



Structuring the Unforgettable: An SFL Genre Analysis of Personal Stories across Age and Gender

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ABSTRACT

Storytelling turns experience into meaning, and meaning into something we can share. Personal stories about unforgettable moments are one of the clearest examples of this meaning-making process at work. This study examines how individuals construct such stories by drawing on Martin and Rose's (2008) Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) genre theory to analyze five story variations: Recount, Anecdote, Exemplum, Narrative, and Observation. Data were collected from spontaneous audio-recorded stories told by 20 participants across different age groups and genders. Findings reveal that Recount was the most commonly used genre (35%), followed by Anecdote (30%), Exemplum (20%), Narrative (15%), and Observation (5%). Across age groups, a developmental pattern emerged: children favored Anecdote to express raw emotional reactions, adolescents favored Narrative to navigate complications, young adults favored Recount to document structured sequences of events, and adults favored Exemplum to offer moral evaluations of others. Story construction also differed by gender, with Exemplum dominant among female participants and Anecdote dominant among male participants.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Storytelling serves as an important medium for emotional expression. It enables individuals to express complex emotions in ways that others can easily understand and relate to. Through storytelling, individuals can express a range of emotions, including joy, sadness, fear, and hope. This process contributes to emotional release and supports self-understanding. Unlike traditional interview approaches, storytelling in any form (e.g., oral, visual, or digital) effectively allows individuals to share lived experiences that are often sensitive or require further elaboration (Yan et al., 2021, as cited in Hou, 2025). Additionally, storytellers communicate their personal thoughts, feelings, and life experiences, which fosters a strong connection between individuals (Philip et al., 2025). This emotional expression enhances listeners' ability to connect on a human level, making shared stories more impactful and relatable. This function of storytelling is vital for fostering empathy among individuals, as it enables the sharing and understanding of emotional experiences.

The power of storytelling to develop empathy stems from its ability to let listeners experience events and emotions from another person's perspective. By sharing personal stories, individuals express their emotions while inviting others to develop a shared understanding of their experiences (Philip et al., 2025), a process also known as "narrative transportation" (Green & Appel, 2024). Furthermore, the empathy gained through storytelling can reduce prejudice by humanizing others. For young children, moral values embedded in storytelling can help transform low empathy into positive daily behaviours (Wahyuni et al., 2023). In professional settings, storytelling is an effective tool for stimulating creative thinking, as it connects personal experiences with professional scenarios, increases attention to narrative detail, and improves the ability to interpret underlying meanings (Pattanaik et al., 2024). Moreover, storytelling that elicits empathy can help individuals adapt to society and recognize their place within it.

Storytelling helps individuals understand their life experiences while also constructing their identities. Through storytelling, people can organize their memories and life lessons into a clear and meaningful narrative. This process strengthens self-awareness and allows individuals to share their own unique perspectives. Storytelling does not just reflect on the past but also expresses hopes and future identity development, much like how autobiographers construct a narrative of their own lives (McAdams, 2019). Our understanding of our identity and role in the world is built through storytelling, which is adaptable, shaped by our surroundings, and can significantly influence how we view our emotional and social well-being (Stark et al., 2022). In addition, storytelling is acknowledged for its significance in restoring cultural identities within communities (Lawson-Te Aho, 2014, as cited in Chioneso et al., 2020). Therefore, storytelling is not just a medium of expression but also a dynamic process of identity construction that reflects a person's life experiences.

Previous studies have acknowledged storytelling as a useful method for facilitating communication between people and a flexible tool for broadening individuals' perspectives. Many studies have shown that storytelling is capable of producing positive impacts. This broad effectiveness makes storytelling a crucial and frequently studied subject across many different fields of study, including clinical psychology (see Chauvin et al., 2019; Hakim et al., 2025; Komóczy & Kósa, 2025; Petrovic et al., 2022; Ramamurthy et al., 2024), modern education (see Berberyan et al., 2024; Ghafar, 2024; Ginting et al., 2024; Herlina et al., 2024; Jarrah et al., 2024; Zhulamanova & Bernhardt, 2024), children's development (see Bunayyah et al., 2025; Ebrahimi et al., 2021; Frausel et al., 2021; Mulyono et al., 2024; Wong et al., 2022), and linguistics (see Iqbal et al., 2020; Kushartanti et al., 2024).

