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Open about organizational failure: A communication perspective on postmortem impression management

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ABSTRACT

Being open about failure as an entrepreneur is an increasingly common practice in and beyond startup communities, for example by proactively and strategically crafting public statements to frame subsequent failure conversations. Combining an impression management perspective with an analysis of communicative genres of failure narratives, we empirically investigate postmortem statements of failed entrepreneurs. Shifting the discourse from the (content of the) failure narratives towards considering its broader communicative context, we show how genres emerge from patterns of failure narratives and impression management strategies. Our analysis suggests that subgenres of postmortem statements represent different forms of openness about failure, and some subgenres in particular contribute to establishing an ‘organizational afterlife’ as a potentially long-lasting impression management strategy.

1. Introduction

Over the past decade, we can observe growing scholarly attention on strategic communication known as failure narratives, as they are shared at events such as F***Up Nights and in digitally published ‘postmortem statements’ (Cardon et al., 2011; Wolfe and Shepherd, 2015; Ingardi et al., 2021). While such failure narratives are often considered as a means of sensemaking (Gabriel, 2000; Czarniawska, 1998) of individual entrepreneurial failure (see Byrne and Shepherd 2015; Wolfe and Shepherd 2015), more recently scholars began examining how failure narratives may serve as an impression management device (Überbacher, 2017; Kibler et al., 2017). Specifically, these scholars identified various impression management strategies and tactics that are used by entrepreneurs within failure narratives (Kibler et al., 2021). What these impression management strategies have in common, is their reliance on particularly open ways of communication even in cases of failure, complementing other studies pointing to openness as a way ‘to foster social legitimacy with stakeholders following venture failure’ (Kibler et al., 2017: 145; see also Gegenhuber and Dobusch, 2017).

In a recent paper, Kibler et al. (2021) even distinguish between various venture-failure narratives used as impression management devices. Similarly, other scholars have pointed out the impact that entrepreneurial narratives (Martens et al., 2007) and entrepreneurial communication (Fischer and Reuber, 2011, 2014) have on stakeholders’ thinking and behavior. Building upon this line of research, we suggest deepening the communication-theoretical foundation of analyzing failure narratives as impression management

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strategies for two reasons. First, previous works on failure narratives and impression management do not further explore the rhetorical context – what we conceptualize as a genre (Orlikowski and Yates, 1994; Wenzel and Koch, 2018) – that these narratives are embedded in and shaped by (a recent exception: Ingardi et al., 2021). Based upon a communicative ontology of organizing processes (see Ashcraft et al., 2009; Cooren et al., 2011), our understanding of genres goes beyond the idea that actors only make collective sense of situations à la Weick (1995) but also participate in the co-construction of our social realities (Giddens, 1984). Accordingly, for the purposes of this study, we use the concepts of genre and genre analysis to capture how failure communication genres are shaped by post-failure impression management strategies.

Second, carefully crafted and openly communicated failure narratives may attempt to extend and manage the impression of an organization (Elsbach, 2003; Überbacher, 2014) after it went out of business. Since the peculiar connections between communicative acts constitute an organization (Luhmann 2006; Cooren et al., 2011), requalifying and reconnecting acts of communication through failure narratives effectively reconstitutes certain aspects of an organization in a postmortem statement. We refer to this communicatively construed entity through failure narratives as an *organizational afterlife*. This organizational afterlife lasts as long as the follow-up communication continues and serves as a means to manage impressions related to an organizational failure.

Empirically, we investigated postmortem statements of failed entrepreneurs. We define postmortem statements as public communicative acts in which founders announce the end of their entrepreneurial endeavors and speak ‘openly’ about the reasons for the failure, the consequences, and their future plans. We show how postmortem statements differ in their temporal orientation, form, and content, arriving at four distinct subgenres of postmortem statements. Based on this analysis, we matched our four inductively generated genres with the typology of failure narratives identified as impression management devices in Kibler et al. (2021).

This study contributes to the literature on the open publication of failure narratives as an impression management strategy in two main ways. First, we show that not just the (content of the) failure narrative but also the communicative (sub-)genres it constitutes matter from an impression management perspective. Specifically, we reveal combinations of narratives and impression management strategies that produce various types of postmortem subgenres, representing different directions of open failure communication. Second, we complement the discourse on failure narratives from just considering them as impression management devices (Kibler et al., 2017, 2021) towards explaining how they contribute to construing an organizational afterlife that goes beyond an immediate impression management strategy.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. From entrepreneurial failure to failure narratives

Before approaching how entrepreneurs communicatively deal with failure, we first need a clear conceptual understanding of entrepreneurial failure (Heracleous and Werres, 2016; Jenkins and McKelvie, 2016). While some scholars have used more economic and legal definitions of entrepreneurial failure, such as bankruptcy, insolvency, and economic viability (De Castro, Alvarez, Blasick and Fondomicro, 1997; Ucbasaran et al., 2013), these conceptualizations have been criticized as too narrow to capture the entrepreneurial failure phenomenon (Watson and Everett, 1993). Based on this critique, others have taken a broader approach and defined organizational failure as a deviation from expectations, often involving the notion of exceeding a certain threshold (Cannon and Edmondson, 2005; McGrath, 1999; McKenzie and Sud, 2008). In this study, we follow this broader conceptualization of entrepreneurial failure and define it as ‘a deviation from the entrepreneur’s desired expectations’ (McKenzie and Sud, 2008: 123). This conceptualization includes unexpected or undesirable cases of bankruptcy, insolvencies, closures, and discontinuities in operations.

Acknowledging the often public character of failure reflections, in turn, has led scholars to increasingly focus on failure narratives. Narratives can be more generally defined as ‘recurrent practices of storytelling that typically include a causal interpretation of a time sequence involving focal actors, events, and motivations, and ‘embody a sense of what is right and wrong, appropriate or inappropriate’ (Pentland 1999: 712)’ (Haack et al., 2012: 817). Failure narratives, however, do not just represent a means of sensemaking of the failure event (see Gabriel, 2000; Czarniawska, 1998) but are also a way of post-failure impression management (Elsbach 2003; Überbacher 2014).

