *positioning cues* (Wortham, 2000; Georgakopoulou, 2013b). The reiteration of cues in social interactions and their association with recognizable social positions explains how such forms accumulate social meanings and become indexes. In this respect, positioning cues are also types of entextualization markers, i.e. linguistic cues that point to the local context but also to invoked contexts, past and future, that can reveal processes of narrative and identity sedimentation (Giaxoglou, 2019). According to Wortham (2001, pp.70–75) there are five main types of cues: (i) *reference*, i.e. personal pronoun choice and *predication*, i.e. phrase and sentence construction choices that contribute to the description of actions, characters and links between them (e.g. compare the phrases “the Lord” to “the Lord of the Rings”), (ii) verbs of saying (e.g. answer, exclaim, whisper, demand), also known as *metapragmatic verbs*, (iii) *quoted speech*, (iv) *evaluative indexicals*, which encompass a broad range of signs that can be used to characterize and evaluate characters and participants (e.g. ‘little boy’), (v) *epistemic modalization*, i.e. the way tellers calibrate their epistemic status in storytelling practice, claiming, for example, a God’s eye view or the status of a mere participant.

Lucius-Hoene and Depperman (2000) have also suggested different kinds of temporal and interactive sources of positioning. The analysis of small stories of mourning on a Facebook memorial wall has shown the centrality of time, space, and person referencing as interactional positioning resources for signalling the sharer’s distance or proximity from the death event, the dead, and the grieving self (Giaxoglou, 2015). More recently, Bamberg (2020) has pointed to visual cues as an integral part of narrative performance features serving as positioning cues, such as gaze, head movement, and breath intake and the coordination between them.

In positioning analysis, the para/linguistic cues described above are not taken as a priori categories but rather as *heuristics*, that can be drawn as required by the researcher’s specific questions and data to reveal the updating, reiteration and sedimentation of narrative identities and social positions as ways of telling and as types of participation. As we argue in the remainder of this chapter, positioning analysis has proved a productive and flexible framework not only for the study of identity in digital contexts, but also for the analysis of affect performances.

Affective positioning

Despite the growing recognition of affect as an integral part of embodied communication (Busch, 2020), aspects of emotional stance-taking have been only marginally attended to in empirical studies of identity positioning so far. For example, Bamberg's analysis of an interview in the Boston Globe with a person called Clark Rockefeller draws attention to the interviewer's questions-prompts for the interviewee's self-disclosure, e.g. *Does that trouble you?* and *Does that worry you? What do you feel about that?* as revealing of an empathic concern for the interviewee at one level (Bamberg, 2012, p. 112). Such prompts can be linked to the interviewer's alignment with social discourses about self-disclosures as being central in social actors' emotional state and wellbeing, indexing modern folk theories of narrative identity, which draw on the "therapeutic" master narrative (see Illouz, 2008). The "therapeutic" master narrative indexes a social and cultural shift in modern capitalist economies to an ethos of self-realization and growth with a central concern about well-being and emotional rights. Given the instrumental bearing of these shifts to the forms of modern identities and the increasing pervasiveness of affect in domains of social life, narrative approaches to identity need to attend more systematically to the affective dimensions of tellers' identity positioning.

As Busch (2020) notes, the study of affect - i.e. the specific performances of emotion and their effects - requires the study of visible discursive practices through which emotions are produced and taken up within specific constraints. In digital contexts, in particular, additional constraints involve platform-specific socio-technological affordances and limitations, which bear on the selection, styling and dissemination or amplification of shared affect. The study of affect should, thus, not be restricted to the level of emotion labels (e.g. 'love', 'sadness', 'anger', etc.) or explicit expressions of feeling states (e.g. 'I feel sad'), but, instead, it should be examined as an integral part of storytelling interaction and as an embodied practice, i.e. a practice that comes out of bodies and is interpreted in the context of lived, embodied experiences of audiences (Heavey, 2015).

The concept of positioning can be calibrated so as to address dimensions of affect performance, in what can be termed *affective positioning*. Affective positioning can be analyzed empirically at the three levels posited for the study of identity positioning, namely the taleworld, the storyrealm, and the teller with a focus on how tellers emplot degrees of affective proximity or distance from the storyworld, their audiences, and their own emotional self (see Giaxoglou,

2020). In digital contexts of sharing, social actors are not only faced with the identity dilemmas of *constancy and change*, *uniqueness and conformity (sameness and difference)*, and *agency and construction* (Bamberg, 2012), but they also have to navigate dilemmas which relate to the production and authentication of experientiality, that is the investment of an experiential telling with credibility and genuineness. These dilemmas include, for example, the negotiation of the degree of *uniqueness and representativeness of the shared personal experience*, the call for *audience identification or distancing*, and the sharer's *display of emotional control or loss of control* on recounted situations in line with existing templates for storying the self and sharing emotion in different social media platforms.