In psychology, storytelling has been shown to be an effective method for managing emotional disorders and building mental wellbeing. Research on psychiatric rehabilitation patients found that storytelling in group discussions effectively enhanced patients' life satisfaction and perspectives (Komóczy & Kósa, 2025). Relevant stories about life challenges shared in group discussions inspired patients to talk openly about similar personal experiences and helped them find purpose in life by connecting the story's lesson to their own experiences. For children, storytelling serves as a powerful approach to ease anxiety (Hakim et al., 2025), while also helping them improve their psychological ability to adapt to and manage emotions in difficult situations (Ramamurthy et al., 2024). This may happen because storytelling allows children to express their emotions, which raises their self-awareness. As a therapy tool, storytelling works as an innovative way to expand perceptions, which can positively change individuals and increase their mental wellbeing across different platforms (Chauvin et al., 2019; Petrovic et al., 2022). The effectiveness of storytelling in therapy lies in stories that offer a non-confrontational space for people to reflect on their ways of thinking and find solutions to issues without feeling judged. Considering these findings, it is evident that storytelling facilitates a safe space for individuals to release their emotional burden with less intimidation.

In educational contexts, storytelling has shown effectiveness in motivating students (Berberyan et al., 2024), maintaining their focus (Jarrah et al., 2024), strengthening their ability to absorb information, and reviving their creative imagination in understanding materials (Zhulamanova & Bernhardt, 2024). In STEM education, a narrative approach combined with engaging exercises helps students understand complex concepts more comprehensively and compellingly (Herlina et al., 2024). This approach worked by encouraging students to connect scientific theories with daily experiences, which eventually enhanced their confidence to solve problems. A study on Storytelling Narrated Video (SNV) found that it had advantages over conventional lecture videos in terms of knowledge retention and cognitive skill acquisition (Ginting et al., 2024). These outcomes were created through emotional moments in the narrative that made the material feel more personally memorable. Moreover, storytelling is also recognized as a highly successful educational strategy for increasing second language fluency in both children and adults, as it offers an engaging context for both productive and receptive skills (Ghafar, 2024). Overall, storytelling as an educational approach successfully stimulates students' willingness to improve their learning performance through emotional involvement and practical application.

In addition to the studies above on children's development, storytelling significantly promoted children's socioemotional growth by encouraging empathy, imagination, and collaborative interaction with peers, although the outcomes differ considerably by the child's gender (Wong et al., 2022; Bunayyah et al., 2025). This has been made possible by narratives' ability to trigger deep emotional involvement, which helps children learn to understand the consequences of their actions and others' feelings through the story's characters. In parent-child relationships, interaction through personal stories becomes a profound basis for higher-order thinking talk (Frausel et al., 2021). It is further explained that stories provide a richer linguistic context, which makes storytelling one of the most efficient ways for parents to foster their children's complex thinking from an early age. In a similar vein, storytelling before bedtime has also been shown to promote children's language development (Mulyono et al., 2024). Even for children with autism, storytelling can enhance their sleep quality (Ebrahimi et al., 2021). This has been made possible because storytelling stimulates the cerebral cortex and calms the nervous system, which helps children with autism attain the relaxed state needed for good sleep. Collectively, all these studies have confirmed that storytelling serves as a multidimensional tool for improving children's emotional maturity, intelligence, and physical wellbeing.

From a more sociolinguistic perspective, personal stories, whether oral or written, typically follow Labov's six stages of narrative, which consist of abstract, orientation, complication,

resolution, evaluation, and coda (Iqbal et al., 2020). In constructing their stories, storytellers usually use cohesive devices, such as references, conjunctions, substitutions, ellipses, and lexical ties. Interestingly, in the context of school-age children in Indonesia, it was found that children's story structures were affected by the type of emotion described (Kushartanti et al., 2024). Using Labov and Waletzky's narrative components as a theoretical framework, the study found that stories about sad experiences tend to be shorter than those about happy experiences, a pattern also influenced by the duration and sequence of storytelling. Both studies above have shown that using linguistic frameworks to analyze stories can generate findings that shed light on how people structure stories to reflect on their personal experiences.

To advance linguistic approaches to storytelling, applying systematic analytical frameworks to narrative data remains essential. While storytelling practices have been widely examined across non-linguistic disciplines, this study applies Martin and Rose's (2008) Systemic Functional Linguistics (hereafter SFL) genre framework to investigate a collection of personal stories centered on unforgettable life experiences.

SFL conceptualizes language as a social-semiotic resource shaped by, and responsive to, the social contexts in which it is used (Halliday, 1994). Rather than treating language as an autonomous formal system analyzed sentence by sentence, SFL genre theory examines whole spoken and written texts to explain how language users achieve specific pragmatic and interpersonal goals within a culture. From this perspective, linguistic choices are never arbitrary; they are systematically motivated by the social functions a text is designed to serve (Eggins, 2004; Halliday, 1994).