For example, Mantere et al. (2013) investigated the narrative-based attribution of reasons for failure. Here, we can already see how intra-organizational data is complemented with ‘media narratives’ (ibid.: 460) of failure, pointing to the importance of a public failure impression. Similar to Cardon et al. (2011), Mantere et al. (2013) derived media narratives from newspaper reports on entrepreneurial failure. Recognizing the relevance of these media narratives, in turn, may have fueled the emergence of postmortem statements as a form of strategic impression management as described by Kibler et al. (2017). It is in these statements that entrepreneurs offer narratives as impression management devices (Kibler et al., 2021) with the intention to influence and shape media narratives, thereby

Table 1

Impression management strategies associated with post-failure narratives, identified by Kibler et al. (2021).

| Impression management strategy | Description |
|--------------------------------|--|
| <i>Assertive</i> | acquisitive in nature, used to boost image typically through enhancements, ingratiation, self-promotion, and exemplification |
| <i>Defensive</i> | reactively manage impressions, usually by means of apologies, distraction, justification, and self-handicapping |
| <i>Demonstrative</i> | entrepreneurs provide data or details regarding their venture’s activities |
| <i>Self-focused</i> | behave in ways intended to make the entrepreneur appear nice, polite, and hard-working |
| <i>Other-focused</i> | identify and compliment significant others |

avoiding stigmatization potentially associated with failed entrepreneurs (Cardon et al., 2011; Singh et al., 2015). In their analysis, Kibler et al. (2021) identified 16 tactics clustered into five impression management strategies (see also Boline, Kacmar, Turnley and Gilstrap, 2008: 1082). Table 1 summarizes these impression management strategies, which we will build our empirical analysis upon.

To some degree, and following a similar rationale as Gegenhuber and Dobusch (2017) have found for starting new ventures, it is the openness about a venture's failure which contributes to the credibility of claims made in postmortem statements (see also Ingardi et al., 2021). At the same time, variants of open communication practices are likely to make a difference with respect to what types of failure narratives are available for an entrepreneurs' impression management repertoire. In other words, it is not just the content – the story – told within a failure narrative but also the way the narrative is presented to the wider public in an open manner that matters from an impression management perspective.

2.2. A genre perspective on open failure communication

To explore the rhetorical context that failure narratives are embedded in, we draw on a communication-theoretical perspective (see Ashcraft et al., 2009; Cooren et al., 2011; Pälli, 2018; Vázquez et al., 2018). From such a perspective, communication is constitutive of both organizations and professional institutions and fields, which 'need to be continuously evoked *in* and *through* language use and its material manifestations' (Schoeneborn, 2013: 1778, emphasis in original; see also Cooren, 2012; Kuhn, 2008). Examining the communicative dissolution of an organization, as well as its communicative afterlife, as part of the same communication process (Bean and Buikema, 2015), we apply the concept of genre and the respective genre analysis.

A genre, after being established within a certain community, serves as an institutionalized template or a premise for social interaction: it influences the ongoing communicative actions by providing previously and collectively established reference points for follow-up communication ('connectivity', Schoeneborn, 2011). Genres as institutionalized templates shape, but do not determine, how actors in each field engage in everyday social interactions. Genre usage in turn reinforces a genre as a useful, distinctive organizing structure for the community. The concept of community here broadly refers to social units such as groups, organizations, or professional fields (Orlikowski and Yates, 1994; Wenzel and Koch, 2018). The potentially cross-cutting application of genres makes them particularly promising for analyzing a communicative phenomenon such as entrepreneurial failure communication, which is situated at the intersection of the organizational and field level.

The notion of genres has been applied to examine organizational communications such as memos, meetings, reports, training seminars, resumes, and announcements, in which the genres have been theoretically defined as 'socially recognized types of communicative actions' (Orlikowski and Yates, 1994: 542) used by organizational members for particular communicative and collaborative purposes (ibid.). Several scholars in organization and management studies have recently begun using the concept to refer to typified social action (e.g., Brown and Duguid, 1991; Orlikowski and Yates, 1994; Yates and Orlikowski, 2002, 2007; Schoeneborn, 2013; Wenzel and Koch, 2018). Within the entrepreneurship literature, the concept of genre has been leveraged by (Martens et al., 2007), who have placed the genre of an entrepreneurial pitch on the research agenda. In the strategic management literature, scholars have recently started to study 'genres of strategic communication' (Wenzel and Koch, 2018, 639).

Wenzel and Koch (2018) investigate video recordings of Apple Inc. to shed light on the discursive and bodily activities through which these speeches come into being as a 'staged genre of strategic communication' (ibid., 639). Focusing on another specific genre of strategic communication, Cornut and his co-authors (2012) examine the features of the strategic plan genre of communication. They draw on a series of textual analysis tools that examine dimensions such as verbal tone, temporal orientation, and stance (i.e., degree of self-reference), while also exploring lexical content and the sequence of rhetorical 'moves.' In a recent study applying the genre concept to failure narratives, Ingardi et al. (2021) connect narrative genres such as 'Fabel', 'Tragicomedy' and 'Documentary' used at F**kUp Nights to the qualification of errors. What their categorization underlines is the fictional character of certain failure narrative genres, pointing to the fact that postmortem failure communication to some degree rewrites organizational history.

Building on this research, we try to find out how entrepreneurs communicate openly about their venture's failure as a means of impression management. To do so, we examine genres and their discursive norms along six dimensions (Yates and Orlikowski, 2002). First, genres are characterized by the *participants* involved, as they define who initiates the interaction and who is addressed. In this way, genres reflect different roles that are played or not played by community members. Moreover, genres specify the conditions required for an interaction to happen or not to happen (Yates and Orlikowski, 2002) by setting expectations about *form*, including media and linguistic elements, *time* (e.g., timing of publication and subsequent follow-up communication) and *place* (such as specific web addresses). Furthermore, genres are associated with socially recognized *purposes*. Thereby, they reflect which actions are taken by a community and which are not. By setting expectations about the *content*, genres reveal what is valued by a community and what is not. At the same time, the content of the genre is where we situate the narrative impression management strategies such as identified by Kibler et al. (2021).

Taken together, the concept of genre and our understanding of impression management strategies in postmortem statements will guide our empirical analysis of entrepreneurial failure communication, to which we turn next.

3. Research design

3.1. Research context

Founders of failed startups increasingly engage in strategic public communication to speak 'frankly' about the reasons for and consequences of failure, for example, at events such as 'F**kUp Nights' or 'Fail Cons' (Ingardi et al., 2021). A written form of failure

communication are ‘postmortem statements,’ failure accounts published by founders on blogs and other websites. Since such statements are usually published online on the company’s (former) website, the founder’s personal blog, or as an op-ed in the business press, they are easily found via search engines and are thus a particularly long-lasting way of communicating failure. In this way, postmortem statements ‘survive’ the former startups that they refer to. Further, postmortem statements can be accessed by anyone, and readers often also engage in follow-up communication by sharing or commenting on the article. In line with our communication-theoretical perspective, we refer to this typified communication as a genre (Yates and Orlikowski, 2007).

