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A Multi-Dimensional Approach to Semi-Public Storytelling in WhatsApp Voice Messages

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Abstract

Based on a corpus of voice message narratives in German WhatsApp group chats, the present study contributes to research on social media storytelling in that it focusses on stories of personal experience which are embedded in a communication platform which favours a continuous dialogic exchange, narrated to well-defined non-anonymous publics and multimodal (comprised of visual and audible posting types). To capture the characteristics of this type of social media storytelling, the paper argues that Ochs and Capps' (2001) dimensional model originally developed for conversational narratives (including the dimensions of tellability, tellership, embeddedness, linearity, moral stance) should be expanded by the dimensions of publicness, multimodality and sequencing. The prototype of storytelling in WhatsApp group chats is based on recent personal experiences; it is related by a single teller as an initial, sequentially non-embedded and linearly organised "big package" story (in a single voice message sometimes introduced by a text message containing an abstract); other group members routinely document their evaluative stances in rather conventionalised text message responses in the semi-public group space.

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1 Narrating the private publicly – Practices of digital storytelling

Storytelling has become an almost indispensable part of social media communication. Users post accounts of recent events on networking platforms like Twitter or Facebook, they relate their experiences in vlogs on YouTube or they publish "stories" on Instagram and Snapchat. Linguistic practices of storytelling are both afforded and shaped by the design of these platforms, the choice of different posting formats and the variety of semiotic resources users have at their disposal. Stories constitute an important communicative genre for sharing personal experiences and disseminating them in mediatised publics (cf. De Fina/Perrino 2017; Georgakopoulou 2017a; Page 2018). Storytellers present momentary perspectives on their lived experience to others and thus always relate aspects of themselves and identity positions they claim.

While the growing number of studies of social media storytelling reflects the prominence of narrative formats in computer-mediated discourse (cf. De Fina/Perrino 2017; Hoffmann 2010; Georgakopoulou 2017b; Page 2018), the full range of reconstructive genres of everyday mediatised communication has not been covered, yet. First, many of these studies deal with public storytelling, that is, stories posted on platforms such as Facebook, Twitter or YouTube which can be accessed by larger and oftentimes anonymous publics. However, there are only few accounts of how users relate personal experiences in smaller groups or dyadic constellations, i. e. in non-anonymous messenger chats with only two participants or a clearly identifiable group of users in which participants know each other well and engage in various social activities in their offline lives. Second, most studies look at narrative formats which do not form part of an ongoing dialogic exchange. Although these stories can trigger comments and other reactions, they are often posted on platforms or sites which are not predominantly designed for continuous, conversational messaging. Narratives which are embedded in sequentially organised quasi-synchronous dialogues (in messengers like WhatsApp, WeChat, Signal and the like) still have to be researched. Third, even though it is generally acknowledged that social media narratives are multimodal in nature, research has mainly focussed on "visual narratives", that is, aggregates of images or videos with written or text-based postings or posting components. Digital narratives in which both visual and audible postings are integrated in one continuous string of discourse have yet to be analysed.

The aim of the present paper is to expand the emerging field of digital narratology (cf. De Fina/Perrino 2017; Hoffmann 2010; Georgakopoulou 2017b; Page 2018) by presenting a study of narratives in voice messages in WhatsApp group chats. It contributes to research

on social media storytelling in that it focusses on stories of personal experience which are

- narrated to well-defined non-anonymous publics in mobile messaging,
- embedded in a communication platform which favours a continuous dialogic exchange,
- multimodal (comprised of visual and audible posting types).

Based on the sequential analysis of a corpus of narratives in text and voice messages in German WhatsApp group chats, the study will discuss how users bring about a shared perspective on the presented narratives of personal experience and how they thus establish privacy and intimacy within the group-public space of the mobile messaging chat. Section 2 reviews previous research in digital narratology, Section 3 outlines the parameters by which the framework for narratives in mobile messaging differs from the affordances of other social media platforms. Section 4 presents an analysis of two storytelling formats utilising text and voice messages in German WhatsApp group chats. It focusses on the sequential design and the semiotic resources users deploy to narrate personal experiences in messenger dialogues. The concluding section discusses the findings in light of a controlled publicness in group chats and the implications for future research in digital narratology.

2 Affording narratives in social media: dimensions and parameters

Storytelling is one of the central communicative practices realised in social media. Recent studies have identified narrative formats in different communication forms such as e-mails (cf. Georgakopoulou 2004), blogs (cf. Eisenlauer/Hoffmann 2010), forums or message boards (cf. Arendholz 2010; Bubenhofer 2018; Heyd 2016), status updates (cf. West 2013; Page et al. 2013; Farina 2015), Twitter postings (cf. Page 2015) or Wikipedia entries (cf. Gredel/Mell 2018; Page 2018). Indeed, social networks and micro-blogging platforms seem to favour or afford narrative stancetaking (cf. Georgakopoulou 2017a; De Fina/Perrino 2017): Users are often asked to share their experiences with others; postings can be tagged automatically with time stamps or information about the poster's location, which establishes a spatio-temporal frame for each posting. Moreover, some platforms allow users to tag other users, which enables the original posters to choose co-tellers or recipients from a larger audience.

Users exploit these technical affordances to realise several forms of storytelling which do not always conform with the "narrative prototype": Drawing on Labov and Waletzky's seminal research of recurrent narrative structures in oral narratives of personal experience (cf. Labov/Waletzky 1967; Labov 1972), the analysis of linguistic practices of storytelling has long focused on elaborated single-teller narrations which include an initial orientation, outline the complicating action and offer a resolution before a final coda interspersed with internal and external evaluations indexing the teller's stance towards the reconstructed events. While conversation-analytic studies have helped to identify the co-constructedness of storytelling activities as interactive accomplishments (cf. Becker/Quasthoff 2005; Quasthoff 2001; Selting 2017), they too have mainly focused on sequentially extended "big packages" (cf. Sacks 1995).

