# Contemplating post-digital narrativity:
## Co-active, multimodal meaning-making on Instagram and its implications on learning

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ABSTRACT

The paper addresses the post-digital, multimodal narratives of a thirteen-year-old teenage girl on Instagram. Post-digitality refers to the ontological assumption that the online is inseparably intertwined with the offline world. On the other hand, narratives are understood as sociocultural, perspectival, and interactional discursive nodes co-produced by the teenage girl and the platform. The fine-grained interpretation of our data draws upon a transdisciplinary framework combining several theoretical and methodological approaches, most prominently social semiotics and semiotic technology, narrative studies, new literacy studies, and critical sociolinguistics. The qualitative analysis of our data follows the logic of nexus analysis, highlighting the design of the post-digital, multimodal teenage narratives on Instagram Stories and the software's complex role in co-crafting situated storytelling. The main research findings indicate that Instagram's affordances, i.e., its technological, semiotic, social, and algorithmic features, function as co-active, non-human agents with which the adolescent girl strategically negotiates to produce her multimodal narrative work. Finally, we argue that educational policy should acknowledge the affordances of the teenage-platform multimodal narrative synergy and the need for a post-digital critical literacies pedagogy.

# 1. Introduction: The narrative turn and the new media

*Narrativity* has been a key concept in human thought since Aristotle's time. Throughout history, people have found myriad ways to narrate their stories orally or in writing. Indeed, "storytelling is integral to the way we structure, account for and display our understanding of our human condition and experience" (Thornborrow 2012: 51). A wide variety of scientific paradigms, ranging from literary theory to semiotics, have explored the concept of narrative offering insightful work on narrativity. Out of these, Walsh (2018:11) claims, "some have gained some ascendency at certain periods," leading to the so-called 'narrative turn' (De Fina and Johnstone 2015), a term referring to "the transition of narrative study from literature to social sciences" (Davies 2015:396) that from the late 1970s onwards has developed in several competing perspectives.

In the early days of this interdisciplinary endeavor, one could notice, as Gee (1991) put it, a "charge of formalism," a trend in narrative analysis to look for formal patterns (Hodge and Kress 1988: 204). Through the years, narratives have been explored regarding text and structure, sociocultural variety, interaction, and power discourse. Thus, analyzing narrative has become one of the most prominent areas of inquiry for any approach to meaning-making.

For meaning-makers, narratives are indisputably privileged means to express their worldviews. Still, we must raise questions about how, where, when, and why narratives unfold. Meaning-making is a historically and socially situated process that also applies to its narrative aspect. The new media seem to have a profound effect on meaning-making, effectively "reshap[ing] the ways in which we make meanings" (Domingo et al. 2015:264). Consequently, acknowledging the role of new media on narrativity is necessary for understanding the digitally-based forms of meaning-making.

Our research focuses on a specific form of new media, *social media*, as new spaces for unfolding narratives. Nonetheless, these spaces are:

> (pre-) designed for distinct and specific communicational purposes: for the production and display of identity for instance; or as 'hubs' or nodes for the distribution of information, etc. These 'platforms' are tightly designed and controlled spaces with affordances that are social, physical, and semiotic in their effects. (Kress 2014:12)

To Kress's inspiring approach, we can add the conceptualization of social media as *algorithmically* designed socio-technical spaces with *affordances* (Bucher and Helmond 2018) that influence how social media users construct their *multimodal* meanings and, specifically, their stories.[1]

## 2. Narrativity in retrospect: Perspectives and relevant literature

As noted, narrative research has led to an ample range of contributions. In this section, we review the existing approaches to narrativity to situate our approach in this broad field of research. A full survey (like those of De Fina and Johnstone 2015; Thornborrow 2012) is beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, we focus on reviewing the approaches that have contributed to shaping *post-digital, multimodal narrative synergy*.

### 2.1. The foundations: Narrativity in the social sciences

In the social sciences, the most-cited perspective on narrativity is that by Labov and Waletzky (1967), who suggest that narrative elements can perform five functions. Later, Labov (1972) expanded the functions to six, namely *abstract, orientation, complication action, evaluation, resolution*, and *coda*, "creating one of the most influential models for analyzing personal narratives" (Gimenez 2010:199). Thus, from a sociolinguistic perspective, a narrative is seen as a chronologically organized textual sequence serving specific functions.

While this model is helpful for several possible applications, many researchers argue that it mainly fits data elicited during isolated, context-less settings, such as research interviews (Gimenez 2010; De Fina and Georgakopoulou 2012). This line of critique has led to the emergence of more situated perspectives, like Hymes's and other sociocultural approaches, as well as that of Conversation Analysis, which we will consider presently. However, Labov's view on narrativity still has much to offer and we have accordingly adjusted his framework to fit our study of social media narratives (see section Four).