More specifically, we analyze the phenomenon of postmortem statements in the context of the international technology startup sector, with Silicon Valley as the leading environment for such ventures. Previous scholars have noted that Silicon Valley’s tolerant and encouraging culture towards failure is an essential reason why it has become a home for the most important Internet corporations and countless startups (e.g., Saxenian, 1996). In practice, highly regarded entrepreneurial concepts such as the ‘lean startup approach’ (Felin et al., 2020; Ries, 2011), which advises founders to implement business ideas as fast as possible to test them in real-life circumstances, strongly contribute to a view of failure as a crucial and common learning resource. As such, the community of tech startup entrepreneurs and investors serves not only as an empirical setting where failure is both numerous and to a certain degree accepted but also as a setting where it has become more common to openly communicate about failed ventures at public events or in postmortem statements.

In line with previous research (Kibler et al., 2017, 2021), we qualify postmortem statements as a form impression management (Elsbach 2003; Überbacher 2014). As a result, postmortem statements do not present a random review of entrepreneurial activities. While these statements may be less honest than intimate accounts to family or friends, they may be more direct and franker than those given to banks or venture capitalists. However, we are not interested in the reasons for failure or post-failure coping processes; instead, we are interested how various failure narratives are communicatively embedded in genres.

3.2. Data collection

To collect postmortem statements for our analysis, we used the website *Autopsy.io*, which was launched in June 2015. Referred to as ‘a graveyard of startup failures’ (Wright, 2015), the site serves as a publicly accessible database for postmortem statements that is continuously updated by its users. According to its operators, the aim of *Autopsy.io* is to be a learning resource for aspiring founders by providing them with the reflections of failed entrepreneurs (D’Onfro, 2015). Each entry linked to a postmortem statement is listed with an ID and relevant information such as title, publishing date, the startup’s name, a summary of the reasons for failure, and the author’s Twitter name.

At the time of our initial data collection (November 2015), *Autopsy.io* listed 114 articles published between 2006 and 2015. A first screening showed that not all entries could be used for our analysis. In particular, the older articles were no longer available online. Additionally, our study intended to give a snapshot of how postmortem statements as an evolved genre are currently used by failed entrepreneurs. Therefore, we excluded all articles published before 2010 (15 articles) as well as seven articles that were no longer accessible. Additionally, we eliminated articles that were press releases on the termination of a business or comments by journalists or other commentators (28 articles), as these did not meet our definition of postmortem statements as public communication by founders to announce the end of their endeavors, to speak frankly about the reasons and consequences of their failure and to share future plans. We thus arrived at a body of 64 postmortem statements (56% of all *Autopsy.io* entries at that time), which compose the sample of our analysis (also see Table A1 in Appendix A).

For all 64 postmortem statements, we then collected additional data about the origin and format of the statements to complement and cross-check the information collected from the *Autopsy.io* database (see Table 2 below). Statement lengths vary from 325 to 7465 words, resulting in a median word count of 1558 words (average: 1933). Regarding publishing channels, founders’ personal blogs are the most frequently chosen platform (42%), while other channels such as the online publishing platform Medium (31%) and coedited articles in online magazines (16%) are frequently used as well. This variety of channels demonstrates that the genre is not exclusively used by founders who already blog on a regular basis but also by entrepreneurs who take the failure of their startup as an occasion to engage in public communication. Notably, 5 (8%) of the 64 statements in our sample were posted on either the still active website of the failed startup or on the website of the founder’s new company; we understand this as an indicator that entrepreneurs were especially interested in keeping the failed venture’s name alive. As expected, most postmortem statements deal with North American businesses (69%); regarding metropolitan areas, the sample is dominated by Silicon Valley (23%) and New York (16%) based startups. Nevertheless, our sample is quite diverse in terms of location: European articles make up 25% of the sample, with the large startup hubs

Table 2
Descriptive statistics of the 64 postmortem statements under study.

| Year | Channel | | Channel | | Geography | | | |
|------|---------|-----|---------------------|----|-----------|----------------|----|-----|
| | # | % | # | % | # | % ¹ | | |
| 2010 | 10 | 16% | Founder’s blog | 27 | 42% | North America | 44 | 69% |
| 2011 | 2 | 3% | Medium.com | 20 | 31% | Europe | 16 | 25% |
| 2012 | 2 | 3% | Online Magazine | 10 | 16% | Asia | 3 | 4% |
| 2013 | 14 | 22% | Company website | 4 | 6% | Australia | 1 | 2% |
| 2014 | 18 | 28% | Social Network | 2 | 3% | | | |
| 2015 | 18 | 28% | Website of new firm | 1 | 2% | | | |

of London and Berlin contributing 8% and 5%, respectively. Asian and Australian startups together constitute 6% of the articles.

3.3. Data analysis

We analyzed the data on 64 postmortem statements in two main phases. First, we conducted a genre analysis, following [Yates and Orlikowski's \(2007\)](#) notion of genres being characterized by their discursive norms. Second, we mapped our inductively derived genres with the typology of venture-failure narratives derived by [Kibler et al. \(2021\)](#) based upon their study of postmortem statements (which they refer to as 'business-closure statements').

For conducting a genre analysis, we analyzed the discursive expectations and norms ([Yates and Orlikowski, 2007](#)) embedded in this type of failure communication by founders as members of a professional field ([Schoeneborn, 2013](#)) of startup entrepreneurs and investors. These norms are constituted by the following aspects of communication ([Schoeneborn, 2013](#)): *purpose* (why), *content* (what), *participants* (who), *form* (how), *time* (when), and *place* (where). As discussed in the previous section, the genre of postmortem statements is rather homogenous regarding the aspects of *place* and *participants*. By analyzing how the entrepreneurs embellish the genre in terms of *form*, *time* and *content*, we expected insights that would also clarify the *purposes* of postmortem statements: the genres' most important aspect according to [Yates and Orlikowski \(2007\)](#).