Although "big" stories can still be found in weblogs or YouTube videos, recent studies point out that major parts of narrative practice in social media will be missed if one only takes those forms into account that adhere to the prototype of a single teller reconstructing past events in a linear and sequentially self-contained manner. Rather, the small stories research paradigm (cf. Georgakopoulou 2017a, b; Georgalou 2015; Page 2010; Page et al. 2013) has identified various other formats in which users take a narrative stance without necessarily presenting a complete narrative account afterwards:

> *Narrative stancetaking* involves posts in which conventionalised story framing devices are used to suggest that there is a story in the making, a story that can be told, developed and updated later if requested. More generally, narrative stancetaking indicates that an activity is:
>
> - being offered or taken up as a story, thereby positioning participants as tellers-recipients-(co)-tellers, etc. and/or,
> - consisting of events and characters in specific spatiotemporal scenarios whose actions and speech are assessable. (Georgakopoulou 2017b: 275)

Thus, the small story heuristic casts a wide net over semiotic practices in social media and allows for identifying a larger set of storytelling practices. Instead of solely focussing on complete or "fullfledged" stories, studies of this paradigm identify condensed and often fragmentary narrative patterns in Tweets (cf. Page 2015) or selfie postings (cf. Georgakopoulou 2016) in which the textual basis is either restricted by the platform (e. g. 280 characters on Twitter) or secondary to the picture posting (as is the case with selfies). To bet-

ter grasp the various features which have been identified as characteristic for digital narrations, the next paragraph will introduce an adaptation of Ochs and Capps' model of narrative dimensions to the study of social media storytelling (cf. Page 2012).

Building on their observation that many of the narratives found in oral conversations actually do not conform with the Labovian default narrative, Ochs and Capps (2001) developed a dimensional model for the study of everyday storytelling. They stipulate that a more differential account of narratives can be given by examining the following five dimensions of storytelling activities – tellability, tellership, embeddedness, linearity and moral stance – which are organised on a continuum rather than as binary opposites. Interlocutors treat the reconstruction of an event as more or less tellable (i. e. of interest or of significance for the recipients). Speakers can vary between positioning themselves as the only or primary teller or as one of various speakers contributing to an ongoing telling activity. Moreover, this positioning can fluctuate in the course of a story telling sequence. Stories can respond to a foregoing activity and thus exhibit a high degree of embeddedness, they can establish a more or less overt thematic relation to what has been said before or they can be presented as sequentially detached entities which do not relate to the preceding conversational exchange. Tellers can choose to reconstruct relevant events in various temporal outlines: Events can be presented in a linear or chronological order, or tellers might relate them in reversed or even non-linear order. Finally, the teller's evaluative or moral stance can oscillate between a stable and a rather flexible and negotiable take on the events related.

While Ochs and Capps' dimensional approach was intended for oral and synchronous forms of storytelling, recent studies of computer-mediated discourse argue that the model can also be applied to the analysis of text-based and asynchronous narratives in social media (cf. Page 2012; Arendholz 2010). Characterising social media storytelling along the five dimensions, these studies contend, helps to adequately grasp and systematise the variety of narrative forms and formats in social media – even though the categories for describing the varying shapes of the narrative dimensions have to be reworked (cf. Page 2012, 2015). For one thing, the semiotic means tellers can deploy for narrating certain events differ as the model now also encompasses text-based narration (prosodic contextualisation cues vs. typographic variation or emojis). Particularly, studies in the small stories paradigm have outlined further distinctive features of narratives in social media. The following summary relates their main findings to the five narrative dimensions:

- **Tellability**: Social media favour the reconstruction of recent and sometimes still ongoing events or of past and future events which are linked to aspects of the current situation (cf. Page 2015; Dayter/Mühleisen 2016). Moreover, users predominantly narrate their self: Their own mundane everyday experiences are treated as relevant to other users (cf. Georgakopoulou 2017a).

- **Tellership**: Social media narratives are often realised by multiple tellers. This occurs either within one communication form (e. g. by inviting others to comment on a selfie [cf. Georgakopoulou 2016]), through collaborative writing practices on Wikipedia (cf. Gredel/Mell 2018) or by sharing and further commenting on narrative content across different platforms (cf. Page 2018).

- **Embeddedness**: Social media narratives are persistent (cf. boyd 2011). They can be forwarded and shared with other users and on other communication platforms, i. e. they are taken from their original communicative contexts and embedded or recontextualised in a different sequential framework (cf. De Fina 2016; De Fina/Gore 2017; Georgakopoulou 2015; Page 2018; Tienken 2013).

- **Linearity**: Hypertextual features (links to webpages, postings or hashtags) turn social media narratives into networked, non-linear polymedial configurations (cf. West 2013; Eisenlauer/Hoffmann 2010). Some social media platforms actually display postings in counter-chronological order (cf. Page 2015), which impedes a posting-by-posting development of narratives. Moreover, social media narratives often do not constitute clearly delimited or closed-off formats; they are rather emergent, fragmented and potentially open-ended (cf. Georgakopoulou 2017b).

- **Moral stance**:[1] In the context of emergent storytelling, which often begins without a predetermined teleological endpoint, users can shift their evaluative stances (cf. Deppermann 2018). Also, the multiple voices involved in the collaborative storytelling activities, which are shared and reconfigured (or rescripted, cf. Georgakopoulou 2015), often produce variable and sometimes conflicting moral or affective stances vis-à-vis the narrative subject (cf. De Fina/Gore 2017).

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[1] In contrast to Ochs and Capps (2001: 45), my understanding of the term "moral" is a rather broad one, which is not restricted to the contextualisation of "what is good or valuable and how one ought to live in the world" but rather captures the evaluative of affective stances that tellers take in their stories.