For Dell Hymes and his "narrative view of the world," storytelling is one of the principal modes of human communication, in which "denotational, cognitive, affective and interpersonal aspects combine" (Blommaert 2006: 234). He framed his

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[1] Throughout this paper, we use the terms 'narrative' and 'stories' interchangeably. In the literature, one can find more nuanced approaches to this matter. For instance, Hodge and Kress (1988:229) explicitly distinguish between these terms, with "narrative [referring] to the organization of the world as constructed by a text [while] story refers to a generic type of narrative, ordered in particular formal, textual ways, contingent on the social organization." See also Cobley (2001), Ochs and Capps (2001).

approach to narrative as a cultural genre through his notion of 'ethnopoetics,' aimed to reconstruct the aesthetic functions of narrativity. This approach is often praised for contributing to the "uncovering of the poetic quality of storytelling" (De Fina and Georgakopoulou 2012: xi). However, in modern societies, the notion of culture is much fuzzier than in Hymes's time, resulting in the need for more nuanced understandings of storytelling practices.

In parallel with Hymes's ethnographic research, scholars such as Scollon and Scollon (1981), Heath (1983), and Gee (1991, 2014) paved the way for a view on narratives "not simply as texts but rather as complex communicative practices intimately linked with the production of social life" (De Fina and Georgakopoulou 2012: i). This interconnection between storytelling and social practice also implies a linking between the former and the concept of *discourse*,[2] in the sense that social identities (and social reality more generally) are discursively constructed through narratives (Gavriely-Nuri 2018). This recent linking of narrative and discourse in the broader field of Critical Discourse Studies has reconceptualized narrativity, associating it with power and authority.

## 2.2. Interactional approaches to narrativity

Researching narratives in sociocultural practice entails an alternative approach that perceives narrativity as deeply rooted in our particular contexts. Another alternative comes from Conversation Analysis work, where narratives are interpreted "as highly embedded in surrounding talk and deeply sensitive to different participation roles" (De Fina and Johnstone 2015:156), highlighting the significance of the interlocutors' role in a specific instance.

The contribution of this particular interactional paradigm is supplemented by other interactional yet more 'flexible' approaches to narratives, notably the so-called 'small stories research' paradigm (Georgakopoulou 2017a; 2017b; 2019). This paradigm emphasizes the "largely unscripted, naturally occurring" (Thornborrow 2012:51) range of storytelling activities that traditional narrative analysis did not consider worthy objects of study.

Specifically, small stories refer to small, fragmented, co-constructed, often open-ended tellings of events (Georgakopoulou 2017b). These stories share a lurking anti-essentialist assumption of "self, society, and culture which stresses the multiplicity, fragmentation, context-specificity, and performativity of our communication practices" (ibid: 267). In the last decade or so, there has been excellent work informed by this paradigm (see, for instance, Georgalou 2015; Page 2012), especially in the case of

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[2] In Gee's (2014:201) terms, discourse is understood as the "ways of combining and integrating language, actions, interactions, ways of thinking, believing, valuing, and using various symbols, tools, and objects to enact a particular sort of socially recognizable identity."

stories on social media that differ from conventional narratives because of their multi-modal, multi-authored, mundane, and post-digital nature.

Another example in this "cohort of more flexible approaches" (Dayter 2015:1) is the approach of Ochs and Capps (2001), who identify five dimensions of narratives: tellership, tellability, embeddedness, linearity, and moral stance. These five dimensions comprise a framework accounting for the narrative's structural and contextual aspects (Page 2015), which makes it appropriate for analyzing new media narrativity.

The above approaches have answered the call to shift attention from canonical narrative structures toward a more flexible, relativist conceptualization of narrativity as a *scalar* concept (ibid). Perspectives on stories that occur naturally in everyday contexts have proved of great significance for our work, along with another recent trend in the social sciences, that of multimodal analysis.

### 2.3. **Multimodal narrative analysis**

*Multimodality* is a crucial concept of Social Semiotics (Hodge and Kress 1988; Kress 2010; van Leeuwen 2005), a paradigm that aims to shift the emphasis on language as central to human communication toward a more holistic view of *semiosis*. Attending to semiosis in its full multimodal spectrum (Bezemer and Kress 2016:15) entails paying careful attention to every *semiotic resource* meaning-makers use in producing, distributing, and interpreting *signs*. Semiotic resources are

> the actions, materials, and artifacts we use for communicative purposes, […] together with the ways in which these resources can be organized. Semiotic resources have a meaning potential, based on their past uses, and a set of affordances based on their possible uses, and these will be actualized in concrete social contexts where their use is subject to some form of a semiotic regime (van Leeuwen 2005:285)

Communication and meaning-making have always been multimodal (see Kress 2010). However, the new media and social media revolution in the *post-digital*[3] era (Maly and Blommaert 2019) has foregrounded the semiotic forms constituting the multimodal texts of the 'new communicative order.'

Multimodal narrative analysts (De Fina and Johnstone 2015; Page 2010, 2012, 2015) have explored the affordances of each semiotic resource employed by multimodal narratives, the role of their social, economic, and political contexts, as well as notions such as authorship, space and time.

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[3] The concept of 'post-digitality' entails the assumption that the revolutionary phase of digital media is a thing of the past. Nowadays, the online is inseparably intertwined with the offline world.