Following [Yates and Orlikowski \(2007\)](#), genres involve expectations about the communicated content. Regarding this dimension, we were particularly interested in the contexts in which entrepreneurs embed their failure: what categories of reasons for failure are reported and how are these reasons characterized? As failure is acknowledged as a learning resource, how are the lessons explicated? Furthermore, a genre entails assumptions about its form, including aspects of the genre such as structure and language ([Yates and Orlikowski, 2007](#)). In our analysis, we particularly focused on the narrative perspective, the narrative structure, and linguistic devices such as colloquialisms and irony to examine how the authors position their failure narratives. [Yates and Orlikowski \(2007\)](#) also note that temporal aspects are not necessarily explicitly stated in genres. We intend to shed light on this aspect of the genre by revealing how founders make use of the past, present, and future to frame mistakes or achievements as closed or outliving the failed startup.

To capture the discursive norms regarding form, content, and time of the postmortem statement genre, we sought to identify and compare recurrent content and structures in and across texts ([Schoeneborn, 2013](#)). This allowed us to abductively ([Mantere and Ketokivi, 2013](#)) arrive at categories of content and discursive norms. To analyze our data, we adhered to techniques and principles for qualitative data analysis ([Miles and Huberman, 1994](#); see also [Achtenhagen and Welter, 2007](#)). First, one author conducted a phase of open coding (e.g., [Mantere et al., 2013](#)) to encompass all text segments relevant to our research question and labeled them with *in vivo codes* ([Strauss and Corbin, 1990](#)), i.e., with characteristic quotes. Second, he alternated phases of merging similar codes to inductively create categories ([Miles and Huberman, 1994](#)) and discussed the outcome with another author. He then used these categories to identify recurrent text passages across the statements once again (i.e., *axial coding*, [Strauss and Corbin, 1990](#)). In this way, we obtained a set of inductively generated main categories and subcategories, which we then reflected on and refined with our theoretical pre-considerations and previous empirical studies (e.g., [Ingardi et al., 2021](#)).

Our genre analysis suggests that the postmortem statements of the failed entrepreneurs involve four subgenres that we call (1) 'Prescription', (2) 'Explanation', (3) 'Description', and (4) 'Affection' (see [Table 3](#)). We will describe and explain each one in more detail in the findings section (see [Appendix B](#) for plausibility checks that we undertook to ensure the trustworthiness of our mainly qualitative coding process).

In the second phase of our data analysis – that is, after we had identified the four subgenres of postmortem statements through manual coding and categorizing – we investigated the dominant semantic patterns and impression management strategies in the four subgenres. We thereby selected analytical steps developed by [Kibler et al. \(2021\)](#). Our goal was threefold: First, we aimed to substantiate and enrich our findings from manual content analysis through additional, automated qualitative analysis. We analyzed the linguistic and psychological inventory ([Kibler et al., 2021](#)) for each subgenre, using the text analysis software Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) ([Pennebaker et al., 2001](#)). Using the software's established dictionaries, we investigated three semantic aspects of the statements per subgenre: temporal orientation (past, present, future), emotional and cognitive content (positive vs. negative emotions, problem orientation), and ownership (personal vs. collective) ([Kibler et al., 2021](#); [Table A2 in Appendix C](#) shows the results). Second, we sought to uncover which narrative impression management strategies failed entrepreneurs leverage to convey the content layer of the respective subgenres. In a subsequent step, we matched the results from our genre analysis with the impression management strategies derived by [Kibler et al. \(2021\)](#), arriving at a set of rhetorical configurations that link genres and impression

Table 3
Subgenres at a glance.

| | Prescription | Explanation | Description | Affection |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------------------|------------------------------------|---|---------------------------------------|
| <i>Frequency</i> | 30 (47%) | 13 (20%) | 15 (23%) | 6 (9%) |
| <i>Temporal orientation</i> | future | past | past | future |
| <i>Form</i> | problem-centered | problem-centered | chronologic/episodic | problem-centered, snapshot |
| <i>Content</i> | generalized advice, lessons learned | mishaps, shortfalls, mistakes made | chronology of failure, self-referential startup story | farewell, gratitude, emotional eulogy |

Total = 99% due to rounding.

management strategies.

Overall, the comparison of our subgenre segmentation with Kibler et al. (2021) reveals complementary insights, which we will present in the subsequent findings section.

4. Findings: subgenres of postmortem statements generated through impression management tactics

Our findings section has two parts. First, we describe the four subgenres of postmortem statements and how they are generated through impression management strategies and tactics. Second, we show how some subgenres contribute to constituting an organizational afterlife.

4.1. Subgenres of postmortem statements

The genre analysis of the postmortem statements of the failed entrepreneurs resulted in four subgenres (1) ‘Prescription’, (2) ‘Explanation’, (3) ‘Description’, and (4) ‘Affection’. In the next paragraphs, we describe each subgenre by referring to its temporal orientation, its form, as well as its content, namely the specific impression management strategies and tactics used by the entrepreneurs (Table 4 provides an overview).

4.2. Subgenre #1: Prescription

‘We did a lot of things right [...] but if I could go back, I’d change a few things.’ —Needium

The most frequent subgenre (30 statements, 47%) we identified is the one we call ‘Prescription’. In this subgenre, the entrepreneurs discuss the challenges their startup faced and what they learned from the failure. The reasons for the failure are usually presented in a problem-centered way as follows:

‘I’ve made a list of what I’ve personally learned from working on NewsLabs. Not every one of these will generalize, but I hope my mistakes are instructive for other founders.’ —News Tilt

‘Seven lessons I learned from the failure of my first startup’ —Dinnr

What is most striking is that mistakes are always framed as lessons. Although founders confess that they have made mistakes, emphasis is always placed on the learning experience they received from them. These mostly individual learning experiences are often framed as helpful and potentially generalizable lessons. The authors take the role of an advice giver and explicitly address aspiring founders, expressing their experiences as universally valid entrepreneurial imperatives, e.g., ‘keep your head above the ever-changing technology waters’ (Bitshuva Radio). In this way, the statements serve two functions: they provide valuable tips for other entrepreneurs on which mistakes to avoid and, at the same time, the authors use the statements to position themselves as an attractive companion for future endeavors. The entrepreneurs present the wealth of experience and expertise they gained while working on their startup and demonstrate that they know how to be successful:

‘I’m fortunate to have had the opportunity to learn from my mistakes in my early twenties. And I’m fortunate to have been given a second chance as an early employee at QuickPay. I’m better for the experience, and have learned from it. I only hope that some of you out there can learn from my mistakes as well.’ —HelloParking

