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"Do it for the Plot": A Ricoeurian Approach to Social Media Performativity

Abstract:

This paper analyzes the social media trend "Do it for the plot" through Paul Ricoeur's theory of narrative identity. Although the trend frames itself as enriching, its emphasis on isolated and casual actions conflicts with the ethical depth that a narrative identity entails. Drawing on Ricoeur's ethical aims outlined in *Oneself as Another*, the paper argues that narrative coherence is fundamental to responsible agency. In contrast, the "Do it for the plot" logic risks reducing subjectivity to performance and life to consumable content, echoing concerns raised by Debord, Goffman, and Sartre about objectification and spectacle. The paper contends that a fuller understanding of narrative provides a helpful counterpoint to digital culture's performative pressures. Reengaging Ricoeur offers a way to move beyond reductive views of online self-presentation toward a more substantive account of agency, recognition, and ethical selfhood.

Keywords:

narrative identity, performativity, social media, TikTok, ethics of the self, Paul Ricoeur

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is that of analyzing the role and impact of narrative practices in the construction of personal identity and of the self on social media platforms. Specifically, I will do so by focusing on a recent trend that gained popularity on the short-form video app TikTok and on the Meta-owned equivalent "Reels" section of Instagram. The two platforms share a similar format – fragmented, short-form videos that frequently depict aspects of the creator's personal life and experiences. Current scholarship characterizes these platforms as crucial sites for self-presentation and participatory identity construction in the digital age,[1] often emphasizing spontaneous, performative, and non-linear narratives. The trend that caught my interest was referred to by the slogan it proclaimed: "Do it for the plot." This phrase, which went viral on social media in 2022–2023, encourages users to engage in impulsive or chaotic actions, justifying them as necessary plot points required to create an "exciting narrative" or to embody main character energy in their own life story. My interpretation of the "Do it for the plot" trend is grounded in the popular, online understanding of the phrase as presented in digital dictionaries and lifestyle-oriented publications. These sources generally frame the expression as an invitation to approach one's life as if one were the protagonist of a narrative, embracing decisions and experiences – whether positive or negative – as meaningful plot points within a larger story. *Urban Dictionary*, for instance, defines the phrase as an encouragement to perceive oneself as the "main character" and to act accordingly, while lifestyle magazines and online commentary attribute the popularization of the expression to creator Serena Kerrigan, whose 2021 TikTok video[2] ("if something works out, great, and if it doesn't, it's for the plot") helped the trend circulate widely. For representative discussions of this interpretation, see entries and articles in *Urban Dictionary*,[3] *Cosmopolitan*,[4] and *BBC Learning English*.[5]

My perspective here will not be that of a scholar in the social sciences or media and communication studies. For a media studies analysis of the phenomenon, one

1) Van Dijck,"'You Have One Identity.'"
2) Kerrigan, "It's looking like."
3) *Urban Dictionary*, "Do it for the plot."
4) Hocking, "So Many of Us."
5) BBC, "The English We Speak."

can refer to the analysis of authors like Turkle,[6] Cardon,[7] and Georges,[8] which set the basis for an analysis of what effects technology, especially in the digital realm of social media, might have on personal identity. A more recent body of work focuses on the effects social networking sites might have on relationships with others, such as boyd[9] and Turkle.[10] Rather, I will adopt a theoretical framework grounded in the concept of narrative identity as developed by French philosopher Paul Ricoeur in his collection of lectures *Oneself as Another*,[11] as well as in his earlier essay "L'identité narrative."[12] Ricoeur further clarifies his theory of an identity that is built as a form of narration, close to the Aristotelian *mimesis* in the form of "emplotment" in his article entitled "Life in Quest of Narrative."[13] By adopting a Ricoeurian perspective on the self and on identity, my aim in this paper will be twofold. First, I will suggest that applying Ricoeur's theory of narrative identity to contemporary social media platform narratives and tropes can provide scholars with meaningful insights into how a mediated hermeneutics of the self is constructed and curated online. This application is particularly timely given the critique that Ricoeur's original theory, centered on the literary paradigm, may be fundamentally monomediatic and requires extension to the hyper- and multi-medial affordances of digital environments. The present work therefore builds on efforts to argue for a broader application of Ricoeur's theory to the social sciences,[14] to social networking sites[15] and to the status of personal identity in the digital milieu.[16] Not only, as I will show, can a Ricoeurian framework help us better understand and problematize what "narrating" our lives, both online and offline, can