Central to this framework is the concept of genre as a staged, goal-oriented social process (Martin et al., 1987), a culturally recognized pattern that has evolved through repeated social use to help speakers and writers fulfill specific communicative purposes. Because these processes unfold through predictable stages toward a recognized outcome, texts that deviate from their anticipated structure can leave listeners or readers with a sense of incompleteness, as internal schematic expectations remain unfulfilled (Christie, 1999; Derewianka & Jones, 2016). This staged, purposeful view of text organization is particularly generative for studying personal narratives, where tellers select among structural options to shape raw lived experience into a communicable, socially intelligible form.

Within this tradition, Martin and Rose's (2008) genre model offers a detailed account of story genres, distinguishing five variations (Recount, Anecdote, Exemplum, Narrative, and Observation) based on their distinct structural staging and social purpose. This taxonomy demonstrates that "telling a story" is not a single, undifferentiated act, but a rich repertoire of structural choices. Each option achieves a distinct interpersonal effect: reporting past events (Recount), evaluating a remarkable occurrence (Anecdote), drawing a moral lesson (Exemplum), resolving a complication (Narrative), or reflecting on a state of affairs (Observation).

Despite the analytical strength of this model, limited research has examined how demographic variables, specifically age and gender, influence speakers' story variations when telling personal experiences. Existing SFL-based studies of narrative have primarily focused on internal structural mechanics or pedagogical applications in educational literacy contexts. Consequently, it remains unclear how different social groups select from the story genre repertoire when narrating significant life events. For instance, do younger and older speakers, or male and female narrators, systematically favor different story variations to make sense of their memorable experiences? Addressing this gap provides insight into how identity, life stage, and social positioning are encoded not only in narrative content, but in the structural genre choices speakers deploy to represent their lives.

To address this gap, the present study applies the SFL story genre framework to examine how individuals across different age groups and genders construct personal narratives to achieve specific communicative goals. By identifying structural patterns in personal stories of

unforgettable experiences, this analysis demonstrates how speakers organize lived reality into specific story types. Accordingly, this study seeks to answer the following research question: *How do individuals across different age groups and genders construct their personal stories when narrating their most unforgettable life moments?*

2. METHODS

The data for this study consist of spontaneous audio recordings of personal narratives about unforgettable life moments, gathered from 20 participants. To ensure the sample captured a range of narrative styles across the lifespan, participants were purposively selected based on two demographic variables: age group and gender. The sample was evenly distributed across five age categories, namely children (7–11 years old), adolescents (12–18 years old), young adults (19–24 years old), adults (25–60 years old), and elderly (over 60 years old), with four participants in each category, comprising two male and two female participants. This balanced design allows for meaningful comparison of genre preferences both across age groups and between genders, while keeping the sample size manageable for close qualitative analysis.

Following data collection, the audio recordings were transcribed in full and formatted using word-processing software. Transcripts were then organized into tables to facilitate systematic linguistic analysis, allowing the researcher to segment, code, and compare narrative stages across the full dataset in a consistent and traceable manner.

This study employs a systematic, four-step analytical procedure to examine the 20 personal narratives collected: (1) identifying units of meaning to determine the sequence of stages within each story, (2) categorizing each story into a specific genre, (3) mapping the overall distribution of genres across the sample, and (4) interpreting the resulting patterns. Each step is described in turn below.

Step 1: Identifying the Stages. The analysis began by identifying the structural stages of each story to understand how the story unfolds functionally. This involved locating key stages such as Orientation, which introduces characters, settings, and the initial situation common across narrative genres, along with other stages that vary depending on the story variations. This stage-by-stage segmentation provided the foundation for the subsequent genre classification.

Step 2: Categorizing Story Variations. Each story was then evaluated according to the social function it appeared designed to achieve, following Martin and Rose's (2008) framework, in which genre is identified not by topic but by communicative purpose. Drawing on Plum's (1988/1998, as cited in Martin & Rose, 2008) classification, four story variations were distinguished alongside the more familiar Narrative, which centers on how a protagonist resolves a complication. Recount was identified as the most straightforward of these variations, presenting a chronological sequence of events with minimal disruption. In contrast, the remaining variations foreground moments of disruption or noteworthy events: Anecdote centers on a remarkable event and culminates in the protagonist's emotional reaction to it; Exemplum resembles Anecdote in involving a disruptive event, but goes further by interpreting that event, often through moral judgment about the characters or behavior involved; and Observation captures a reflective "snapshot" of a moment, focusing on a personal response to an object or occurrence rather than on a sequence of events.