Drawing on these studies, a prototypical way of social media story telling features recent events the narrators have experienced themselves; as postings can be shared and added to by multiple tellers social media stories often come in a non-final linearity and with shifting or even contradictory moral stances. Whereas the aforementioned aspects can adequately characterise narrative practices on platforms such as Facebook (be it in status updates or in selfie postings) or Twitter, they do not document the actual spectrum of storytelling in social media. While the small stories paradigm has clearly helped to identify the wide range of – what is often referred to as "a-typical" – communicative practices in which users relate event structures in web 2.0 contexts, one should not lose sight of the linear, elaborate forms of narration which can also be found in social media contexts. Blogs, vlogs, message boards and internet forums, as well as Wikipedia entries, offer sites for user-generated narratives which are tilted towards the other end of the dimensional scale. These "big" stories often relate non-recent and life-changing events (such as childbirth [cf. Bubenhofer 2018] or a biographical crisis [cf. Arendholz 2010]); they are told in a coherent, linear and teleologic fashion by a single teller with a straightforward, non-flexible evaluative stance. According to De Fina it is not the actual shape of the stories told in social media that distinguishes them from their familiar counterparts in oral communication (cf. Herring 2013) but rather their potential to be shared in a wider audience or networked public (and thus their open-endedness) across different media and their multimodal design:

> [W]hat is most distinctive about storytelling in social media is precisely the way narratives are shared, recontextualized, commented upon, and subject to continuous reconfigurations and reinterpretations, how they are embedded within different media, how they are often recounted through multimodal resources, and how their production and circulation are as much a focus of attention as their content. (cf. De Fina 2016: 477–478)

Thus, to apply the dimensional model of narratives to social media storytelling requires more than just a reworking of the parameters (cf. Page 2012): It must recognise the different modes of contribution and participation which have developed (single teller and multiple voices); it must also recognise that certain platforms (Twitter and Facebook) and postings types (selfies) favour recency while others afford retrospection (blogs, forums). Due to their mediated and networked nature, I argue that further dimensions have to be added to the dimensional model, which was originally developed to capture

the specificities of ephemeral and synchronous oral storytelling. With the production, retention and distribution of stories via different media and platforms, other affordances and resources are available to users for taking a narrative stance. Rather than subsuming them under the five dimensions developed by Ochs and Capps, I suggest expanding the model by adding the following three dimensions:

- **Publicness:** In addition to having multiple tellers, the publics can be quite dispersed in social media storytelling. Users can select particular recipients to receive their stories or post them on platforms accessible to a wider, often anonymous networked public (De Fina 2016; De Fina/ Gore 2017). Mediated story postings are also persistent; they can be shared with a wider audience for which the original story was not designed in the first place (alluded to as "context collapse" by Baym/boyd [2012]). In a communicative framework characterised by polymedia (cf. Madianou 2014; Androutsopoulos/Staehr 2018) users can navigate and control (at least to a certain extent) publicness by choosing particular platforms, communication forms (such as group chats) or privacy settings (cf. Georgalou 2016).

- **Multimodality**: Even though many studies in digital narratology take text-based material as their starting point, they also always stress the fact that social media storytelling is essentially multimodal in nature (cf. Eisenlauer/Hoffmann 2010; Farina 2015). Different platforms afford different semiotic resources to users for telling a story. They can choose to relate their experiences in a text-based manner, exploiting typographic or other structuring resources afforded by the platforms (story abstracts might be given in headers so that the actual posting can start with the complicating action [cf. Arendholz 2010]) or combinations of text and images can be used as multimodal aggregates of narration (cf. Eisenlauer/Hoffmann 2010). Also, different posting types might be used for different story components (image postings might be used as invitations for others to request more elaborate narrations in the form of text messages [cf. Georgakopoulou 2016]) which brings about a "transmodal interaction" (Androutsopoulos/Staehr 2018: 124). As users can often choose to design their stories as more or less multimodal, this aspect

should be added to the dimensional model of social media storytelling.

- **Sequencing**: In addition to the dimension of embed-dedness, which captures the relation of the story to the current communicative context, the dimension of sequencing helps to differentiate variation in the sequential design of stories in social media. Stories can be made up of one single posting or of multiple postings which chunk the telling of the story into several larger or smaller units (what Page [2012: 193] refers to as "narrative sequencing").

Naturally, digital narratology has acknowledged the varying groups of recipients and audiences and differences in the sequential and multimodal design of stories in social media for some time. Yet, explicitly anchoring them as additional dimensions helps to highlight and systematise the particularities of social media storytelling. The analyses in Section 4 will outline how the expanded dimensional model (see Table 1) can be applied to the study of multimodal storytelling in mobile messenger chats (more specific: storytelling with text and voice messages in WhatsApp group chats). The next section will give a brief outline of the affordances of WhatsApp communication in general and of storytelling in group chats in particular.

3 Affording narratives in WhatsApp group chats

Similar to internet-based communication platforms, which allow users to connect and share different forms of user-generated content with each other, messengers like Signal, Telegram, WeChat or WhatsApp form part of the ever-growing social media infrastructure (cf. Marx/Weidacher 2014; Androutsopoulos 2010). These messengers, typically used on mobile devices, often consist of several communication modules (such as status information, stories, chats etc.). The following analyses will focus on WhatsApp, which is the most popular messenger app in Germany. Its chat interface enables dyadic chats (one-to-one), broadcast lists (one-to-many) and group chats (many-to-many). Despite its increasing popularity, linguistic research of user practices in these different set-ups is still scarce.

WhatsApp communication is dialogical and multimodal in nature. Studies indicate that text messaging is used in a chat-like manner especially when users are oriented to the device at the same time (cf. Dürscheid/Frick 2016). Like in computer-based chats, chunking is applied as one method to manage the rapid or quasi-synchronous exchange of messages (cf. Imo 2015; König 2015, 2019a; Wyss/Hug

2016). In addition to emoticons, emojis are used widely e. g. as contextualisation cues or economic forms of communication (cf. Dürscheid/Siever 2017; Pappert 2017). While these features all work in the visual modality, with voice messages user-generated auditory postings can also be integrated into the continuous thread of messages. These audio postings, which can be easily recorded on the surface of the chat interface, do not replace text messages but rather complement the existing practices of mobile messaging by providing additional semiotic resources that users can exploit for their communicative purposes. Users often stage "dramas to an audience" (Goffman 1974: 508) in voice messages by relating particular prosodic stylisations or by recording elements of the poster's soundscape (cf. König/Hector 2017). They display different degrees of embeddedness as they are designed as "monologic" contributions, which do not relate to the foregoing discourse, or as "dialogic" postings, which respond to a foregoing posting and hence make another user's response relevant (cf. König/Hector 2019). Because most of previous studies of WhatsApp deal with dyadic chats, little is known about the dynamics of WhatsApp group chats (but see König 2019b) let alone the practices of storytelling that have evolved in this communication form.[2] Yet, the multimodal and semi-public character of group chats make them an interesting subject for digital narratology.