6) Turkle, *Life on the Screen*.

7) Cardon, "Le Design de La Visibilité."

8) Geroges, "Représentation de Soi et Identité Numérique."

9) boyd, *It's Complicated*.

10) Turkle, *Alone Together*.

11) Ricoeur, *Soi-même comme un autre*.

12) Ricoeur, "L'identité narrative."

13) Ricoeur, "Life in Quest of Narrative."

14) Michel, "Narrativité, narration, narratologie."

15) Furia, "Identità e Narrazione."

16) Romele, *Digital Hermeneutics: Philosophical Investigations*; Romele, "Digital Hermeneutics as Hermeneutics of the Self."

mean, but also, as both Romele and Furia note, Ricoeur has shown a deep interest for the "materialisation and externalisation"[17] of language, as well as a profound attentiveness for the problems and the novelties of contemporaneity.[18]

The paper is structured as follows. In this section, I will present Ricoeur's theory of the self and argue for its relevance in understanding the narrative mechanisms at work in digital self-presentation and self-fashioning. In the second section, I will analyze the "Do it for the plot" trend, situating it within a Ricoeurian framework and assessing to what extent the trend can be interpreted as a contemporary mode of self-emplotment and as a device for constructing, performing, or experimenting with narrative identity in online environments. I will argue that a full recovery of Paul Ricoeur's theory of narrative identity – which is a theory of identity conceived in a deeply ethical sense – can offer a solution and provide an ethical corrective to what the "Do it for the plot" trend sets out to accomplish. In my understanding and interpretation, the creators who embraced this trend did so with the aim of "liberating" and imbuing their offline lives, as well as their online self-presentation, with greater meaning. To do "something" (the "it" is significatively generic) for the plot means, in simple terms, to carry a narrative forward for any purpose, and by any means: what matters is that the plot advances, and it is this progression that is taken to give the plot its meaning.

On the other hand, Paul Ricoeur's proposal to understand our lives as a "plot" is, in this respect – as will be examined in greater depth in the first section of this paper – radically opposed to such an approach. The understanding of our lives as a plot occurs *a posteriori* rather than *a priori*. And identity – who we are – is the meaning that emerges from the interpretation of the acts that compose said plot.

2. Narrative Identity: The Ricoeurian Framework and Its Ethical Dimensions

In 2023, a viral phrase echoed repeatedly across users' videos on social media: "Don't be scared. Just do it for the plot." The phrasing of this mantra, and the idea it carried – one of understanding one's life as a narrative construction – resonate deeply with

17) Romele, "Digital Hermeneutics as Hermeneutics of the Self."

18) Furia, "Identità e Narrazione."

Ricoeurian scholarship: nevertheless, in Ricoeur's understanding, our whole lives constitute a plot, whether we want them to or not. Personal identity is to be thought of as a "narrative identity," as Ricoeur states firstly in the third volume of his major work *Time and Narrative*,[19] and then develops more robustly and with a more solid ethical focus in the essay "L'identité narrative" and in the collection *Oneself as Another*, as well as in the article "Life in Quest of Narrative," published in 1991.