To refine this genre identification, the analysis was further guided by the attitude subsystem within Martin and Rose's (2007) appraisal framework. This additional layer of analysis enabled the researcher to examine more closely how participants evaluated the events in their stories, whether through appreciation, judgment, or affect, and to infer the underlying communicative purpose behind each story. Some participants, for instance, appeared to construct their stories primarily to inform, while others seemed oriented toward entertaining or inspiring their

audience. Looking at these evaluative resources helped clarify choices of stories that might otherwise look similar.

Step 3: Mapping Genre Distribution. Once each story had been classified, the findings were represented visually through tables and graphs to map the distribution of story genres across the two independent variables of interest: age group and gender. This visual mapping showed which variations of stories were more common among certain age groups or between male and female participants, laying the groundwork for the statistical findings discussed later.

Step 4: Interpreting the Findings. Finally, the observed distributional patterns were interpreted in greater depth to account for the tendencies identified in Step 3. This interpretive stage explored possible explanations for why particular demographic groups inclined toward specific genres when reconstructing their unforgettable life moments, connecting the quantitative patterns back to the qualitative, functional analysis conducted in the earlier steps.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Data analysis reveals that all five story variations within Martin and Rose's (2008) genre framework were represented in the dataset. When retelling their most unforgettable life moments, the 20 participants employ the complete range of story genres, as illustrated in the figure below.

Figure 1
The Distribution of Story Variations

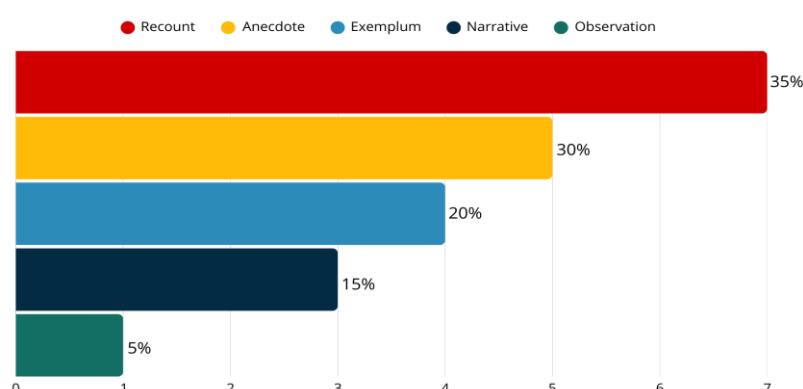


Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of variations identified across the 20 participants' stories. Recount emerged as the most dominant variation, accounting for 35% of the total dataset. This preference showed remarkable consistency, standing out as the only story type present across all age groups and gender backgrounds. Anecdote ranked second, comprising 30% of the stories. The remaining variations appeared in smaller proportions: Exemplum constituted 20%, followed by Narrative at 15%. Finally, Observation was the least frequent variation, representing only 5% of all collected stories. The dominance of Recounts indicates that most participants leaned toward organizing their experiences as chronological sequences of events. This preference likely stems from the straightforward, accessible structure Recounts provide for sharing personal history. Furthermore, Recounts function as the most objective story genre, presenting factual occurrences with minimal disruption from heavy attitudinal or evaluative language. In contrast, the frequent use of Anecdotes reflects a different communicative goal: prioritizing the storyteller's emotional reaction to a remarkable event over mere chronological reporting. The presence of these Anecdotes suggests that participants selected life experiences impactful enough to evoke distinct positive or negative affective responses.

Where Exemplums were deployed, participants aimed to pass moral judgment on character behavior within the story. When Narrative was chosen, the text was structured around a distinct