Note, however, that their affordances do not particularly favour narratives like other social media platforms (cf. Georgakopoulou 2017a; see also Section 2). Although WhatsApp postings are also always tagged with time-stamps, there is no particular prompt or invitation to reconstruct past or recent events. Instead, the quasi-synchronous flow of messages exchanged between multiple chatters might even hinder the realisation of rather complex narrative projects. Indeed, some studies find that it is unlikely for users to try to convey an elongated narrative in a chat-like interface (cf. Hoffmann 2004; Arendholz 2010).[3] Thus, the WhatsApp group chat interface does not prioritise narratives in the same way as other social media platforms or communication forms. However, with the introduction of voice messages, a posting type has entered the communicative realm of messenger chats which can afford longer contributions that are easy to produce.[4] How users exploit this resource for storytelling in group chats will be analysed in the following section.

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[2] For an analysis of patterns of storytelling in dyadic WhatsApp chats see Hector (forthc.).

[3] Even in e-mails, which can have a more "monologic", letter-like form, larger narrations are often postponed to face-to-face encounters, see Georgakopoulou (2004).

[4] The lock-option introduced in 2018 makes longer recordings even easier.

Also, unlike in other forms of social media storytelling, in WhatsApp group chats narrative contributions are particularly designed for a non-anonymous semi-public audience made up of the group chat members.[5] At the same time, posters are not anonymous; they are at least identifiable by their mobile phone number. Building on the extended dimensional model for narratives, the analyses in Section 4 have to determine the methods users prototypically apply to tell stories in multi-party and multimodal mobile messenger chats. Moreover, the analyses will also illustrate how chatters make use of, integrate and allude to the networked semi-public of the group chat for their storytelling activities.

4 Storytelling with voice messages in WhatsApp group chats

The following analyses are based on a corpus of 28 German WhatsApp group chats consisting of 585 text messages, 98 voice messages and 17 image postings which were collected in the research project "Dialogicality of Voice Messages".[6] In a multidimensional methodological approach, the messenger chats have been collected as text logs using the messenger's export function and as screenshots which also help to capture relevant visible features of the screen protocol such as the "reply to"-function not visible in the text logs. Voice messages have also been exported using either the messengers export function or the download option in the browser-based WhatsApp web function. They have been transcribed using the GAT 2 conventions (cf. Selting et al. 2009). All names and place references have been replaced by pseudonyms. Alongside this documentation of chats, sociodemographic and ethnographic background data about the users and their everyday social media routines was collected. The users' informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. Users were asked to contribute coherent stretches of multimodal WhatsApp discourse to the corpus, i. e. they were not specifically asked to supply narrative sequences. The chats took place between 2016 and 2018. They comprise dialogues between family members and groups of friends (mostly students) with four to five

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5 Note, however, that WhatsApp chat content is persistent: it can be forwarded to others and shared on additional platforms or in face-to-face encounters. Future studies have to determine for which purposes chatters make use of this practice, in which cases it is deemed as a breach of privacy and in which cases it is deemed acceptable.

6 For more information see https://www.uni-muenster.de/Germanistik/Projekte/WhatsApp/index.html.

group members on average. All in all, group chats with 28 different users, aged 22 to 58 years, were gathered.[7]

In this corpus 19 dialogues containing narratives were identified (consisting of 164 text messages, 46 voice messages and 7 image postings); this collection was analysed for the current paper. I will present two excerpts which capture the prototypical features of storytelling activities in the given collection.

4.1 Placing "big packages" in group chats

As was argued in Section 3, the continuous and quasi-synchronous exchange of messages in multi-party group chats does not offer ideal conditions for producing longer narrative sequences. The following excerpt, taken from a group chat of four female friends in their twenties, illustrates how users nevertheless manage to place narrations in mobile instant messaging. First of all, in the given collection narratives are typically placed as a posting initiating a new dialogue, i. e. a new thread of thematically-related messages.[8] Users thus avoid the risk of sequentially non-related contributions by other users.[9] Characteristically, there are no 'overlapping' or parallel activities. In posting 1, Beate (BE) starts a new dialogue unit at 01:47 am, a time at which group members were not simultaneously oriented to the messenger. It is in such a context that WhatsApp users treat their reconstruction of recent events as tellable right away. That is, they do not elicit a prompt to tell their stories, they do not ask for a 'ticket' or permission to start storytelling (cf. Sacks 1974). Second, the choice to use voice messages as a posting type also enables users to place extended single-teller narrations in messenger chats. In the given example, Beate first takes a narrative stance by posting an abstract of the event setting so far (posting #1) before switching to an audio posting to deliver a full-blown account of the following events (posting #2).

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7   Rather than focusing on a particular community of practice, contributors were identified using a friend-of-a-friend procedure, i. e. data were gathered among students, their friends and families willing to donate particular sequences of their everyday messenger dialogues.

8   For narratives in dyadic chats, Hector (forthc.) finds a greater variability in the embeddedness of narratives. He also finds patterns in which users 'ask' for a ticket, in which other users elicit stories or in which they are embedded as second stories.

9   Phenomena like split adjacency and phantom adjacency which are typical for text-based quasi-synchronous chats (cf. Beißwenger 2016; Garcia/Baker Jacobs 1999) are thus averted by design.

Excerpt 1: lost purse and keys

| 1 | BE | 01:47 | Gerade beim feiern im Amp hab ich mein Portemonnaie und mei-nen Schlüssel verloren 🎉🕺🕺 richtig geiler Abend |