In the subgenre ‘Prescription’, an assertive impression management strategy is frequently used, reflected by the tactics of enhancement and exemplification. The authors claim to have reached positive results, nevertheless, and they provide examples to appear competent in the eyes of stakeholders. Often, this is underlined through demonstrative and self-focused impression management strategies: by providing numerous facts and details as well as by engaging in boasting and self-promotion, the authors try to substantiate their prescriptions and to raise the legitimacy of their claims. Gary Swart was the founder of Intellibank and his post-mortem statement is a typical example for this subgenre. In his text, he claims a positive outcome (learning experience), communicates

Table 4

Dominant impression management strategies and tactics per subgenre.

| IM strategy ^a | Dominant IM tactics per subgenre | | | |
|--------------------------|--|---|---------------------------------|---|
| | Prescription | Explanation | Description | Affection |
| <i>Assertive</i> | Enhancement; Exemplification | / | / | Favor rendering; Ingratiation; Flattery |
| <i>Defensive</i> | / | Apologies; Justification; Self-handicapping | Apologies; Self-handicapping | / |
| <i>Demonstrative</i> | Provision of facts and details | Provision of facts and details | Provision of facts and details | / |
| <i>Other-focused</i> | / | / | / | Other-enhancement |
| <i>Self-focused</i> | Boasting; Intentionally looking bad; Self-promotion | / | Intentionally looking bad | / |

^a Adapted from Kibler et al., (2021); Bolino et al., (2008).

the ability to raise money and boasts about the team's cognitive abilities:

'[I]t was a promising company with smart people. We raised money and could have been the next big thing, but it never happened. Why? Though Intellibank was not successful, I don't view my time there as wasted' —Intellibank

Gary Swart and the other entrepreneurs writing in this subgenre present themselves as competent and knowledgeable authorities to the startup community to ensure that they can be trusted when it comes to starting new startups. In this way, the 'Prescription' subgenre is clearly future oriented, depicting mistakes in the past tense to conserve the reputation of the startup beyond its failure.

4.3. Subgenre #2: Explanation

'[H]ere are what I believe are a number of myths about why Mint won and Wesabe lost' —Wesabe

In our analysis, we identified another subgenre that at first glance appears rather similar to 'Prescription'. In this subgenre titled 'Explanation' (13 statements, 20%), founders discuss the shortfalls of the startups and the mistakes they think they made in a problem-centered way:

'(9) Hindsight bias. Of course Apple and Google would become the two most important companies in phones —tell that to Nokia, circa 2003. I wish I could tell me I told me so. But I can't, so what else can I really say?' —UDesign.

While the 'Prescription' subgenre is characterized by authors trying to generalize their experiences for aspiring founders, the 'Explanation' statements are limited to the individual idiosyncratic case. Instead of giving lessons to be applied in the next venture, these articles instead reflect on mistakes the founder made. The level of detail in these reflections varies. Within the subgenre, the statements range from short lists that enumerate the biases challenged by supposedly every founder at some point ('99 Problems But A Bit Ain't One: Why My Startup Failed' —Enjoyment) to extensive self-critical discussions of the mistakes leading to defeat by a main competitor:

'I see two primary reasons that, if they had changed before Mint's launch or had never occurred in the first place, could well have allowed Wesabe to maintain its early lead and remain the leader against Mint's entry.' —Wesabe

In the subgenre 'Explanation', demonstrative impression management (i.e. the provision of facts and details) is common as well, but in contrast to 'Prescription' authors frequently use defensive impression management tactics such as apologies and self-handicapping, i.e., providing external explanations for negative outcomes (Kibler et al., 2021). As typical representatives of the 'Explanation' subgenre, Jeanette Cajide (the founder of Blurtt) and Adam Zerner (the man behind Collegetheinsideview) engage in defensive impression management tactics by pointing the finger towards external players:

'The reality is VCs look for big exits so they don't want to invest in your multi-million-dollar venture even if you're making millions'—Blurtt

'[W]hen I asked people from my high school to answer questions and spread the word a bit, I thought that a bunch of them would have respect for what I'm doing and want to help out. Almost no one did, which I found to be quite selfish of them.' —Collegetheinsideview

In a way, the 'Explanation' subgenre gives closure to past mistakes, but often without explicating lessons or a 'track record'. The subgenre is thereby as retrospective as the next subgenre 'Description'.

4.4. Subgenre #3: Description

'Dear Internet, our journey began a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away ... but for all intents and purposes let's just say it began in May 2013.' —Poliana

We termed the second largest subgenre of postmortem statements (15 statements, 23%) 'Description'. These articles chronologically narrate the startup's history, ending in its failure. In contrast to this allegedly linear narrative structure, which aims to make the development of the startup and the decisions of the founders plausible, the subgenre clearly expresses the ambivalence and ambiguity inherent in entrepreneurial failure: the authors disclose both successes and achievements of their startups as well as 'unfair' setbacks and unforeseeable pitfalls:

'[They] had been busting their asses off for the last few months trying to crack the code to making it all work. And right there and then someone in SKAT decided that what Harriet and Nate were doing did 'not qualify as the kind of work that a Danish citizen could not perform equally well'' —99dresses

In terms of narrative structure, the authors describe key moments, such as realizations that failure is inevitable in a detailed and episodic manner ('On a typical, miserable, Auckland 'spring' day last September, the remaining three of us decided to wind down the company and open source the code over coffee at Imperial Lane.' —Popin). Following the entrepreneur's point of view, an apparently subjective, personal character is inherent in these articles. The authors often do not omit the 'dark side' of failure; instead, they write frankly about the psychological costs that they incurred on them ('But what they don't tell you is just how utterly devastating failure actually is for an entrepreneur.'—Critica). The statements are often framed as instruments for coping ('Writing it was cathartic to me'—99dresses) while explicitly downplaying strategic considerations ('Perhaps with some insight along the way. Perhaps not.'—Popin). Irony is used as a linguistic device to create some distance from the events and actions depicted, thereby allowing the entrepreneur to report the traumatic failure experience and speak blatantly about mistakes ('Am I not the mythological founder that rock star people are eager to join and work for free for a fraction of the company?'—Admazely). Taken together, the 'Description'

subgenre is clearly retrospective. Although entrepreneurs appreciate the failure as a learning experience, they remain rather vague about the concise lessons.

This subgenre shows impression management strategies similar to ‘Explanation’. The authors follow a demonstrative and defensive strategy by providing an abundance of facts and details, as well as apologies and external explanations for the negative outcome. Yet, they appear to be much more self-focused: they often intentionally look bad (Kibler et al., 2021) to present the failure as too human and relatable. This impression management tactic corresponds well with the frequent use of irony and the illustration of ambivalence. For instance, Alex Pankratov writes the following:

‘Verifying the timestamp was as easy as down-loading the timestamped archive - 175-227-296.exe in this case - opening its Properties in Windows Explorer - and looking at the Digital Signatures tab’ —Certtime

In doing so, the founder of Certtime gives the reader a detailed behind-the-scenes view and broadcasts a simplified reflection of his individual incompetence at the same time.