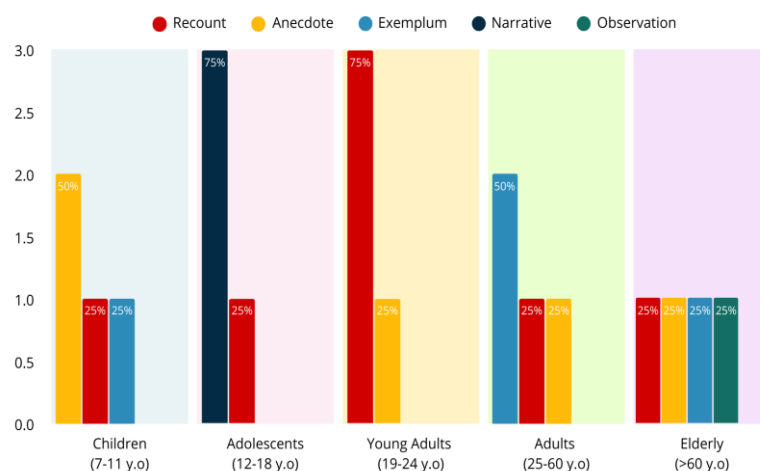
plot line driven by a Complication and its Resolution. Meanwhile, the minimal presence of Observations reveals that participants seldom framed their stories as static personal commentary without an accompanying plot or emotional climax. Overall, this genre distribution demonstrates that storytellers regarded chronological sequence and emotional stance as the core components necessary to render personal experiences complete and meaningful.

Age-Based Distribution of Narrative Constructions

Further analysis of the data by age group reveals distinct patterns in story construction. As illustrated in the figure below, significant variation emerged across age groups in how participants structured their most unforgettable life moments.

Figure 2

Story Variations Based on Age Groups



As shown in Figure 2, Anecdote emerged as the most prominent genre among children aged 7–11, representing 50% of the stories in this age group (2 out of 4 participants). The remaining narratives were divided equally between Recount and Exemplum, each accounting for 25% (1 story each). This distribution highlights a distinct preference for emotionally reactive storytelling among the youngest participants. To illustrate how a child structures this genre, a representative Anecdote excerpt is presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Story Excerpt 1 (Participant: A Child, 7 years old)

Anecdote	
Remarkable Events	<i>Nah, pas masa itu teh, pas lagi ini di kamar mandi, nggak tau ada yang ngetawain, “hi hi hi.” Tapi gak tau siapa, da dari tembok yang lubang. Nah, jadi pas masa itu teh langsung bilang ke mamah, “mamah, itu- itu... ada yang ngetawain.” Langsung aja doa-doa gitu.</i> (And then, while I was in the bathroom, I don't know why, but someone laughed at me, like “hi hi hi.” But I don't know who! It came from the hole in the wall. So right then I told Mama,

Anecdote	
	“Mama, look! Someone is laughing at me!” And then we prayed and prayed right away.)
Reaction	<i>Nah, jadi pas di rumah temen teh, gini, pada takut. Jadi, ini diem di rumah temen dulu lah yang temen yang kedua. Nah, udah itu, udah gak ada lagi, udah dibaca doa. Nah, udah dibaca doa, udah gak ada lagi.</i> (So at my friend's house, everyone was scared. We just stayed at my other friend's house for a bit. But then it was gone because we prayed. After we prayed, it didn't happen anymore.)

In Table 1, the presence of negative affect highlights an emotional disruption during the event, generating fear and tension. Emotional affect is expressed both implicitly and directly throughout the text. For instance, the implicit affect embedded in the phrase “we prayed and prayed right away” functions as an emotional reaction, depicting behavioral action taken under the pressure of fear. This demonstrates that the participant's emotional state is conveyed not only through descriptive adjectives, but also through actions triggered by distress. Most notably, the explicit use of the word “scared” serves as a direct inscription of affect, confirming fear as the primary reaction to the remarkable event.

This finding suggests that when retelling unforgettable moments, young children prioritize their immediate emotional reactions to an event. Their preference for the Anecdote likely reflects an evolving capacity to regulate or filter emotional states during storytelling. As Labouvie-Vief (2003) notes, emotional development involves a gradual shift from raw, immediate reactions toward a more socio-cognitively mediated understanding of how others think and feel. However, because this developmental transition remains in progress, the emotional intensity of the experience continues to dominate the story structure over a strictly logical or chronological sequence of events.

Among adolescents (aged 12–18), the genre distribution shifts decisively toward Narrative, which accounts for 75% of the stories in this age bracket, alongside a single instance of Recount (25%). This pattern indicates that adolescents tend to frame unforgettable life moments as critical disruptions that require active resolution. The narrative in Table 2 exemplifies this genre structure, demonstrating how the storyteller interprets a crisis as an event to be navigated through human agency. Specifically, the text features a well-defined Complication—a life-threatening situation where the narrator and his sister began drowning—which is subsequently resolved through a successful rescue by his father and a bystander.