In summary, the analysis of affective positioning attends to the three levels posited for identity positioning with a special focus on affective dimensions in each level:

Positioning Level 1: the level of the story or *taleworld*; at this level, the analysis examines how events and characters are described and evaluated as falling into particular types of affective events (e.g. 'tragic', 'fun' etc.) and characters (e.g. 'suffering', 'strong', 'vulnerable').

Positioning Level 2: the level of interaction or *storyrealm*; at this level, the focus is on the affective stances communicated through different (para)linguistic and visual cues and the kinds of relationships established through these with story-recipients as intimate, proximal or distant. The analyst also considers the particular kinds of reactions, for example 'support', 'empathy', or 'solidarity', which are fostered through these relationships.

Positioning Level 3: the level of the self, i.e. the communication and establishment of a sense of an emotional self through the projection of particular types of affective states, e.g. as 'sad', 'happy', more or less 'in control' of a situation. These inflect and are inflected by broader sociocultural and social-mediatized norms of emotional displays.

The study of death-writing of the moment, which extends modes of life-writing of the moment as a prevalent mode of narrating everyday life, prompted by social media affordances of sharing in the here-and-now, is a rich site for the study of stories as practices, associated with specific kinds of affective positionings. As we will show below in an extract from a vlog about living with – and despite – illness, the analysis of such practices can shed light on digitally-afforded practices of mediatized story, identity and affect performance and participation.

Affective positioning in death-writing of the moment

Sharing significant life moments with and for networked audiences involves the selection and entextualization of significant moments as small stories through which actions, thoughts, and feelings can circulate widely (John, 2017; Androutsopoulos, 2014; Georgakopoulou, 2015). Importantly, sharing online also involves acts of positioning, through which sharers locate themselves *socially* as participants in the context of specific types of digital interaction and *affectively*, (re)producing relationships to each other as well as to their own self. Part of the analysis of a vlog of a young adult documenting her life with – and despite cancer – until her passing will serve to illustrate, even if summatively, key-aspects of the connections between storying and affective positioning in online performances.

The vlog is publicly available on YouTube¹ and documents Charlotte Eades' experience with cancer from June 2014 until her passing in February 2016. The vlog counts one hundred and twelve (112) videos posted by Charlotte herself and three additional updates posted by her mother on behalf of her updating viewers on the vlogger's last days and ultimately, her passing. After her death, Charlotte's mother, Alex Eades, her brother Miles, alongside Charlotte's cat, Nala, have taken over the vlog, having broadcast, at the time of writing, a total of one hundred (100) videos.

The analysis of story-making in the vlog from its launch to the vlogger's passing has pointed to three parts in the vlogger's overall emplotment of her illness, which are revealing of the changing stances to her illness, her audience, and her own self and emotions. The first part of the vlog includes videos that deal with everyday aspects of living with the diagnosis as a 'teenager with a twist' and make up the majority of the videos (63%), while the second part of the vlog, which deals with the aftermath of the diagnosis about the growth of the tumour includes fewer videos (29%). The shorter part of the vlog covers the last period of her illness (8%), where cancer treatment results in the vlogger's visible transformation in her appearance and her ability to walk and talk.

Transitions to each of these three parts can be said to be signalled by three videos, respectively which set the tone for the vlogger's selections of content and tone of the videos, namely (i)

¹ "Welcome to my channel" / Charlotte Eades YouTube channel. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ShO2QZ98Ro>. Accessed: 28 Feb. 2020.

“*When things aren’t going to plan*” (27 October 2014), which focuses on the vlogger’s identity dilemmas of being a teenager with cancer, (ii) “*Bad News*” (9 September 2015) where the vlogger announces the news of the tumour’s growth and shares her reactions and feelings about it, and (iii) “*Fed Up*” (28 December 2015), a short video about the vlogger’s deterioration of health and the related difficulties.