### 2.4. **Narrative design as synergy: New media affordances and subjectivity**

The perspectives discussed so far have allowed us to stress the importance of structure, context, and interaction to better understand narrativity as a *process*. Yet, existing literature seldom acknowledges the role of the specific actors, affordances, and discourses found in new media (for notable exceptions, see Georgakopoulou and Bolander 2022; Georgakopoulou, Iversen and Stage 2020; Topalidou Laskaridou 2021).

Recent social semiotic research has studied how the *design* of the new and social media affects both meaning-making and the related social practices under the umbrella term 'semiotic technology' (Djonov and van Leeuwen 2018; Papadopoulos 2020; Poulsen and Kvåle 2018). These studies have examined the semiotic, social, and algorithmic affordances that impact meaning-making, leading us to explore the nature and function of *non-human actors* (Koutsogannis et al. 2020) in meaning-making. We aim to extend this line of research to social media narratives to understand how the *social media platforms'* built-in semiotic, socio-technical, and software logic impact meaning.

Affordances are the ways social media make specific actions possible while constraining others. They include each semiotic resource's affordances, socio-technical affordances like interactivity, synchronicity/asynchronicity, content permanence, manageability, searchability, mobility, and reach (see boyd 2010; Madianou and Miller 2013), as well as algorithmic affordances like metrification, datafication and algorithmic circulation of content.

In our research, we try to determine how the teenage social media user strategically negotiates with Instagram's semiotic, social, and algorithmic affordances to produce her multimodal narrative work. Specifically, we employ the notion of *perceived affordances* (Bucher and Helmond 2018), which names how users engage with affordances based on their subjective uptake of how they function.

Our turn to subjectivity is affected by the sociocultural and the interactionally oriented approaches to narrativity, which have shifted the focus from 'monologic' (De Fina and Johnstone 2015) to negotiated perceptions of identity, mainly the interconnection between storytelling and the building of identities in social practice.

Subjectivity is a rather complex notion. Here, we take it to comprise four interacting concepts coming from various disciplines: *interest* (Kress 2010), *habitus* (Bourdieu 2002), *enacted agency* (Nichols and Campano 2017), and *micro-hegemonies* (Blommaert and Varis 2013). Interest refers to the social, cultural, affective, and material experiences of human beings that inform their engagement with the world (Bezemer and Kress 2016: 27), their "habitual way of being in the world" (Gee 2014: 162). This implies that the agency of each individual is *enacted* (Nichols and Campano 2017) in relation to different networks of people, objects, and environments, networks full of micro-hegemonies, meaning the multiple sets of norms governing the minutiae of social life.

## 3. Methodology

In our single-case study (Yin 2018), we analyze the Instagram narratives of Eva,[4] a thirteen-year-old teenage girl[5] chosen because of her intensive engagement with the specific platform. Employing an 'adaptive digital ethnographic' (Hine, Kendall and boyd 2009) and 'connective' (Leander and McKim 2003) approach, we identified the multimodal teenage narratives on Instagram Stories[6] and studied their design, motivation, and enactment.

Adaptive digital ethnography involves "applying flexible routes to fieldwork over time to suit the mobile, ever-shifting landscape of social media" (Georgakopoulou 2017b:272). In more detail, we entered the "zone of identification" (Pan 2014), participating in the Instagram community and observing social action as it unfolded.

Following Leander and McKim's recommendation (2003), our approach was connective; to understand the production conditions of Eva's narrative better, we maintained direct contact with her. This also constituted our 'triangulation' method, for Eva was always 'on alert,' either to confirm or to refute our emerging hypotheses.

Data collection involved the researchers' engagement to comprehend the semiotic and sociocultural trends on the platform environment, monitor Eva's actions, and collect[7] her 'digital artifacts' (Yin 2018), namely the narratives she posted on Instagram Stories. Our study's data comprise a three-episode narrative of affection, developed over one and a half months. Next to that, we also used informal conversations with Eva and field notes.

Our research endeavor's ethnographic orientation was deemed highly appropriate to the 'kaleidoscopic' and complicated (Blommaert 2015) narrative reality of Instagram. Its complexity is partly an effect of the social platform's affordances. Thus, Instagram was placed under concrete examination as a semiotic technology co-shaping the teenage girl's semiotic and social practices. In effect, Instagram was approached not just as a contextual factor but as an active non-human actor in meaning-making.

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[4] 'Eva' is a pseudonym, chosen by the research participant and used here to ensure confidentiality.

[5] Given that our case study involved an underage participant, we took care to have her parents' written consent before engaging in conversations with her.

[6] Stories is a feature of Instagram, "launched as chronologically ordered multi-modal collections with a beginning-middle-end case study continuity and permanence, relative to the single feed and the moment" Georgakopoulou (2017a: 327-328). To avoid confusion, we mark Stories as a feature with a capital S, separating them from stories as the telling of events.

[7] We collected our data through screenshots for a longitudinal research project on meaning-making practices on Instagram.