Lost my purse and my keys while partying at the Amp 🎉🕺🕺 really cool evening

| 2 | BE | 01:50 | *Voice message duration 02:34* |

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001  AN: wir ham dann HALT-
         we then
002      (0.2) geWARtet,
         waited
003      bis ähm (0.1) alle WEG waren aus dem
         lAden-
         until everyone had left the club
004      ham den ganzen <<lachend>lAden>
         durchgeSU:CHT-
         we searched the whole club
005      und halt NACHgefragt-=
         and asked around
006      =und beSCHEID gesagt-
         and told everyone
007      °hh aber es wurd natürlich !NICHTS!
         abgegEben:-
         but of course nothing was returned
[…]
024      wir ham alles durchSU:CHT-
         we looked everywhere
025      und immer NACHgefra:gt-
         and always asked around
026      und WAR halt nix-
         but to no avail
027      dann haben wir (halt) quasi gewartet
         bis de:r scheiß laden ZUmacht
         endlich,
         then we waited until the fucking club closed
028      °hh (0.2) ((schlucken))
          ((gulping))
029      und wir halt den leeren (0.1) lAden
         durchsuchen KÖNnen:-
         so that we could search the empty club
030      ÄHM:-
         ehm
031      (0.6) und da haben wir dann aber
         leider <<h>!AUCH! nichts gefunden:->
         and unfortunately we did not find anything
         then either
032      dann kam irgendwann einer der da
         geARbeitet hat-
         after some time one of the employees
         approached me
033      hat meinen PERso gefunden?
         found my ID
034      °hh also mein pErso der im portmonNAIE
         war-
         that is my ID which had been in my purse
035      is auf <<lachend>jeden fall>
         AUFgetau:cht?
         has turned up
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        […]
060     (1.1) also das geld ist mir jetzt auch
          (.) richtig eGAL,
        I don't care about the money
061     (0.6) aber ähm (.) schlÜssel is halt
        SCHEIße;
        but having lost my keys sucks
062     °hhh (vielleicht) hat ja irgendwer
        besOffen den schlüssel eingeSTECKT;
        maybe someone took my keys drunk
063     und ähm: MERKT dann morgen früh-=
        and will realise tomorrow morning
064     =oh das is gar nicht MEIner;
        oh that's not mine
065     °hh <<gähnend, h>und gibt ihn
        viel!LEICHT! bei der polizEI ab;>
        and maybe returns them to the police
066     deshalb telefonIEr ich morgen nochmal
        mit meinen netten freunden von der
        poliZEI::>;
        that is why I will call my dear friends from
        the police tomorrow
067     hh° <<creaky>JA;>
        yeah
068     °hh  <<creaky>war auf jeden fall ein
        schöner Abend>;=ne?
        it was a really nice evening anyway, right?
069     <<t>hat sich richtig geLOHNT;>
        it really was worth it
070     (0.6) ordentlich auf die KACke
        gehauen:;
        really had a blast
071     °h_ACHTzig euro-
        eighty euros
072     wat SOLLS;
        why do I care?
073     (0.5) SCH:LÜSsel no_hinterhErgeworfen-
        throwing the keys away
074     (0.3) °hh <<verstellt>alles RAUS;>
        everything must go
075     h°((schnalzen)) gute nAcht ihr süßen
        SCH:ÄTzis-
        good night you sweet darlings
076     (0.1) SCHM:ATzi:s-
        kisses
077     °hh gut dass ihr: ((schlucken)) brav
        zu hause SITZT-=
        how good that you sit at home well-behaved
078     =und HAUSarbeiten schreibt-
        writing your papers
079     und nach INdien jette:t-
        that you are jetting to India
080     °h und äh morgen früh ARbeiten mü:sst-
        and have to work tomorrow morning
081     und SCHLAfen geh:t-
        and that you go to sleep
082     (0.3) un:d nicht FEIern geh:t-
        and don't go partying
083     mItten in der WOche:-
        in the middle of the week
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084      das ist die <<creaky>STRAfe dafü::r;>
```
that is my rightful punishment
```
085      °hh wer geht denn auch schon dIEnstags
         FEIern;
```
who goes to a party on Tuesday anyway
```
086      (1.5)
```

3	IS	04:05	Ach fuck 😑

Oh fuck 😑

4	IS	04:05	Hoffe du fährst mit dem Rad ohne Licht zu deinen Freunden von der Polizei 😂

I hope you take your bike without lights to your dear friends from the police 😂

5	IS	04:06	Wer war denn mit?

Who was with you?

6	JA	06:56	Oh nein :/ wie blöd!

Oh no :/ how awful

7	JA	06:57	Vor allem was wollen die mit Schlüsseln?!

After all what do they want with the keys?

8	JA	06:58	Jaa..fuck ey. Teuerlicher Abend

Yeah fuck ey. Expensive evening

9	BE	08:25	Ja versteh ich auch nicht

Yeah I don't understand either

10	BE	08:35	Gut angekommen Isi?

Are you there yet Isi?

11	NI	09:57	Ach kacke! Zum glück hast du deinen perso. Hoffentlich gibt echt noch jemand den schlüssel ab. Blööööd 😖😖😖😖

Ah shit! Fortunately you have your ID. Hopefully someone returns the keys. Awwwwwful 😖😖😖😖

Beate uses a voice message to give a complete and linear narrative account of the events which unfolded after she discovered that she had lost her purse and her apartment keys. While some narrations are first announced with a preceding text message (such as in the given excerpt), users usually do not chunk the narrative core,[10] which in itself is characterised as a temporally emergent structure. In just one audio posting, she presents the complicating actions (searching for the missing objects, finding her ID), a resolution (she plans to contact the police) and a coda containing a lesson to be learned from her experience (one should not party on a Tuesday). Although it would have been technically possible to stop recording after each of these story units to enable recipient reactions, Whats-App users typically present voice message narrations in a closed-off format. The lengths of the audio postings in the given collection range from 20 seconds to 2.5 minutes, with a mean length of 49.5 seconds. So, the actual telling of the story is a monologic act by a

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[10] This is also the case for narratives in dyadic WhatsApp chats, see Hector (forthc.).

single teller who hinders others from influencing the story's trajectory. By choosing not to split the story into several postings, tellers can present a complete account of the event structure and their evaluation. The narration is interspersed with various explicit and implicit evaluations exhibiting a fluctuating evaluative stance. While Beate starts off by relating the events in a serious tone, she later switches to a more humorous and ironic stance (indicated by various cues like shifts in pitch and voice quality, use of vulgarism).

In terms of tellability, we can see parallels to narrations found on platforms like Twitter and Facebook: WhatsApp group chats are treated as sites where personal experiences (be they positive or self-deprecating) can be shared with others. In this way, users present performances of themselves; they position themselves in these narrative accounts and thus construct personal identities. Also, all of the events related in the collection can be characterised as rather recent events which happened only a few days or even minutes before their narrative reconstruction in the group chats and which are still unfolding – like in the given excerpt in which Beate has not yet determined what happened to her purse and her keys. These breaking news stories reduce the temporal distance between the taleworld and the telling world (cf. Georgakopoulou 2013). Recipients are thus invited to take part in the teller's experiences as they emerge despite being in different locations.

Concerning the narrative dimension of publicness, the excerpt exhibits two features characteristic of multimodal storytelling in WhatsApp group chats: First, the narration itself is explicitly designed to address all members of the group. While there are no forms of address at the posting's beginning, Beate closes her story by referring to her friends as "SCH:ÄTzis" (075, the diminutive plural form of *Schatz* 'sweetheart'), which expresses closeness and familiarity (cf. Günthner/Zhu 2015). She then enumerates activities that she knows the other group members did instead of partying (writing a paper, going to work, flying to India) and thus connects her experience with the other group members.

Second, the recipients' reactions in this excerpt are characteristic in their design: They are typically cast in text messages rather than in audio postings. Moreover, they assess or evaluate the narrated events with rather conventionalised and similar expressions. All group members contextualise their evaluative stances with swearing interjections ("ach fuck", #3, "fuck ey", #8, "Ach kacke!", #11). Responses to selfie postings exhibit similar patterns; they are referred to as "ritual appreciation" (cf. Georgakopoulou 2016), i. e. generic ways of displaying one's alignment with the first-poster's stance. What is also striking is that the users do not react to one another; rather, their postings are designed as responses to the initial story.

Even though there are postings which could have been expanded upon by Beate (a humorous fictionalisation of future events in #4, a follow-up question in #5), she does not develop the story further. Instead, she displays her general irritation (her response to posting #7) before she initiates a change of subject by addressing Isi with a question not related to her story. It is a general tendency for narrations in the given collection to not develop into rather extended follow-up sequences. This again highlights the fact that multimodal storytelling in group chats constitutes a rather confined activity which is set off from the more chat-like or conversational to and fro of messaging.

Note that all group members respond to Beate's story, even though they basically express the same affiliative stances, even though some time has passed since Beate's original postings and – as is the case of Nina's posting #11 – even though Beate has already moved on to another thematic strand. This points to the particular function of storytelling in the controlled semi-publicness of group chats: Users do more than just inform other group members about what happened in their lives; they share their perspective and their interpretation of their everyday experiences with a particular preset group of people, thus treating them as friends and re-establishing the sociality of a friendship. This 'sharing' framework explains why recipients post similar responses even if they are repetitive in form and content. In this controlled public, they reaffirm that they all hold the same views.

While the analysis of the group chat story in excerpt 1 can make use of Ochs and Capp's (2001) narrative dimensions (tellability is treated as a given, the story is not embedded in an ongoing interaction but constitutes the first move, a single teller reconstructs a personal experience in a linear order and takes various evaluative stances towards the event), it cannot fully grasp all the choices or resources that tellers in social media can exploit for their communicative purposes. The overall aim of the dimensional modelling of narratives was to give an account of the varying parameters that conversational narratives exhibit. Social media afford new "narrative possibilities" (Ochs/Capps 2001: 20) and the dimensions of publicness, multimodality and sequencing help to capture these additional possibilities of story design. In excerpt 1, Beate sequences her story into two units: She first posts a rather short abstract before relating the events in more detail with a separate posting. For this, she mode-switches from a text to an audio posting; subsequently, the other group members respond with text messages. The story and its subsequent responses thus constitute a "transmodal interaction" (Androutsopoulos/Staehr 2018). Moreover, Beate chooses a particular audience by posting her messages in the semi-public chat with her

friends making an affiliative reaction by all of them relevant. While all of the other group chat members take on the role the role of recipients rather than co-tellers, the following analysis will further explore how group chat members can take on different participant roles.

4.1 Managing participation roles

The previous analyses have demonstrated that the prototype of storytelling with voice messages in group chats is based on recent personal experiences; it is related by a single teller as an initial, sequentially non-embedded and linearly organised "big package" story (in a single voice message sometimes introduced by a text message containing an abstract); other group members document their affiliative evaluative stances in rather conventionalised text message responses in the semi-public group space. The following excerpt, taken from the same group chat, illustrates that other forms of participation are possible. In this case, the "deviation" from the prototypical structure can be explained by the story itself, which identifies the group member Isi as an object of playful ridicule.

Again, Beate's narration is the initial, non-embedded posting in a new dialogue. It specifically addresses all group members (001) and relates recent events as tellable objects (she has just arrived in Munich and reconstructs her activities and the thoughts she had on her journey there). However, the narrative's trajectory differs from the prototype particularly with regard to its multimodal design and the participant roles of teller, recipient and audience.

Excerpt 2: Isi is the "Sams"