Table 2

Story Excerpt 2 (Participant: An Adolescent, 18 years old)

Narrative	
Complication	<i>Awalnya itu cuma bercanda-bercanda gitu di atas ban pelampung, lama-lama tanpa disadari ban pelampung kami itu terseret ombak sampai ke tengah. ... Aku kira tidak terlalu dalam lautnya, ya masih dangkal lah. Namun, saat aku turun ternyata sangat dalam. Kakiku sampai tidak bisa menapak ke dasar laut, aku tenggelam.</i> (We were just messing around on the floatie at first, but without us even noticing, the waves started pulling us out to sea. ... I honestly thought the water was still shallow, you know? But the second I dropped down; it turned out it was super deep. My feet couldn't even touch the bottom, and I started drowning.)

Narrative	
Resolution	<i>Ayahku langsung berlari untuk menolongku. Kalau saudaraku itu, ditolong oleh wanita yang ada di tengah laut yang bisa berenang. Lalu dia dibawa ke pinggir pantai. Saat sudah dibawa ke pinggir pantai, untungnya dia baik-baik saja. Untungnya orang yang menyewakan pelampung itu sangat baik. Yang penting aku dan saudaraku selamat dan baik-baik saja. Jadi tidak perlu ganti rugi atau tanggung jawab karena pelampungnya hilang.</i> (My father ran straight into the water to save me. As for my sister, she was rescued by a woman who happened to be swimming nearby. They brought her back to the shore, and thankfully, she was okay. ... Luckily, the guy who rented the floatie to us was really cool about it. He said as long as my sister and I were safe, it was fine, he didn't make us pay or anything.)

The preference for Narrative among adolescents closely reflects their developmental stage. During this period, individuals actively construct self-identity by navigating interpersonal conflicts and intense social situations with peers. The Narrative structure, built around a Complication and Resolution, offers a fitting framework for processing these encounters and showing how personal crises were overcome. This interpretation aligns with Marwick and Boyd (2014), who note that navigating social drama plays a central role in helping adolescents form personal identity amidst peer pressure and conflict.

Among young adults (aged 19–24), the findings mirror the overall dataset, with the vast majority (75%) organizing their stories through the Recount genre. At this stage, participants predominantly adopt a matter-of-fact approach to sharing personal history, prioritizing chronological clarity over acute crisis or raw emotional reaction. Table 3 illustrates this pattern through an excerpt structured around a clear sequence of factual events, sustained by distinct temporal transitions.

Table 3

Story Excerpt 3 (Participant: A Young Adult, 22 years old)

Recount	
Record	<i>... Setelah beres check-in dan melewati imigrasi, kita nungguin sambil ngambil makan pagi-pagi. sempat sarapan di sana sambil nunggu penerbangan. ... Begitu sampai di [bandara], aku masih gak nyangka akhirnya bisa ke [suatu negara]. ... Setelah check-in dan istirahat sebentar, aku jalan-jalan di sekitar hotel, beli makanan dan minuman, sambil menikmati suasana [kota]. ... Keesokan harinya, kami pergi ke [sebuah landmark terkenal], salah satu destinasi wajib buat turis. ... Setelah puas di sana, kami mampir ke kafe kecil di dekat situ.</i> (... After checking in and clearing immigration, we grabbed some breakfast while waiting for our flight. ... When we finally touched down at [the airport], I was honestly in shock that I was actually in [a country]. ... After checking in and resting for a bit, I went for a walk around the neighborhood, grabbed some snacks and drinks, and just soaked in [the city] vibe. ... The next day, we hit up [a famous landmark], which is a total must-see for tourists. After hanging out there, we stopped by a small cafe nearby.)

The use of explicit temporal signalling phrases, such as “after checking in” and “the next day”, demonstrates the participant's primary focus on presenting a systematic, uninterrupted chronological account of what occurred, where, and when. This indicates that for young adults, sharing memorable experiences serves predominantly to convey clear, sequential information rather than to frame the event around a critical crisis requiring resolution. By adopting this direct, linear structure, young adult storytellers minimize narrative disruption and avoid information overload. This pattern aligns with previous research suggesting that young adults prioritize “personal semantics” (the objective facts and basic details of life events) over the deeper moral framing or rich evaluative interpretation characteristic of older adults (Acevedo-Molina et al., 2019).

A markedly different preference pattern emerges among adults (aged 25–60), where Exemplum becomes the primary genre at 50%, with Recount and Anecdote comprising the remainder (25% each). This shift highlights a strong tendency among adult storytellers to incorporate moral judgment and personal evaluation regarding specific characters or behaviors. Illustrating this orientation, a narrative contributed by a survivor of domestic violence employs the Exemplum framework specifically to assess and pass moral judgment on the perpetrator's actions.

