Stories and the construction of identity: Time, place and hashtags as narrative resources in posts by social media influencers

Attested as an effective resource for the construction of identity (e.g., Schiffrin, 1996), storytelling also represents an important avenue for research into digital discourse and, more specifically, self-presentation on social media. To zoom in on this area of research, in this paper I adopt a narrative-discourse perspective and explore the role of stories in the self-presentation of a specific group of social media influencers (SMIs) and the construction of their identity. For these purposes, a dataset of Instagram microposts shared by five UK-based fashion and lifestyle SMIs was compiled (n=3,845), and the narrative potential of these posts was examined. Besides open-ended concomitant small stories (Georgakopoulou, 2007) that these SMIs individually narrate, the analysis also identified several types of multi-author stories that are developed collectively, across the feeds of the selected SMIs. These stories centre around a shared narrative element – a specific time, place, or hashtag – which provides opportunities for emplotment; time, space and hashtags hence function as narrative resources in these stories and assume a constitutive role in the narrative (Baynham, 2015). The paper argues that specific time-/place-/hashtag-centred stories which recur in posts by the selected SMIs can be understood as highly tellable for this group of users. As a result, they are considered instrumental in the construction of their identity and are thus likely to be embraced by other (aspiring) UK-based fashion and lifestyle SMIs. The analysis, however, also shows that this practice leads to the replication of specific narrative frames in the self-presentation of this group of SMIs as well as to the standardization of social media content in general (cf. van Driel & Dumitrica, 2021).

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