### 3.1. **Nexus analysis as a framework for multimodal narrative analysis**

In the post-digital era, *platform-mediated* narratives unfold in the offline-online nexus. In other words, online digital practices intermingle with the more conventional, offline ones. This complexity will be aptly highlighted by analyzing our data following the logic of nexus analysis (Hult 2017; Scollon and Scollon 2004).

We approach each digital artifact as a 'nexus of interdiscursivity' (Koutsogiannis 2020), in which many global and local discourses are mixed. Therefore, we adjust Scollon and Scollon's (2004) framework for nexus analysis to the specific needs of researching social media (See Figure 1 below). In particular, the *sign of engagement*, represented here as an arrow, is essentially a *sign-complex* (Bezemer and Kress 2016) compiled by five Stories. Therefore, Eva's multimodal narrative forms our inquiry's 'point of entry.' In addition, the three intertwined circles surrounding the nexus, namely subjectivity, affordances in *place*,[8] and discourses in place, correspond to different aspects of the sign-complex.
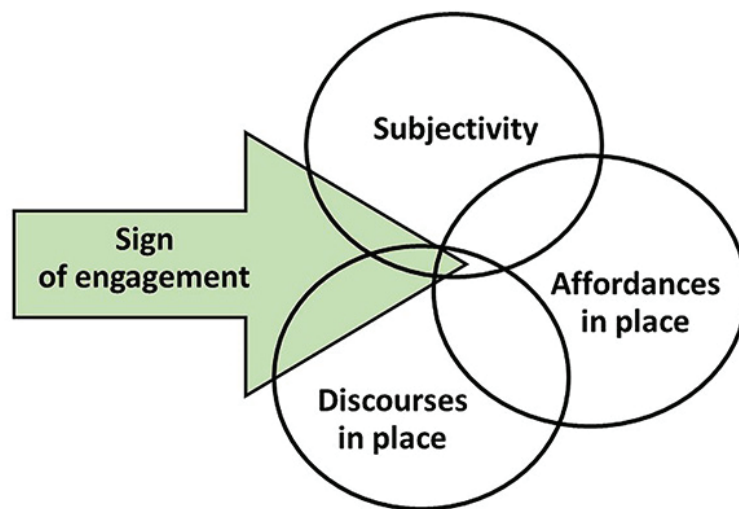


**Figure 7.** A model for Nexus Analysis of multimodal narratives
(adapted from Scollon and Scollon 2004).

Altogether, our multimodal analysis of Eva's narrative aims to answer the following research questions:

1. Do platform affordances play any part in storytelling? If so, how does this happen?

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[8] The emphasis on affordances *in place* relates to the historically and socially situated function of the semiotic, social, and algorithmic features engaging in narrative action. In contrast, the notion of discourses in place stands for "the wider circulating discourses that are already present […] when the action occurs" (Hult 2017).

2. How does Eva perceive and recontextualize the medium affordances in her narrative practices?

3. What are the implications of the assumed teenage-platform synergy for literacies and learning?

## 4. Analysis

We start the analysis section with a concise overview of the feature of Stories, focusing on the design and the affordances offered for meaning-making. Then, we turn our attention to the multimodal narrative of Eva, analyzing the 'where,' the 'what,' the 'how,' and the 'why' of the story.

### 4.1. Instagram stories: Design and affordances

The feature of Stories is a multimodal text environment first launched by Instagram in 2016 to enrich user-generated content on the platform through 'the sharing of the moment' (Instagram 2016[9]). Stories can be synchronous or asynchronous 'artifacts,' five to fifteen seconds each and up to one hundred consecutive posts, available for round-the-clock viewing and interaction. Thus, ephemerality comes under the spotlight, giving prominence to the spontaneous and mundane of everyday life. This aspect of storytelling is essential in the platform ecology, as Instagram focuses on the 'present,' the constant user-generated content mobility. The saliency of the feature of Stories layout on the Instagram interface further amplifies this. The Stories' placement on the top level of the interacting screen 'invites' users to engage with them as soon as they open the app.

The arrangement of the posts reflects 'algorithmic suggestions,' informed by the personalized interests of the users, their interactive habits, and the 'timeliness' of each post. For example, Instagram algorithms order the content of the 'horizontal axis,' the top level on the platform interface, according to the specific 'algorithmic identity' (Chenney-Lippold 2011) formed by the 'mining' of each user's data.

To conclude, the semiotic, socio-technical and algorithmic design of the feature of Stories allows users to 'digitalize' their multilayered everyday life. Their affordances give users various possibilities to produce, disseminate and interpret meanings. At the same time, they constrain the action(s) by establishing 'chronotopic'[10] (Blommaert 2015) rules and socio-semiotic 'regimes' (Djonov and van Leeuwen 2018).

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[9] https://about.instagram.com/blog/announcements/new-ways-to-share-with-instagram-stories-and-instagram-direct (Access: 5/9/2022).

[10] Blommaert (2015:124) employs the Bakhtinian notion of 'chronotopes' to refer to the "intrinsic blending of space and time in any event in the real world." We extend this conceptualization to social media to stress the 'timespace' configurations affecting social action in the online-offline nexus.