Table 4

Story Excerpt 4 (Participant: An Adult, 55 years old)

Exemplum	
Incident	<i>Terus waktu itu aku mulai hamil 10 minggu, aku ditendang, diseret sampai lebam berminggu-minggu tidak hilang lebamnya. ... Semoga kalau anak ini lahir dia akan berubah lebih sayang dan lebih memikirkan rumah tangganya. Tapi malangnya dia malah terlalu gak peduli ... Dibilangin gini malah dia langsung berdiri, memukul dan mencekik juga. (When I was ten weeks pregnant with my little one, he kicked me and dragged me... the bruises stayed for weeks, they just wouldn't fade. ... I kept praying that once the baby was born, he would change, that he would be more loving and care for our family. But sadly, my dear, he only grew more indifferent. When the baby cried, he just ignored it. ... When I tried to speak up, he just stood up and immediately hit and choked me again.)</i>
Interpretation	<i>Dia orangnya itu mementingkan egonya sendiri. Dia tidak mementingkan yang lain, apalagi istrinya ... terus saya berusaha untuk menghindari dia dengan cara menceraikan dia, sebab dia tidak mau menceraikan saya. Dah, itu cerita sedih saya. (He is a man who only cares for his own ego. He doesn't think of anyone else, especially not his wife. ... I realized I had to protect myself, so I fought to get a divorce, because he refused to let me go. That is my sad story.)</i>

In the story excerpt presented in Table 4, the participant uses explicit negative Judgement to characterize her ex-husband. Inscribed negative evaluations directly criticize his disposition through descriptors such as “cruel,” “indifferent,” and “only cares for his own ego.” She further invokes moral condemnation of his behavior by detailing explicit acts of physical violence, including “hit,” “choke,” “kick,” and “drag.” These linguistic choices invite the listener to pass unfavorable moral judgment on his failure to fulfill basic ethical and familial responsibilities as a spouse and parent.

This preference for the Exemplum among adult storytellers likely reflects a developmental focus on interpersonal intimacy, moral responsibility, and relational security at this life stage.

Because navigating complex relationships is central to adult social life, storytellers of this age frequently embed explicit moral evaluations and behavioral assessments of the key actors in their personal narratives.

Notably, the dataset's only instance of Observation (5% of the total data) occurred within the older adult group (aged over 60), illustrated by the narrative excerpt in Table 5, contributed by a 61-year-old female participant.

Table 5

Story Excerpt 5 (Participant: An Elderly, 61 years old)

Observation	
Event	<i>Nah, pengalaman yang sangat menyenangkan bagi saya karena saya melakukan perlombaan itu dengan spontan, nah kalo orang lain kan pada di ini dulu apa di tulis dulu, pokoknya sesempurna mungkin lah, kalo saya spontanitas. Eh ternyata yang spontanitas ini lah yang bisa menjadi juara. (It was such a joyful experience for me because I did it completely spontaneously. While others prepared their scripts so carefully and aimed for perfection, I just went for it on the fly. And as it turned out, that spontaneity was exactly what led me to win first prize!)</i>
Comment	<i>Ya mungkin ini karena juga sih pesertanya kebanyakan laki-laki, jadi kalo ada peserta perempuan mungkin dianggap sesuatu yang amazing kali ya. Nah, kemudian waktu itu kenapa peristiwa ini merupakan peristiwa yang tidak bisa dilupakan karena ada sesuatu hal yang menyenangkan yaitu, selain mendapatkan juara pertama, kita juga dapat hadiah yang lumayan juga untuk ukuran mahasiswa mah, bisa untuk traktir temen-temen dekat atau bestie lah. ... saya juga bersyukur dengan terpilihnya saya menjadi juara melawak, saya menjadi aktif juga di himpunan dan di fakultas. Mungkin itu adalah peristiwa atau kejadian yang menyenangkan bagi saya yang tidak mungkin terlupakan, meskipun kejadiannya sudah beberapa tahun yang lalu. Mungkin segitu saja. (Perhaps it was also because most of the contestants were men, so seeing a woman up there was considered something quite amazing. This event is so special to me not only because of the win, but also because the prize money was quite substantial for a student back then. Enough to treat my close friends, or "besties" as the kids say now. ... I am so grateful for that win. It made me much more active in the student association and the faculty. It truly is a happy memory that I will never forget, even though many years have passed since then. I think that is all I can share.)</i>

The story in Table 5 is classified as Observation because its structure centers on personal comment on an event, without conflict or complication. It also contains numerous instances of Attitude, particularly positive Appreciation of the event. For example, expressions such as "joyful experience," "quite amazing," "so grateful," and "happy memory" reflect a high valuation of the spontaneous event rather than a judgement of moral character. Furthermore, the extended Comment stage relative to the Event stage reflects the participant's main goal: personal reflection on her unforgettable moment. She evaluates her spontaneous victory as a source of happiness and social recognition during her college days.