Viewers of the vlog watch the vlogger’s identity and affective positioning change across these three different parts associated with different types of storying the vlogger’s everyday experience of cancer. Content selections for the videos shift from a focus on general, relatable aspects of the teenage experience, which are not ‘normal’ to more personal, visible, and raw aspects of the experience of being (terminally) ill. The vlogger is seen to shift from affective positions of being in control, reflecting on how to best get on with her everyday life (“*When things aren’t going to plan*”), to positions in-between losing and being in control (“*Bad News*”) and ultimately, to being irrevocably transformed and alienated from herself (“*Fed Up*”) (for a full analysis, see Giaxoglou, 2020).

The remainder of this section illustrates how the vlogger engages in affective positioning practices in the context of her visual story-making, focusing on a selected extract from the first video “*When things aren’t going to plan*” (27 October 2014).

Level 1: Affective positioning vis-à-vis cancer

In Extract 1, reproduced below, the vlogger plots her personal experience with cancer in the form of a retrospective account (1.21 ‘recently’), where she reflects on the impact that cancer has been having on her everyday life with an orientation to the present moment (‘*I have cancer*’, 1.26; ‘*I can’t drive for two years*’, 1.28; ‘*it’s extremely difficult to get a job*’, 1. 31; ‘*I don’t really get to socialise*’, 1. 34).

Extract 1 “*When things aren’t going to plan*” (27 October 2014)² [lines 20-34]

20 I for some reason

21 I’ve been having a few problems recently

² In this transcript, numbering reflects the position of this extract in the longer transcript of the full video from which it is taken. Lines have been segmented ethnopoetically (Hymes, 1981) so as to maintain a sense of rhythm and oral patterning: verbal phrases, adverbials, discourse markers and short pauses have been used as cues marking a new line or *idea unit* (Gee, 1999).

22 with dealing with things
23 and feeling normal
24 Umm I will quickly go through this:
25 the first reason why I don't feel normal
26 is because I have cancer
27 the second reason being
28 I can't drive for two years
29 because I had a seizure last year
30 the third reason being
31 it's extremely difficult to get a job
32 which I'm sure a lot of you can relate to
33 and the third reason being
34 that I don't really get to socialise that much.

This retrospective account is a small story that can be described as a *recount*, in that it is organized as a report-like listing of the everyday difficulties in the life of a teenager with cancer, featuring little explicit evaluation and echoing the story genres of blogging on illness analysed by Page (2011). Evaluation is limited to assessments of the practical and social consequences of cancer, which is viewed as a disruption to “normal” life (l. 25), to everyday life activities, such as driving (l. 28), and to plans for the future, such as getting a job (l. 31). The employment of cancer as a major disruption in the teenager’s everyday life and plans points to the way the vlogger is constructing her affective positioning at the first level - the level of the *taleworld* - where she is seen to take a relative distance from her illness in an attempt to re-affirm her identity as a teenager.

Level 2: Affective positioning vis-à-vis the viewing audience

At the second level - the level of the viewing audience - the vlogger’s recount of difficulties is framed as an experience, which can resonate with viewers (‘which I’m sure a lot of you can relate to’, 2.32). Here, the vlogger is constructing her unique experience as more broadly representative of human experience in moments of crisis. This explicit orientation to her viewers as having a personal interest in what she’s talking about is inscribed in her discursive attempt to construct an affective positioning of proximity – and even intimacy – to them. This type of affective positioning in proximity to a personal public is central to this vlogger’s video-

storying practice. It is also carefully managed throughout the vlog based on a set of linguistic, discursive, and visual cues. These cues will be discussed by considering a multimodal transcription of two further extracts from the video “*When things aren’t going to plan*”, namely its opening and closing (see Extract 2).

Extract 2. When things aren’t going to plan (27 October 2014)

Time	Line	Verbal	Nonverbal
00:00	0	n/a	 <p>Getting the camera on</p>
00:03	1	Hi everybody	
	2	I am with a (.) really sudden video which I decided to film	
	3	in the space of about 10 minutes	
	4	(.)	
	5	I’m not wearing any makeup	
	6	uhm I've just come out of the bath	
	7	it’s a Sunday evening	
	8	but while I was in the bath	
	9	I had a thought	
	10	and I really wanted	
	11	to share it with everybody	
	12	and get the message out there	
		[...]	