### 4.2. **A post-digital, multimodal narrative of affection**

Eva tells the story of her unrequited love for one of her schoolmates. The narrative consists of five seemingly unrelated Stories, which recite Eva's one-sided affective story. The recipient of her love is symbolically represented as orange through diverse materials (objects, printed paper), written text,[11] and orange-colored resources (e.g., the orange heart emoticon, Figure 2). The five screenshots depicted below compose what a *narrative nexus* which includes "multiple, active co-tellers, moderately tellable account, relatively embedded in surrounding discourse and activity, […] temporal and causal organization, and uncertain, fluid moral stance" (Ochs and Capps 2001:23). As research on small stories has aptly demonstrated, this "ambient, unfolding narrative composed of many fragmented and ephemeral pieces of information" (Dayter 2015:8) comprises a certain quasi-linear, yet flexible, structure that eventually presents a complete narrative of the events.

Indeed, each Story separately cannot account for a complete, independent story. However, if approached as a nexus, by the end of the sequence, the data depict a whole, self-contained narrative, which we can summarize as follows: The online narration begins *in medias res* since the story has been underway for a certain period at the offline level before its online 'onset' (Figure 2). Adjusting Labov's terms, the first Story depicts Eva's attempt to orientate a specific audience to her love story, while the next one (Figure 3) can be seen as a consequent elaboration providing even more information. In addition, the second Story explicitly incorporates a co-teller whose Story Eva reshares. In the last piece of data (Figure 4), Eva 'stages' a Story trilogy that implies the complication of her narrative and signifies the resolution and coda of her story.

Throughout her narrative, Eva provides nuggets of her evaluation of the events depicted through her 'semiotic work' (Kress 2015). A work, moreover, that is always *post-factum* since all her Stories are shared *after* carefully editing the *multimodal ensembles* (Bezemer and Kress 2016) she creates. Despite the immediacy and spontaneity discourses surrounding Instagram's Stories feature, which privilege the impulsive, unreflective 'sharing of the moment,' Eva always tries to regulate the uptake of her narrative. All the while relating current events, her telling can best be described as *frozen synchronicity* (Topalidou Laskaridou 2021:125). The narration of the moment becomes thus controllable, a strategic choice that, according to Eva, "aims at avoiding" a possible "face-threatening act" (Brown and Levinson 1987) from some of her Instagram 'haters,' in case her data were unfiltered and hence vulnerable to criticism.

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[11] 'Portokali' means orange in Greek.

The story format in Labov's (1972) work, recontextualized here by Eva to suit the narration of her affective story, functions as a mechanism of coherence. This reminds us of Blommaert's (2005: 84) claim that "narratives are never flat but always structured into units, segments, episodes." Even though small, fragmented, and complex, Eva's narrative is no less exciting and valid than any typical story. In more detail, the fragmented and episodic elements of narrativity on Instagram can be 'reconciled' with the notion of structure through Blommaert's (2018: 44) concept of *constructure*, a term that combines two others – structure and construction – to name the fact that any social event – storytelling in our case – is always ordered, but in a dynamic and unstable, unfinished and non-unified way.

Therefore, narrativity on Instagram is a 'scalar concept' (Page 2015) that often falls outside the *canonical narrative schema*. Likewise, our research leads us to view narratives as 'grammars of experience' (Hymes 1996), i.e., emerging through social action and always situated in specific sociocultural contexts. The Instagram platform environment surrounding Eva's storytelling allows life sharing in miniaturized form (Georgakopoulou 2017b:269), selecting from a default semiotic repertoire. Platform affordances facilitate narrativity's interactional aspects by providing call-to-action interactive buttons and resharing possibilities. Eva utilizes these (see Figure 3) to involve a co-teller in her story, proving that her affective story is worth sharing. This visual narrative stance-taking (Georgakopoulou 2017a; 2017b) positions her audience as recipients while simultaneously ensuring the multiple tellerships of the story. The platform's socio-technical affordances allow Eva to co-construct an affective account that *indexes* her subjectivity and immerses the reader. In this way, she tries to stand out in the Instagram ecology and ensure her post-digital, offline social success.

To conclude, her narrative's aestheticized and multivocal nature relates to her post-digital socialization through the construction of a successful online persona – similar to the influencers' discourse. This particular post-digital nature of narrativity is also evident in that, to correctly interpret her love story, extra-situational, 'offline' knowledge is necessary since, as indicated above, Eva symbolically constructs the recipient of her affections as an 'orange.' Thus, her narrative is associated with 'insiders,' with people in her intimate circle (Davies 2015:405).

Stories are consequently shaped by the situated context in which they unfold. Whereas Eva seems to acknowledge some of the platform's semiotic and social possibilities, she subconsciously acquiesces to the algorithm's agentive role in her meaning-making processes. As noted above, her semiotic and social choices are informed by the opaque action of non-human agents that provide her with meaning-making and content-circulation resources. In this way, algorithmic affordances heavily influence the tellership and tellability aspects of the teenage narrative

by co-constructing the story and making it relevant for Eva's audience. In the following subsection, we examine each part of the story in even more detail, focusing on the multimodal realization of the narrative in conjunction with Instagram's role in this process.