4.5. Subgenre #4: Affection

‘Thank you for the time and attention you’ve contributed to this community. It has been a privilege to read together’—Readmill.

The last subgenre that resulted from our analysis we termed ‘Affection’ (6 statements, 9%). Most often, failed entrepreneurs use these texts to express their gratitude for the loyalty and support of stakeholders, including investors and employees. The authors express sadness and grief about the failure. In terms of linguistic presentation, this is underlined by superlatives (‘This has been the hardest decision of my life and one that saddens me deeply.’ —Secret). Additionally, the analogy of a journey coming to an end is frequently expressed (‘It’s been a long four-year journey, full of highs and lows.’—DrawQuest). The narrative structure varies: some articles are structured in a more problem-centered way, others are more fact-driven; some are presented in a Q&A format, others represent a ‘snapshot’ of the current situation instead of a more in-depth reconstruction of the startup’s development. This turns out to be especially characteristic of the ‘Affection’ subgenre. Reasons for failure are typically dealt with in a general manner (‘Did I not recognize signs that we didn’t have product-market fit? I’ll never know, and I don’t think it’s worth my time to guess.’—Thrively) or attributed to inexperience and poor external conditions. In light of adverse circumstances, the failure of the startup is often framed as at least partially an autonomous decision, and the termination of the business is rationalized as saving the investors or as an alignment with personal priorities:

‘Unfortunately, Secret does not represent the vision I had when starting the company, so I believe it’s the right decision for myself, our investors and our team.’—Secret;

‘Cusoy ultimately no longer aligned with my personal goals.’—Cusoy.

For these reasons, the subgenre is rather forward-looking, with many articles stating the great impact the product has left on customers or the industry as a whole (‘Even though Thrive. ly is shutting our doors, we’d like to think we have made a small dent in the world with your help.’—Thrively).

In contrast to the other three subgenres, statements in the subgenre ‘Affection’ appear to be much more other-focused, with identification and enhancement of partners, mentors, employees, spouses, etc. As an impression management tactic being very determinant to the subgenre:

‘I’m incredibly proud of an amazing team and all that they have accomplished. Our most recent product, DrawQuest, is by all accounts a success.’—DrawQuest

‘We’re proud of the product we built, but even more so, we’re grateful for the community of readers that made it grow.’—Readmill.

4.6. How subgenres construct an organizational afterlife

An additional intriguing finding of our analysis is that some subgenres may not only serve as an immediate impression management context, but that they are construing an ‘organizational afterlife.’ The subgenres ‘Explanation’ and ‘Description’ achieve this with a communicative direction of being oriented towards the past and exhibiting a retrospective writing style. Identifying mistakes and explaining the failure goes hand in hand with re-establishing what the idea behind and the identity of the organization was all about. In other words, these subgenres rewrite a venture’s history – to a certain degree. They provide a ‘novel’ coherent narrative (Lusiani and Langley, 2019) which construes an intentionally created organizational entity, that is, the organizational afterlife.

One striking example is the postmortem of Wesabe. In the postmortem, the author clearly tries to (re)gain sovereignty over the interpretation of why the startup failed. He first rebuts a couple of what he calls ‘myths’ about why the startup lost against its competitors. For example, he writes the following: ‘With that in mind, here are what I believe are a number of myths about why Mint won and Wesabe lost: 1. Mint launched first [...] 2. Wesabe never made any money—untrue [...] 3. Mint was a better name and had a better design [...] 4. Wesabe wasn’t viral and Mint was [...].’ Subsequently, he mentions and thus retroactively qualifies certain communicative events as consequential decisions, rationalizing ex-post why they made sense at that time. In the postmortem of Formspring, to give another example, one of the founders discusses what he retroactively identifies as key decisions in the process of the venture, which he considers having contributed to its failure.

‘Prescription’ statements, in turn, may also contribute to constituting an organizational afterlife by eclipsing instances of

‘Explanation’ or ‘Description’ within a postmortem statement. While Prescription statements are clearly future oriented, depicting mistakes in the past tense as a basis for deriving lessons learned also allows preserving – if not producing – the reputation of the startup beyond its failure. For example, by writing about ‘HelloParking’, the founders Chris Hoogewerff and Neil Hannah reinterpret the idea of their entrepreneurial organization from being a startup that failed to find a business model for the monetization of vacant spaces to an invaluable experience making them learn ‘more about business in the past 7 months than [they] did in a lifetime at school’ (HelloParking). In doing so, they turn their narrative about the organization into a reference point for future communication about ‘HelloParking’. Other entrepreneurs, former clients, future employers, and researchers can continue to converse about it.

All the examples listed above suggest that failed startups do not just cease to exist when the organization ends operations under the current management and ownership. Although all the activities that had been directly connected with the organization have been terminated, the entire inventory has been sold, all the employees have left, and the last one has turned off the lights, the focal organization as an identifiable entity remains ‘alive’. Thus, the failed startup has not yet vanished. Rather, the organization enters its communicative ‘organizational afterlife.’

5. Discussion and conclusion

Our findings offer insights into different subgenres of postmortem statements as well as their communicative features in the context of strategic impression management communication (Kibler et al., 2017, 2021). By matching a genre analysis with the typology of impression management strategies developed by Kibler et al. (2021), we were able to show how various subgenres are constituted by combinations of narratives and impression management strategies. This finding offers the foundation for assessing the effectiveness of postmortem impression management strategies with respect to the relation between narrations and subgenres. Furthermore, we found that the two subgenres ‘Explanation’ and ‘Description’ in particular share the communicative direction of construing an ‘organizational afterlife.’ By being oriented towards the past and exhibiting a retrospective writing style, the statements in these subgenres partly rewrite a venture’s history and provide a ‘novel’ coherent narrative (Lusiani and Langley, 2019; Ingardi et al., 2021). In the following, we outline the theoretical implications of these findings.