		[...]	
05:13	133	anyway	
	134	I will film another video soon	
	135	I'm sorry for the crappy quality	
	136	you may have realised from the viewfinder	
	137	But please just remember to stay	
	138	true to yourself	
	139	and sometimes you can be your	
	140	own worst enemy	
	141	but you all can do it	
	142	and please just share this video	
	143	remember to speak to someone	
	144	don't ever hold things in	
05:41	145	thank you for watching	

The opening and closing parts in this video, which are typical of videos in the vlog, are used as *meta-communicative devices*, connecting this video to the ongoing series of videos that self-document the moments the vlogger selects as potentially interesting for her audience. These devices are drawn upon by the vlogger as authenticating strategies for affirming the spontaneity of content creation on the vlog ('really sudden video', 2.2), creating a sense of 'naturalness' and 'realness' ('I'm not wearing any make up', 2.5). These verbal authenticating strategies are supplemented by non-verbal choices, for example the choice of shooting the video in the intimate space of her bedroom and her bodily proximity to the camera. These combined strategies construct her affective positioning at the second level, helping the vlogger to negotiate aspects of privacy and publicness and forging an intimate relationship with her viewers, who are, thus, constructed as "a personal public" (Androutsopoulos, 2015, p. 74).

The second level of affective positioning is further marked visually through shifts in head-positions: the vlogger's head shifts from the viewer's right-hand side, during the camera set-up the camera and preparation for launching into (Extract 2, line 0) or moving out (Extract 2, line 145) of broadcasting mode, to the viewer's left-hand side, which seems to be the base mode for the vlogger's entering into the self-broadcasting mode of performance.

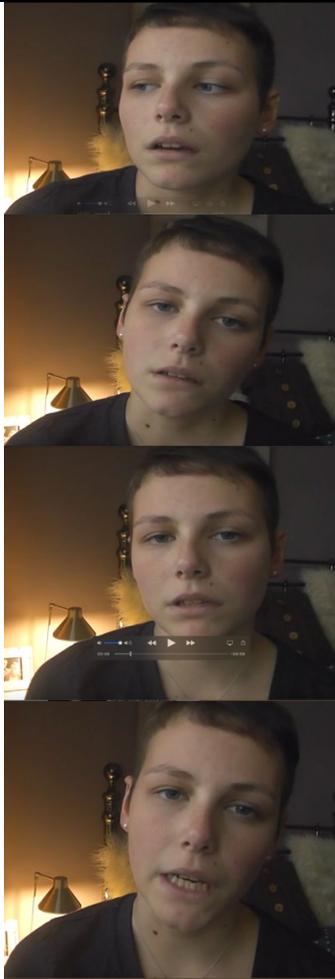
Uses of addressivity, for example the choice of using the pronoun 'you' ('but please just remember', 2.137) are central in the vlogger's affective positioning of intimacy to her viewers. The closing, in particular, where the vlogger fashions her experience into a small story directly addressed to her viewers (2. 133-145), opens up a space for her followers to share in her struggles and potentially, also, intimate their own stories of difficult situations in the comments space ('don't ever hold things in', 2.144). This mode of affective positioning is, thus, intricately linked to the vlogger's *identity positioning* to her viewers as an 'inspirational' teenager, who transforms her personal experience of suffering into an experience that can unite others facing similar difficulties and create a (YouTube) compassionate community.

Level 3: Affective positioning vis-à-vis the self

Lastly, at the third level of positioning the vlogger affectively positions herself as strong, positive, and largely in control of what's happening even 'when things aren't going to plan', creating, thus, a relative distance from her emotional self and the experience of cancer. The emphasis of the vlogger's self-presentation is on the "frontstage" (Goffman, 1956) as part of efforts to create and maintain a sense of control over the illness experience in line with norms of avoiding over-sharing emotion online and norms for presenting the self-online.

And yet, subtle nuances of the vlogger's affective positioning to herself surface in the paralinguistic features of the videos. In the video under focus, aspects of the "backstage" of the vlogger's affective positioning are given off in the part immediately following the opening, which brackets the main part of the sharing and brings attention to the affective 'I'. A selection of these features is annotated in the multi-modal transcript below (Extract 3; see Appendix for Transcript Key).