### 4.3. Narrativity as adaptive synergy

In the first image, we observe Eva visually orienting her insider audience to the story setting (Gee 2014). She achieves this by carefully creating a multimodal ensemble containing semiotic resources such as images, objects, emojis, layout, color, and written language.



**Figure 2.** The visual orientation of the setting

Specifically, she photographs herself holding an orangeade, placing it at the center of the picture to attract viewers' attention. This semiotic choice invites two interpretations. On the one hand, it supports *deixis* (Ledin and Machin 2017), the presentation of the object to the viewer, to foreground her subjectivity as the person about to consume the product. On a deeper level, this symbolic game creates a narrative suspense that only insiders can interpret since she does not elaborate

further on the object, except for including abstract elements, such as the written text 'Yasss' and the heart emoticon. Hence, a contextually informed interpretation is needed to understand the *affective metonymy* hidden in plain sight.

Eva presents the protagonist of her narrative through the metonymic association of the object standing for the person. The object depicted is not of interest in itself; instead, it is used to imply the unnamed character. Concurrently, the use of the orangeade operates as a metaphor for Eva's affective feelings. The embedding of the heart emoticon reinforces this to add another "non-verbal affective dimension" (Kern 2015:179) to her narrative, prompting her intimate audience to interpret the post in a non-referential way. The emoticon chosen is the heart icon, an emblematic index of affection on Instagram, and a ubiquitous interactive sign (Adami 2014). Eva's selection of the heart emoticon relates to her 'algorithmic imaginary' (Bucher 2017). Based on a rather abstract perception of an algorithm and its functions, she assumes that by "choosing the heart, the post will reach more users because the heart symbol is everywhere on Instagram." Lastly, the emoticon's orange color further reinforces the Story's interpretation as a narrative of affection since it connotes the teenage boy referred to as 'orange' within her intimate peer group.

The sign-complex Eva creates by adding semiotic elements to the photograph taken is an explicit effort to draw attention to her work, making the visual arrangement salient because "Instagram specializes in pictures," as she explains. This action proves Eva's realistic perception of the socio-semiotic affordances that affect her social activity on the platform.

This *design of the audience's design* (Topalidou Laskaridou 2021, adjusting Androutsopoulos 2014) is greatly influenced by the discourses in place, especially the representation of materiality as congruent with entertainment and pleasure. Eva assures that "Instagram is a sponsor of what you do in your life. Not showing what you do equals the action not taking place."

We left the analysis of the written text "Yasss"[12] last because it proves to be an excellent way to transition to the next part of the story by discussing the role of language in Eva's multimodal synthesis. What is of great value here is not the text itself but its typographic elements. Contrary to her usual font choice (see Figures 3 and 4), in the example under examination, she chooses, out of a predefined set of typographic features, a light, calligraphic, neon-like font to *stand out from the mundane*. This aspect highlights the emotion's uniqueness, yet with a platform-afforded resource intended precisely to mark the concept of 'uniqueness.'

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[12] A pun associated with 'Yesss,' indicating Eva's affirmative evaluation of the story.

In the second sign-complex of the narrative nexus, Eva reshares her best friend's meme[13] concerning the former's love story, thus making her friend an active co-teller. The co-teller's meme is a multimodal artifact comprised of an exaggerated image of the familiar cartoon mouse Jerry, combined with a two-fold anchorage of the image (Barthes 1977). On the one hand, the co-teller anchors the image's content with the written text on top: "Eva every time she talks or stands next to the orange" (translated from Greek by the authors). On the other hand, Eva herself anchors the meme by tagging her friend and thanking her ("Eucaristume tn [friend's name] giauto") for the creation of the story under examination.



**Figure 3.** The multivocal realization of the narrative

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[13] A broadly circulated cultural genre (see Varis and Blommaert 2015).

Both 'anchorings' are realized in Greeklish, a writing system in which the Latin alphabet is used to transcribe Greek words (Koutsogiannis 2015). Using Greeklish plays a central role in the narrative process by marking the target audience, including all age-appropriate recipients that understand and use this writing system, while excluding others who do not meet the 'criteria' to engage in the interpretation of the narrative.

Concerning the function of another verbal element, the interactive tag of the co-teller's Instagram account, Eva exploits networking as a 'surplus value' that increases her social and symbolic capital. She connects, thus, the participatory culture in social media (Jenkins, Ito and boyd 2016) with the tellership dimension of narrativity.

Before turning to the staged resolution and the story's coda, it is worth mentioning that in the example used, Eva enhances the tellability of her story by resharing and 'positively' evaluating her friend's initiative. This is semiotically marked when she expresses her apparent 'inconvenience' by sarcastically thanking her friend: "We thank [friend's name] for this." She also visually disapproves – somewhat ironically – her friend's action by adding two clapping hands emojis. Far from being dismissive, this evaluation is profoundly positive, as the whole multimodal ensemble acquires an increased functional load that confirms the narrative's worthiness. At the same time, using the first grammatical person[14] in expressing her 'gratitude' constitutes a proposed 'applauding' uptake of the story, which we can interpret as a 'demand' in Halliday's (1985) terms.