5.1. From communicative content to communicative context

A first contribution of this study is that we shift the discourse on impression management related to post-failure communication (Kibler et al., 2017, 2021) from communicative content to communicative context. Previous research (Kibler et al., 2017, Kibler et al., 2021) indicates that impression management strategies vary with respect to content elements of the narrative, and the traits of the audience. Our findings, in line with a recent study by Ingardi et al. (2021), point to the relevance of various genres of postmortem communication and, going beyond Ingardi et al. (2021), indicate that these genres are produced by specific combinations of impression management genres and failure narratives. So, we suggest that future research should shift their primary focus on the content of the failure narratives towards considering the interaction with its rhetoric context as an important additional element in explaining the effects of impression management strategies of post-failure communication (Kibler et al., 2017, 2021).

Furthermore, since failure communication is often considered as a form of ‘open communication’ (see also Ingardi et al., 2021), distinguishing between categories of (sub-)genres corresponds with different forms of openness about failure. Combining impression management strategies and failure narratives into broad and overarching genres highlights how specific genres of open communication may serve to direct attention to certain aspects – while hiding other aspects ‘behind’ this specific form of openness. The genre ‘Prescription’ with the dominant impression management strategies of ‘Triumph’ and ‘Offset’ thereby follows a nonfiction logic, presenting non-affective and fact-oriented descriptions and rationalized conclusions ready to be used by others (similar to the genre ‘Documentary’ identified by Ingardi et al., 2021). The other three genres, in turn, follow a much more fictional approach, either by telling a story of personal experiences (‘Description’), by retrospectively accentuating and explaining the hardships of failure (‘Explanation’) or by looking affectively ahead based upon collective experiences (‘Affection’). It is these distinctions that make it worthwhile to analyze impression management strategies associated with certain genres of failure communication: different subgenres of open communication redirect attention to different aspects of an organization’s history and, thereby, create an organizational afterlife.

5.2. Construing the impression of an organizational afterlife

More than just considering failure narratives as impression management devices (Kibler et al., 2017, 2021), we find that they contribute to construing an organizational afterlife. The notion of an ‘organizational afterlife’ implies that an entrepreneurial venture is not entirely ‘dead’ when the endeavor is formally terminated and when directly related activities cease to exist. Rather, the organization enters its communicative ‘organizational afterlife.’

From a communication-centered perspective, the peculiar connections between communicative acts constitute an organization (Seidl, 2005; Schoeneborn, 2013). Requalifying and reconnecting communication (in our case, through postmortem statements) effectively allows for impression management after the organization has ceased to formally exist. By retrospectively characterizing some decisions as momentous mistakes, new communicative connections between distinct decisions are drawn. This organizational afterlife lasts as long as follow-up communication refers to acts described as decisions in failure communication, such as in postmortem statements. To a certain degree, this allows reassessing of the impression of an organization even after it has formally been dissolved by requalifying certain acts as decisions that made a difference (Luhmann, 2006) in postmortem communication. This feature of

retrospective decision-attribution allows founders – via postmortem statements even after an organization has been formally dissolved – to redefine and reshape the impression an organization makes even beyond the mere fact of its failure. Thus, ventures can have a communicative afterlife in which they are not buried until they fully vanish as a topic of conversation. This idea is similar to Weick's conclusion that 'the communication activity is the organization' (Weick, 1995, p. 75).

The idea of an organizational afterlife also adds to the impression management literature (Kibler et al., 2017, 2021). While previous impression management literature was mainly concerned with the immediate effect of impression management strategies on audience's perception of a failure (e.g., Kibler et al., 2017), we add to these predominantly short-term considerations. We argue that impression management strategies embedded in specific subgenres not only have an immediate effect on the audience, but that they contribute to re-constituting a potentially long-lasting impression of an organizational afterlife. Such an organizational afterlife may help to preserve and create immaterial resources such as trust and reputation, and thus may be even more relevant in the long run than the immediate perception of the failure.

Beyond the implication for the impression management literature, we think that organizational afterlife may even have broader implications for our understanding of organizational lifecycles. Organizational lifecycle ideas typically depict the development of organizations as mostly linear and irreversible sequences of phases that an organization goes through (e.g., Van De Ven and Poole, 1995). These phases traditionally include growth, maturity, and decline phases which end with the dissolution of the organization. Our study suggests that the organizational afterlife may be another phase, which can be relevant to consider after the decline phase of an organization. A theoretically interesting aspect about this additional phase of the organizational lifecycle is that it is not cumulative. Mostly, the phases of organizational lifecycles are depicted to be cumulative, that is, the characteristics of an organization acquired in earlier stages are retained at later stages (Van De Ven and Poole, 1995). In contrast, we suggest that the communicative construal of the organizational afterlife as the ultimate stage of the lifecycle strategically re-frames and re-writes specific characteristics and decisions from earlier stages. Therefore, exploring the role of an organizational afterlife as a more long-term impression management strategy and as an additional phase in an organizational lifecycle may be a promising avenue for further research.

Author statement

Leonhard Dobusch Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing - Original draft, Methodology, Supervision.

Nils Köster: Software, Data curation, Writing - Original draft, Methodology, Formal Analysis, Visualization.

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Appendix D. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lrp.2021.102176>.

Appendix A. Postmortem Statements

Table A1

List of failed ventures in the case study database

| # | Year | Startup | Location |
|----|------|---------------------|-----------------|
| 1 | 2015 | orat.io | Berlin |
| 2 | 2015 | RewardMe | Silicon Valley |
| 3 | 2015 | GuGo | Philadelphia |
| 4 | 2015 | Rate My Speech | Hungary |
| 5 | 2015 | Lumos | India |
| 6 | 2015 | BitShuva Radio | Minneapolis |
| 7 | 2015 | Kolos | Sofia, Bulgaria |
| 8 | 2015 | ComboCats | Moscow |
| 9 | 2015 | Wattage | Toronto |
| 10 | 2015 | College Inside View | New York |
| 11 | 2015 | UDesign | Los Angeles |
| 12 | 2015 | Kinly | Minneapolis |
| 13 | 2015 | Starthead | Czech Republic |
| 14 | 2015 | Secret | Silicon Valley |
| 15 | 2015 | Bawte | Iowa |
| 16 | 2015 | Critica | Silicon Valley |
| 17 | 2015 | Poliana | Nashville, TN |

(continued on next page)