Extract 3³ When things aren't going to plan (27 October 2014)

Time	Line	Verbal	Non-verbal
00:42	1	^{-h} I (.) ^{<} ←	
00:43	2	for some reason: ^{>} (.)→	
	3	>I've been having<→	
00:46	4	a few ^{-h} (.) problems. (.)	
	5	recently .	
	6	with (.)→	
	7	dealing with things and (.)	
00:52	8	feeling: (.) normal. (.)	
	9	Uhm ((slightly moves back))	
00:55	10	I will ↑ quickly go through this	

The section opens with the utterance of “I” (3.1), which is marked paralinguistically by multiple features: It is fronted by an audible in-breath, its sound is elongated over one second and followed by a short pause and a shift of the vlogger’s head and gaze to the left. The overlaying of multiple paralinguistic cues in the utterance of a single sound places emphasis to the affective “I” through the production of a cumulative emotional effect. This is continued in the utterance of the phrase “for some reason” pronounced with an elongated final consonant ‘-n’

³ Note that lines in the multimodal transcript start from 1 for ease of cross-reference in the text; they do not represent the place of this snippet in the transcript.

at a pace slower than her earlier quick pace, while her head returns to the neutral position (right-hand side) which marks her being ‘out of’ broadcasting mode. The phrase “problems recently” (1.2) is uttered in a low pitch and a low fall, audibly marking the weight of these issues for the teller. The vlogger moves her head and body slightly closer to the camera, when she utters “dealing with things” (1. 7) and utters each of the words in the phrase “and feeling [normal]” (1.8) almost separately, adding emphasis to what she says. The move to the next part of the video is signalled by the discourse marker “uhm” (1. 9) accompanied by a slight move of her head backwards taking some distance from the camera and a change of ‘affective gear’ to the quick-paced summary of the reasons that cumulatively create ‘problems’ for her. The accumulation of paralinguistic features at this section mark it as part of ‘affective’ sharing or *embodied affective positioning*, calling attention to affect as an emotionally invested performance which is to be empathically witnessed.

Summary and conclusion

In summary, in this vlog affective positioning was examined in relation to employment in the following three interrelated levels:

Level 1: evaluations of the illness thematized as the main topic or focus of the story or other focalized moments and events through which the vlogger balances the *uniqueness* versus the broader *representativeness* of her experience;

Level 2: the vlogger’s interpersonal orientation to her viewers, shaped by modulations of proximity to her viewers and calling viewers’ *identification* with the portrayals of her experience as a source of inspiration and motivation;

Level 3: the vlogger’s positioning vis-à-vis her projected affective self, privileging the projection of *emotional control* through the vlogger’s explicit orientation to her viewing audience and norms of sharing emotion online, despite the leaks of emotion in acts of unintended embodied positioning. At this level, there is further scope for connecting the choice of the vlogger’s presentation of emotional self to generic plot types of illness narratives (Frank, 1997), master therapeutic discourses as well as social media affordances and constraints for positioning.

The discussion of this example draws attention to practices of affective positioning in story-telling as acts of modulating proximity or distance from the illness, the viewing audiences, and the emotional self as an integral part of identity performance and the staging of authenticity. It also highlights the importance of examining para/linguistic and embodied resources as cues of affect and identities in story-telling activities alongside the affordances and constraints of specific digital platforms.

To conclude, our discussion calls for the need to embed in the analysis of small stories and positioning - which so far has mainly focused on the study of face-to-face encounters - aspects of the way stories have been changing in the digital era. For example, the increasing use of stories as *designed activities* on social media requires a combined attention to the communicative ‘how’, the ‘what’, and the ‘who’ with socio-technical aspects of stories. In response to these ‘new’ dilemmas and tensions for story-tellers/sharers and their recipients, there is scope for considering aspects of *pre-positioning* in stories, especially in relation to Level 3 of positioning analysis, which links the production of situated identities in local storytelling contexts to broader social categorizations and roles. This recalibration of positioning analysis, which was beyond the scope of this chapter, can provide a critical lens on how technical and metrics considerations pre-position tellers vis-à-vis audiences and vice versa, and what feedback loops this subsequently generates amongst storytelling tools, affordances and actual practices (Georgakopoulou, Iversen & Stage, 2020). Our chapter has foregrounded the continued relevance of positioning analysis for the study of identities in digital contexts and the need to keep updating it in response to changes in story-and identity-making practices.

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APPENDIX

Table 1. Transcript Key (adapted from Ochs, 1979 and Jefferson, 2004)

Transcript key

(.)	pause length placed before utterance
.	low fall
?	high rise
!	exclamatory utterance
CAPITAL LETTERS	increased volume
—	emphasis
:::	lengthened syllable
-h	audible in-breath
h	audible out-breath
↑	upward eye-gaze
↓	downward eye-gaze
→	right-directed eye-gaze
•	centred & focused gaze
}	eyes frown
(())	gestures
>	head tilted to the right
<	head tilted to the left
[...]	omitted text