```
 1    BE   15:31   Voice message duration: 00:52

              001 BE: ello ihr SÜße:::n-
                      ello sweethearts
              002     ich bin gerade in MUnich angekommen
                      beim prImmu:s-
                      I have just arrived in MUnich at the
                      prImmu:s-
              003     °hh mache später ein <<h>video von der
                      UNterkun:ft->
                      I will send a video of my accommodation later
              004     und kurz muss ich erZÄHlen,
                      I have to tell shortly
              005     °hh auf der <<lachend>he_HINfahrt,>
                      on my way in
              006     °h <:-)>hab ich das SAMS gehört,
                      I listened to the Sams
              007     <<lachend>hh° he °h>
                       ((laughing))
              008     (0.3)und musste mich m:ega
                      kaPUTTlachen die ganze zei:t,>
                      and was laughing really hard all the time
```

```
009        dass ich mittlerweile schon so_n
           bisschen an mir ZWEIfle:,
           so that I now question myself
010        (0.1) aber (0.1) ich find halt das
           sind auch so witze für er↑WACHsene;
           but I think the jokes are suitable for adults,
           too
011        das ist gar kein kInder (0.1) BUCH;
           it is no children's book
012        (0.3) EIgentlich;
           actually
013        °hhh <<f>auf JEden fall,
           anyway
014        sagen dIE: (0.1) NÄMlich,
           they say
015        °h sagt das <<lachend>SAMS immer,>
           the Sams always says,
016        °hh es hat aus versehen alles
           <<lachend>AUFgegessen,>
           that it accidentally ate everything
017        °hh <<:-)>und dann ist mir
           EINgefallen,=
           and then I realised
018        =dass die Isi das SAMS is;
           that Isi is the Sams
019        weil die ja auch aus versehen meinen
           MÜSliriegel Aufisst-
           because she accidentally eats my cereal bars
020        und anscheinend schon diverse ANdere
           sachen-
           and apparently many other things as well
021        ich hoffe nicht äh: den FENstergriff-=
           I hope she did not eat the window handle
022        =wie das SAMS-
           like the Sams
023        oder aus versehen die anzüge oder so
           von (0.2) JENnybär-
           or Jennybear's suits by accident
024        oder: (0.2) °h STEfan oder so;
           or Stefan or something like that;
025        °h naja das wollt ich nur kurz
           <<:-)>MITteilen;>
           anyways I just wanted to impart that
```

2   IS   15:36   *Voice message duration: 00:21*