Table A1 (continued)

| # | Year | Startup | Location |
|----|------|--------------------|-------------------|
| 18 | 2015 | Cusoy | Silicon Valley |
| 19 | 2014 | Needium | Montreal, CA |
| 20 | 2014 | Wishareit | Lisbon |
| 21 | 2014 | Amiloom | New York |
| 22 | 2014 | Keep Fit Stay Sane | Australia |
| 23 | 2014 | Delight | Seoul |
| 24 | 2014 | Dinnr | London |
| 25 | 2014 | Emjoyment | Silicon Valley |
| 26 | 2014 | Imercive | Kelowna, BC |
| 27 | 2014 | Shwürüm | Gainesville |
| 28 | 2014 | Popin | London |
| 29 | 2014 | Moped | Berlin |
| 30 | 2014 | Pumodo | Copenhagen |
| 31 | 2014 | 99dresses | Silicon Valley |
| 32 | 2014 | DrawQuest | New York |
| 33 | 2014 | Readmill | Berlin |
| 34 | 2014 | Thrively | Silicon Valley |
| 35 | 2014 | Exec | Silicon Valley |
| 36 | 2014 | Blurtt | Austin, TX |
| 37 | 2013 | Intellibank | New York |
| 38 | 2013 | Teamometer | Cherkasy |
| 39 | 2013 | Sonar | New York |
| 40 | 2013 | Travelllll | London |
| 41 | 2013 | Saaspire | New York |
| 42 | 2013 | MyManual | New York |
| 43 | 2013 | Gowalla | Austin, TX |
| 44 | 2013 | Admazely | Copenhagen |
| 45 | 2013 | Vitoto | Silicon Valley |
| 46 | 2013 | GroupSpaces | London |
| 47 | 2013 | Formspring | Silicon Valley |
| 48 | 2013 | Pollarize | London |
| 49 | 2013 | Tigerbow | New York |
| 50 | 2013 | Zillionears | Santa Barbara, CA |
| 51 | 2012 | Parceld | New York |
| 52 | 2012 | Plancast | Silicon Valley |
| 53 | 2011 | HelloParking | Silicon Valley |
| 54 | 2011 | MyFavorites | New York |
| 55 | 2010 | eCrowds | Atlanta |
| 56 | 2010 | SMSnoodle | Singapore |
| 57 | 2010 | RiotVine | Cambridge, MA |
| 58 | 2010 | Devver | Boulder, CO |
| 59 | 2010 | NewsTilt | Silicon Valley |
| 60 | 2010 | Wesabe | Silicon Valley |
| 61 | 2010 | CertTime | Silicon Valley |
| 62 | 2010 | YouCastr | Cambridge, MA |
| 63 | 2010 | Standout Jobs | Montreal, CA |
| 64 | 2010 | EventVue | Boulder, CO |

Appendix B. Plausibility Checks in the Coding Process

To ensure the trustworthiness of the emergent categories, three steps were undertaken. First, we assessed the plausibility of the analysis by calculating intercoder reliability scores (Krippendorff, 2004: 215). All statements were coded again, this time by another coauthor not involved in the original coding and categorization process. During this second round of coding, 48 statements (74%) were coded into the same subgenre categories, representing Krippendorff's α of 0.621 (Krippendorff, 2004: 223). Afterwards, both coders closely examined the 17 inconsistent evaluations and slightly readjusted the coding scheme. This led to a reclassification of four statements, while the initial coding was kept for 12 of the inconsistent evaluations. Second, we assessed the stability of the findings of the content analysis over time by calculating an 'intracoder reliability' (Krippendorff, 2004: 215). Four weeks after the joint coding cycle, the initial coder recoded the statements and compared the results to the outcome of the joint classification of statements. He coded 59 of the remaining 64 statements into the same subgenre categories with an agreement rate of 92% (Krippendorff's $\alpha = 0.886$), which meets the suggested reliability threshold of $\alpha \geq 0.800$ (Krippendorff, 2004: 241). In a third and final step, we qualitatively evaluated the plausibility of the framework in the course of two interviews with failed entrepreneurs and regular, intensive discussions of the findings among the authors at different stages of the project.

Appendix C. Semantic Analysis and Mapping of Subgenres

Table A2
Results of semantic analysis with LIWC

| | Mean word share per subgenre, in % | | | | t-test (on equality on means) | | | | | |
|----------------------------|------------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|----------------|-------------------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| | 1 Pres-cription | 2 Expla-nation | 3 Des-cription | 4 Affection | 1vs.2 | 1vs.3 | 1vs.4 | 2vs.3 | 2vs.4 | 3vs.4 |
| First-person singular | 2.8 | 2.9 | 3.0 | 4.1 | n.s. | n.s. | n.s. | n.s. | n.s. | n.s. |
| First-person plural | 2.8 | 3.0 | 3.4 | 2.1 | n.s. | n.s. | n.s. | n.s. | n.s. | n.s. |
| Past tense | 4.2 | 4.5 | 5.4 | 2.6 | n.s. | ** | *** | * | *** | *** |
| Present tense | 5.5 | 4.9 | 4.6 | 6.0 | n.s. | ** | n.s. | n.s. | *** | *** |
| Future tense | 0.8 | 0.9 | 0.8 | 1.1 | n.s. | n.s. | n.s. | n.s. | n.s. | n.s. |
| Positive emotional content | 3.2 | 3.4 | 3.4 | 4.5 | n.s. | n.s. | *** | n.s. | *** | *** |
| Negative emotional content | 1.7 | 1.8 | 1.8 | 1.7 | n.s. | n.s. | n.s. | n.s. | n.s. | n.s. |
| Cognitive processes | 19.2 | 20.0 | 18.6 | 17.2 | n.s. | n.s. | ** | ** | *** | n.s. |

***p < 0.01; **p < 0.05; *p < 0.10; n.s.: no significant differences between levels.

The subgenre ‘Prescription’ involves a high temporal focus on the present tense and appears non-affective, as both positive and negative content are rather scarce. This fits our description from the genre analysis that in the subgenre ‘Prescription’, failure experiences are processed primarily as generalizable tips, rather than, e.g., traumatic experiences. The linguistic analysis characterizes the subgenre as problem-focused, substantiating again the outcome from our qualitative genre analysis. The subgenre ‘Explanation’ appears non-affective and problem-focused, as well, but with a high emphasis on past events. This matches our observations from the genre analysis, that authors use the ‘Explanation’ statements to give closure to individual, past mistakes. The subgenre ‘Description’ is, unsurprisingly, also focused on the past. The assumption of joint responsibility is strongly thematized. In contrast, statements of the subgenre ‘Affection’ focus on personal ownership. The subgenre is characterized by positive emotional content, high focus on the present and the future, and little confrontation with problems and the past. This mirrors our findings from the genre analysis, where we characterized the subgenre as forward-looking and the statements as a means to express gratitude to stakeholders and frame the closure as an at least partially autonomous decision.

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