The last part of Eva's story contains the closure of the fragmented narrative, staged as a *resolution trilogy* comprised of three interrelated screenshots (Figure 4), providing her audience with the information that her story has ended. One may notice that between the second and the third example is omitted what Gee (2014) names 'Crisis,' a notion related to the Labovian 'complication of the action,' the fact that the story has come to a point where it needs a resolution. This omission proves the need to perceive narrativity as a post-digital process. What led to the end of the love story is found in the offline level of social action, which we can only restore ethnographically.

While the second screenshot of the resolution trilogy implied the crisis, namely the symbolic cut of an orange-depicting printed paper, our direct contact with Eva helped us understand that her love story ended because the feelings she expressed to her teenage crush were rejected.

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[14] In Greek, the first-person plural is integrated, as a morphological category, in the suffix of the verb.
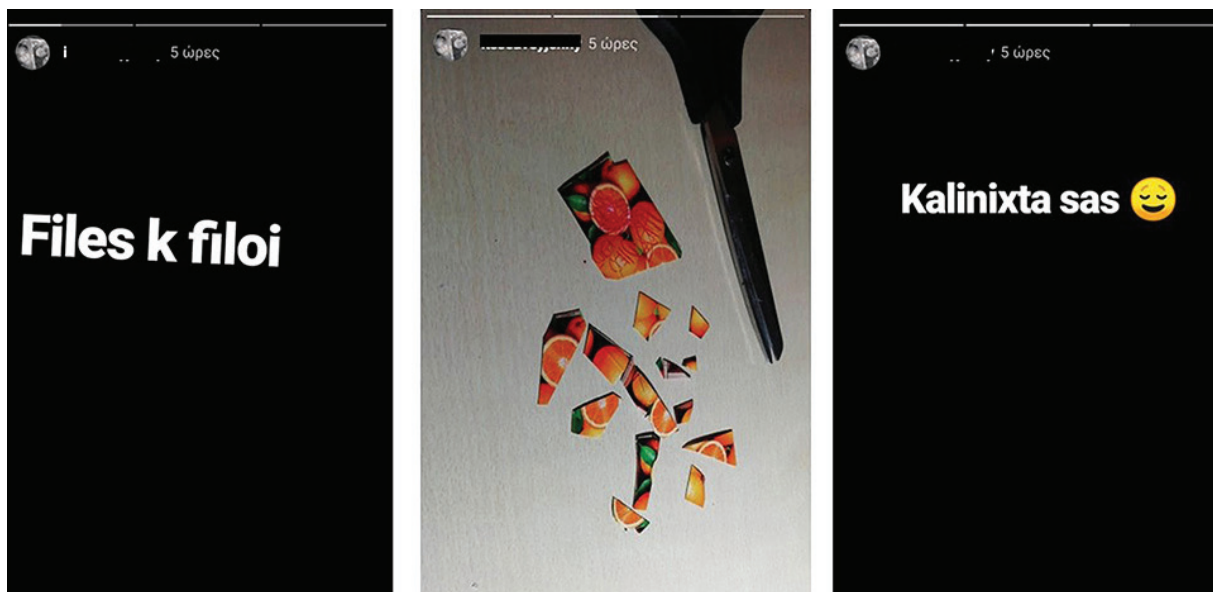
**Figure 4.** The resolution trilogy: the closure of the fragmented narrative.

Returning to the final trilogy, the first and the last screenshots frame the action with written text in Greeklish, beginning with the address "Files k Filoi" [female and male friends] and closing with the phrase "Kalinixta sas" [Goodnight all], accompanied by an emoticon expressing 'relief.' The last screenshot functions as the coda to her story, signaling the transition back to the real world.

Eva says the dark background in the framing screenshots achieves several goals. First, given that she recognizes the black color as a symbol of grief, she embeds it in her narrative work to express her moral stance toward her rejection. Second, by contrasting the black background and the written text in white font, Eva indexes her habitus as 'being in the network' (Androutsopoulos 2015). Thirdly, by combining the black-and-white antithesis with the shortness of the texts, she tries to ensure the visibility of her content, a practice informed by her engagement with Instagram Stories, where the swiftness of the reading process necessitates the visual saliency of the content.

Overall, our analysis coincides with the critical observation that:

> Users' [narrative] practices do not develop in a vacuum. They rather develop in a constant dialogue with the affordances of [the] online environment and its prompts or directives for specific modalities (e.g., Jovanovic and Van Leeuwen 2018). As a result, some types of action and behavior are promoted at the expense of others, and similarly, some type of content is being prioritized and valued more by the algorithms of a given site (Georgakopoulou and Bolander 2022:7).

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The semiotic, social, and algorithmic features Eva deploys to create her multimodal narrative demonstrate that this narrative addresses a specific audience and that the tellers themselves are distributed, starting from her best friend and including Instagram itself as a 'third author' (Eisenlauer 2014). In such a manner, teenage subjectivity can be understood "as part of an assemblage of materialities, networked sites of knowledge creation, and semiotic processes through which they are basically constituted and in continuous flux" (De Fina 2019: 5).