Story Variations by Gender

In addition to age group, gender has also been included as a variable of analysis. Figure 3 presents a comparative illustration of the distribution of story preferences between female and male participants.

Figure 3

Story Variations Based on Gender

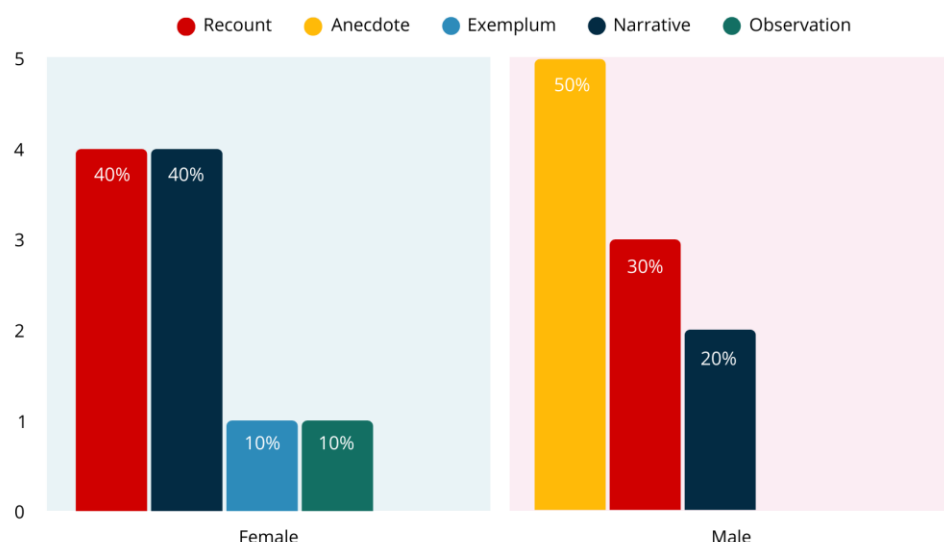


Figure 3. Story Genre Distribution Based on Gender

Figure 3 shows contrasting preferences in story selection between female and male participants. Among female participants, Recount and Exemplum are the most frequently used variations, each accounting for 40%. In contrast, Anecdote (50%) is the majority choice among male participants. This suggests that female participants in the sample tend not only to report their unforgettable moments chronologically but also to insert moral judgements about certain characters or actions in their experiences (see Table 4). This differs from the male participants, who prioritize their emotional reactions to the remarkable event in constructing their unforgettable moments (see Table 1).

It is also worth noting that although Anecdote was the second most frequently used genre overall, it was not used at all within the female group; conversely, neither Exemplum nor Observation appeared among male participants. According to Fivush (2011), females tend to integrate past memories into life narratives that emphasize emotional depth and relational connection more than males do. Although the female group's findings in this study align with previous research on associating past memories with judgements about people, as manifested in the Exemplum, the findings for the male group present an interesting contradiction of this view. Rather than lacking emotional depth, the male participants in the sample demonstrate a high degree of emotional involvement when retelling their unforgettable moments. However, rather than being conveyed reflectively, these emotions are expressed as spontaneous reactions to remarkable events.

4. CONCLUSION

This study reveals that individuals construct their unforgettable moments in diverse ways. Using Martin & Rose's (2008) story framework, Recount emerged as the most common type, though many participants moved beyond neutral reporting toward greater emotional intensity, shifting into Anecdote. These findings indicate that storytelling evolves with age, moving from raw emotional expression in childhood to crisis-navigation in adolescence, factual sequencing in young adulthood, and moral interpretation in adulthood. By gender, female participants favored character interpretation and moral evaluation through Exemplum, while male participants emphasized emotional reactions to events, though such patterns should not be generalized, as age and gender alone cannot fully explain story construction.

These results contribute to SFL genre-based studies by showing how genre theory can trace the way individuals recollect and express memories. Given the study's small sample (n=20), findings may not generalize; future research should involve larger samples and explore additional variables such as educational background or socioeconomic status.

5. AUTHORS' NOTE

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. Authors confirmed that the paper was free of plagiarism.

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