```
001 IS: (0.6) JA:;
           yeah
002        voll GEIL;
           totally cool
003        ich hab ja AUCH-
           I also have
004        naja ROtes haar nich,
           well I don't have red hair
005        aber auch BLOND-
           but also blond
006        und °h auch SOMmersprossen wie das
           sAms,
           and also freckles like the Sams
007        <<creaky>das sind auch alles
           WUNSCHpunkte nämlich,>
```

```
                    all of them also are wishing spots
          008       °h und ich pass eigentlich au_nur
                    in_nen TAUcheranzug-
                    and a diving suit is the only thing that I fit in to
          009       und alles <<creaky>andere PLATZT bei
                    mI::r;>
                    and everything else I wear bursts
          010       (0.3)ich hab AUCH immer das sams sehr
                    gern gehört;
                    I have also always liked to listen to the Sams
          011       jetzt <<behaucht>weiß ich> auch waRUM;
                    and now I know why
          012       (0.3) ich hatte immer ne ausrede für
                    meinen ähm überdrehten ↑ESsenskonsum;
                    I have always had an excuse for my excessive
                    food consumption
          013       he he-
                     ((laughter))
          014       (0.4)
```

3	JA	15:37	Primmus
4	JA	15:37	Süß dass du das Sams gehört hast😻😻
			How sweet that you listened to the Sams😻😻
5	JA	15:39	Franz Sams
6	BE	15:39	Ab in den Taucheranzug
			Off into the diving suit
7	JA	15:39	Framz
8	IS	15:40	Frams😎
9	JA	15:40	Gefällt
			Like
10	NI	15:43	Das Frams😂😂😂😂
			The Frams😂😂😂😂
11	NI	15:43	Love it

In her story Beate identifies the group member Isi as the Sams, a fictional character from a German children's books series known to be impudent and hoggish. Framing this identification as humorous with smile voice and various bursts of laughter, she takes a *laughing at*-stance to Isi, identifying her as the butt of the other users' laughter (cf. Glenn 2003; König 2019b). However, Isi changes this possible trajectory before the other two group members react to Beate's story posting. Unlike in excerpt 1, Isi chooses the same modality or posting type for her response. In her voice message she comments on Beate's taleworld thoughts by accepting her joke and even elaborating on it – turning it into a playful fictionalisation (cf. Kotthoff 2009) contextualised by various prosodic resources (creaky voice, lengthening, pitch jumps). Taking on Beate's mocking remarks, Isi keys the sequence in a *laughing-with* frame. So, rather than closing off the initial narration by posting a conventionalised text, as is prototypically the case, Isi expands the storyline, treating it as potentially open-ended. Jana continues Beate's and Isi's playful banter; she refers to Isi by her nickname *Franz* and the character's name *Sams*

(#5), and later blends the names to create *Frams* (#7). This sponta-neous wordplay is mirrored by Isi (#8) and Nina (#10). Their verbal comments "gefällt" ('like', #9) and "Love it" (#11) constitute conven-tionalised methods of "ritualised appreciation" reminiscent of other forms of approval in social media such as Facebook's like-button (cf. Marx 2018). Moreover, they close the fictionalisation's trajectory.

Beate's story clearly focusses on Isi, however, she nevertheless chooses to post it in the semi-public group chat thereby treating the story as relevant or tellable to all group members (who are addressed collectively at the beginning of the posting). It would have been pos-sible for Isi to relate her response in a dyadic chat with Beate. Yet, she also chooses the group chat as the site in which she comments on her likeness with the Sams with Jana and Nina as the audience of this exchange. Thus, the semi-publicness of the group chat is chosen as the configuration under which their story telling can take place. Moreover, this excerpt documents an instance in which the bound-aries between teller, audience and recipient are blurred by the col-laborative effort of all group members: Isi, Jana and Nina do not simply affiliate with the initial teller's stance by posting short and rit-ualised comments. Thus, their responses do not accord with the par-ticipant roles of recipient or audience. Rather, Isi and Jana assume co-tellership by establishing and expanding a playful fictional frame-work. Beate's comment in #6, a response to Isi's voice message #2, explicitly affirms this participant status. Nina, on the other hand, po-sitions herself as a recipient of the story by appreciating its humor-ous outcome. In contrast to her response in the first excerpt, here she does not comment on the initial story posting but on its following trajectory. She thus takes a metareflexive stance towards the story-telling activity (cf. De Fina 2016). Even though WhatsApp group chats do not afford narratives in the same way as platforms like Twitter and Facebook do, this example illustrates that it is neverthe-less possible to bring about storytelling collaboratively in multimodal mobile messaging – even if a dialogue is comprised of only a few individual postings.

Just like in face-to-face encounters, the collaborative activity of playful fictionalisation in WhatsApp group chats is essential for re-affirming the group's identity and sociality as a close-knit group of friends who share a sense of humour. Even though the story in the first posting only concerns Isi, Beate treats her experience as rele-vant and tellable to the whole group. As this activity might comprise *laughing at*-stances, which can be too sensitive to post on platforms like Facebook, group chats with a controllable selection of members can offer a more regulated audience selection. The stories are thus treated as intimate activities which are only shared between the members of the group.

5 Conclusion: Stories in a controlled publicness

Mobile messenger chats like WhatsApp are said to favour rather short and often chunked contributions (cf. Imo 2015; König 2015, 2019a; Wyss/Hug 2016). Thus, reconstructing an event structure and relating one's own evaluative stance towards it in the continuous flow of multi-party messaging can be a challenging communicative endeavour. Yet, the foregoing analyses of a corpus of multimodal WhatsApp group chats illustrate that digitised storytelling is indeed part of its users' communicative repertoire. Voice messaging lies at the heart of this practice as audio postings allow users to contribute extended but still easy to produce narrations.

Many of the stories' features can be characterised with Ochs and Capp's narrative dimensions: Prototypically, they involve single tellers who choose to place their stories in contexts where there is no continuous exchange of messages between several users. Despite their placement in a chat interface designed for a dialogic exchange, tellers usually do not elicit story prompts or use other methods for negotiating tellership or tellability.[11] Rather, in group chats stories are routinely embedded as first actions which have not been made relevant by the foregoing context. Events are prototypically reconstructed in a linear order but tellers can take varying stances even within a single posting.