The intertwining of teenage subjectivity with the affordances and the discourses in place allows us to (re-)conceptualize the Instagram platform as a techno-chrono-topic, adaptive environment that transforms teenage narrative activity. This assumption leads us to the critical issue of the post-digital, multimodal narrative synergy's broader political and educational implications. Accordingly, we will now examine how this new narrativity impacts the learning and pedagogical potential of teenage engagement on Instagram.

## 5. Discussion: Toward a post-digital critical literacies pedagogy

In 2003, the late Gunther Kress predicted that the dominance of images and the medium of the screen would cause significant changes in the forms and functions of writing. As our research has demonstrated, this prediction has come true, at least in the case of Eva's multimodal narrative action on Instagram. The online world is increasingly mediated by new media affordances, semiotically and socio-technically. To narrate her love story, Eva combines semiotic resources in many ways, adapts this semiotic work to her perceived social and algorithmic affordances, and 'invests' in self-projection to achieve her goals in the online-offline nexus.

Accordingly, she appears to be quite literate in the Instagram social medium, employing a remarkable "constellation of knowledge, skills, and practices" (Kern 2015:240) in her storytelling action. However, whereas she recognizes and successfully engages with some of the affordances and discourses in place to produce her distinctive, multimodal meanings, this awareness is proved to be intuitive, resulting from her habitus. She does not realize that her engagement on Instagram is partly an effect of the platform-afforded ways of being and acting in the online environment. Indeed, Instagram's 'delimited' and predesigned features reflect specific naturalized platform discourses and sociocultural trends, which, combined with the algorithmic content personalization, prompt Eva to engage in a platform-promoted, controlled action, entrenching herself in the social and algorithmic bubbles.

Therefore, a first step toward what we call 'post-digital literacies pedagogy' would be the 'cultivation' of a "critical media-discourse awareness" (Georgakopoulou 2019) that would allow Eva to upscale her already developed socio-semiotic awareness toward the meta-realization that meaning production, dissemination, and interpretation requires a critical reading of the textual and contextual (f)actors in place. A critical media-discourse awareness perspective could be combined with what Carrington (2018) calls "critical data literacies." The latter aim at making the teenager aware of the principle that "texts – printed or multimodal or algorithmic – are not neutral" (ibid: 70) but structure readers' experiences, highlighting the necessity of an apt reading of the world based on learners' agency. More precisely, regarding narrativity, a critical approach would entail the (meta)awareness of the possibility of different viewings and interpretations of the world, helping learners to discern the socially and textually situated nature of narratives, especially in the case of new and social media.

As we have demonstrated, the socially situated nature of narrativity on Instagram must be post-digital since Eva's multimodal narrative unfolds in the online-offline nexus. Eva's complex strategies to attain her post-digital interests – strategies involving evaluating and selecting social and semiotic resources toward synthesizing sign-complexes – may be creative and apt for the social platform environment. And yet, they differ radically from the literacies required in educational contexts (Koutsogiannis and Adampa 2022). The truth is that educational institutions are often slow to acknowledge the new social and textual realities (see Koutsogiannis 2017; Papadopoulos 2020), resulting in the well-known 'home-school mismatch hypothesis' (Luke 2004). Solving such a broader problem is beyond the remit of our endeavor. Still, we believe that a post-digital critical literacies pedagogy, coupled with an appropriate semiotic toolkit, can help learners develop a 'multimodal grammar' (Cope and Kalantzis 2020), enabling them to engage with the post-digital socio-semiotic new media landscape critically.

## 6. Conclusion: Contributions, limitations, future directions

Hymes (1996:115) argued that narrative is a universal language function, yet our analysis has shown that narrative is a *fundamental function of semiotics*. Eva's narrative of affection on Instagram Stories may fall outside the "narrative canon" (Page 2010: 423) but should be confronted as "equally worthy data" (Georgakopoulou 2017b: 266). Such data not only meet the minimal requirements for narrativehood, namely temporal order and thematic consistency but also allow for an updated view of narrativity as an adaptive synergy of subjective agents in unity with the affordances and the discourses in place.

Hence, narratives are understood as perspectival and evaluative (Walsh 2018), social and interactional multimodal discursive nodes, co-produced, in our case study, by the teenage girl's habitual, agentive, and micro-hegemonic action and the technological, semiotic, social, and algorithmic features of Instagram. Eva's identity is thus discursively constructed through narrative co-action rather than just a result of this process.

Our conclusions draw on our personal interpretation of the data, which could be a limitation of our single-case study. We overcame this potential limitation by ensuring a connective (Leander and McKim 2003) approach with the research participant. Still, we should acknowledge that we interpreted the co-active role of medium affordances in the teenage-platform synergy in a way that reflected our own beliefs and discourses, what Foucault (1984) referred to as the "ontology of the present." Consequently, to make broader generalizations about narrative reality in new media, our findings need to be complemented by future research.

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