However, tellers have more "narrative possibilities" which they can make use of in mobile messaging: Users have to choose in which posting type (multimodality) and in how many postings (sequencing) they want to reconstruct their personal experiences. In the given collection, stories can be preceded by a text message containing an abstract, yet the core structural components are realised in an audio posting. While many social media platforms favour rather small story formats, voice message stories are presented as "big packages" in terms of the audio posting's length. Tellers relate their story in a single extended audio posting, which precludes others from changing the story's trajectory. What is small, however, is the sequencing of responses to these stories: Users regularly reply with repetitive and ritualised expressions to contextualise an affiliative stance – often without reacting to one another. Only in particular settings (e. g. one of the group members is primarily addressed) do we find a continuation of the story.[12] So rather than working in the service of other

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[11] Note, however, that in dyadic chats, Hector (forthc.) finds grater variability concerning the embeddedness of stories.

[12] Again, there is greater variability in dyadic chats: Here, Hector (fortc.) also found second stories as a possible response format.

actions (such as explanations, examples, arguments etc.), it is the activity of telling a story that is the focus of chatters.

Moreover, users can choose the degree of publicness their narrative accounts should have. Stories can be posted in dyadic chats or group chats to a non-anonymous audience ore on other platforms like Facebook or Twitter which enable a more public discourse. Practices of addressing users individually or collectively also play an important role in managing audience participation. At the same time the fact that users only share their immediate experiences in the controlled semi-public of a group chat can index intimacy. Storytelling in group chats thus becomes an essential a tool for building and sustaining the group's sociality.

The linguistic forms used by WhatsApp chatters to relate their personal experiences are reminiscent of oral storytelling in face-to-face interactions. Users do not develop completely new narrative genres in mobile messenger chats; instead, they transfer preestablished linguistic patterns of storytelling and reconfigure them according to the messenger's affordances (cf. Herring 2013). While various studies in the emerging field of digital narratology have pointed out that social media prioritise episodic, non-linear and open-ended narrative accounts, the small stories paradigm should not be the only heuristic net to be cast over the broad range of narrative practices in computer-mediated discourse. Particularly in the case of voice messages in group chats, users have adopted a posting format for recounting linearly organised "big package" narrations in mobile messaging. Rather than focussing on just one default narrative format, a multidimensional perspective that can capture the various facets of social media storytelling should be developed. Indeed, Ochs and Capps' (2001) account of everyday oral storytelling, with its dimensions of tellability, tellership, embeddedness, linearity and moral stance, has proved to be applicable to the analysis of digitised messenger dialogues. However, the analysis also shows that a focus on these five dimensions does not cover all the aspects which are relevant for characterising and distinguishing the different narrative configurations in social media storytelling. Expanding the model to include the dimensions of publicness, multimodality and sequencing can help to work out the characteristics more adequately. Table 1 exemplifies the typical parameters on both ends of the respective continuum.

Narrative dimension	Subjects and parameters
Tellability	*How tellable or relevant do users treat the story? What is treated as more or less tellable?* • High degree of tellability – low degree of tellability • Retrospection – recency • Everyday experiences – biographical crises or turning points
Tellership	*How many tellers are involved in actively reconstructing the story's events? Do users quote or rescript the stories of other users?* • Single tellers – multiplicity of voices
Publicness	*How many people have (potential) access to the story? To what extent do users distinguish between audience and recipients? How much control do users have over the selection of recipients? Which degree of sharedness does the story accrue?* • Selected recipients, non-public posting – Public display, larger audiences and collapsed contexts
Embeddedness	*To what extent does the sequential context make a story relevant? Is storytelling afforded by the platform's configuration? Does the story form part of a larger communicative project? How detached is the story from its surrounding context? How are online and offline contexts merged?* • Stand-alone narrations – stories in the service of other actions
Sequencing	*How many postings do tellers require to relate their story? How extended is the story's trajectory?* • Fragmentary and small episodes – "full-fledged" narrations in a single posting
Linearity	*Does the telling of the story proceed linearly? Where does the storytelling take place, i. e. which platforms, sites etc.? Which/how many forms of hypertextuality are used?* • Closed chronological order – Non-linear open trajectories, hyperlinks, hashtags

Multimodality	*Which modes are dominant in telling the story? How many different semiotic resources do users select for telling their story? Do they use particular resources for particular steps in the story?* • Making use of just one posting type – multi-modal configurations, mode switching in trans-modal communication
Moral stance	*How stable is the moral or evaluative stance contextu-alised in the narration? How contested are stances taken in the dissemination and rescripting of stories?* • Coherent and stable stancetaking – contradic-tory and flexible construction of a moral stance

Table 1: Expanded model of narrative dimensions in social media story telling (based on Ochs/Capps 2001)

The adjusted dimensional model enables a more comprehensive perspective of the broad and emerging spectrum of social media storytelling. By identifying which features are specific to which kinds of storytelling activities, digital narratology can set out to investigate the actual repertoire and configurations of user-generated online storytelling. Only when they are understood as complementary parts of a narrative repertoire can the true communicative potential of small stories as compared to big stories be determined.

The present study has investigated social media narratives in semi-public messenger chats which are available only to pre-selected non-anonymous users. Of course, the group chat data analysed here represent only a small fragment of the actual narrative repertoire of mobile messenger communication. Future research has yet to determine how users combine and link text, audio, image and video postings. Moreover, studies of polymedial repertoires can help to shed a light on how users exploit the different degrees of publicness enabled by different social media platforms for narrating their personal experiences.[13]

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