The concept of "narrative identity" is formulated by Ricoeur within the broader framework of inquiry into the problem of personal identity – as J. Michel also notes in his article.[20] This formulation arises not only in response to the analytic and Anglo-Saxon tradition, heir to Hume's reflections, but also as a reaction to the crisis of a strong notion of the subject that unsettled European philosophy in the continental tradition, a crisis brought about by those "masters of suspicion" (to use Ricoeur's own expression) who open the Introduction of *Oneself as Another*. The hermeneutics of the self that are developed in the ten studies that constitute the work represents for Ricoeur, as C. Castiglioni observes, "the only viable path today for reflexive philosophy after the critique advanced by the masters of suspicion"[21]: the deconstruction of the concept of an autonomous and independent subject, carried out by Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, makes it possible, as Furia writes, "to mobilize an otherwise overly static notion" of the subject.[22] In fact, the animating idea of *Oneself as Another* is firstly that of gaining an understanding of the subject that allows philosophy to avoid the pitfall of a solitary *Cogito* – a type of subject that Ricoeur himself describes as excessively abstract and ultimately solipsistic, and that he sees in the philosophical tradition represented by the triad Descartes, Kant, and Husserl.[23]

What, then, is identity? Ricoeur identifies three modes of "permanence in oneself," corresponding to three components of personal identity: identity-*idem*, identity-*ipse*, and narrative identity.[24] Identity-*idem* refers to the notion of same-

19) Ricoeur, *Temps et récit*.

20) Michel, "Narrativité, narration, narratologie."

21) Castiglioni, "Tra Estraneità e Riconoscimento."

22) Furia, "Identità e Narrazione."

23) Ricoeur, *Soi-même comme un autre*.

24) Michel, "Narrativité, narration, narratologie."

ness and implies some form of immutability over time; the reference point here is the Kantian concept of *Beharrlichkeit in der Zeit*.[25] Identity-*ipse*, by contrast, is tied to the concept of selfhood: if the opposite of "same" is "different," the opposite of *ipse* is simply "someone else" or, as the title itself announces "another." Selfhood is defined "in ethical terms, as maintaining oneself through the promise given to the other":[26] it is not a matter of remaining identical to oneself, but of remaining oneself by virtue of fidelity and commitment. When the Self is refigured within narrative discourse, one witnesses a "hermeneutics of the recovery of meaning,"[27] which "if not fruitful, is at least meaningful," the author concludes.[28] It is thus the quest for meaning inherent in narrative construction – proper to this process of self-narration – that becomes particularly significant when attempting to apply Ricoeur's theory to the social sciences, a direction advocated by J. Michel.[29] Ricoeur's pronounced interest lies in the *ipse* type of identity, and the fifth study of *Oneself as Another* is devoted to dismantling Derek Parfit's thought experiments, showing how the problems linked to the impossibility of defining a clear concept of personal identity disappear once the latter is conceived in terms of selfhood (identity-*ipse*) rather than sameness (identity-*idem*). The fifth study serves as an opening point for introducing the idea of a "narrative identity," to which Ricoeur dedicates the following study: the aporias of the dialectic between sameness and selfhood can be solved, as it has been shown insofar, through the linguistic mediation of narration – a life-story is to be articulated through discourse. Ricoeur considers such mediation necessary, in view of the difficulties and aporias encountered when one attempts to think identity-*idem* and identity-*ipse* together. Dilthey[30] appeals to the concept of *Lebenszusammenhang*, that is, the "connectedness of a life." The issue arises, then, in the form of the "discordant concordance" realized in every narrative: the reversal of a character's traits, the

25) Ricoeur, "L'identité narrative."

26) Michel, "Narrativité, narration, narratologie," 126.

27) Ricoeur, "L'identité narrative," 103.

28) Ibid.

29) Michel, "Narrativité, narration, narratologie."

30) Dilthey develops this idea in his philosophical anthropology and hermeneutics as a way to grasp human life not as a mere sequence of isolated experiences, but as a living totality in which psychic life, social-cultural context, memory, action, and expression form an integrated nexus.

process of formation in the *Bildungsroman*, highlight how inadequate the Kantian category of substance proves to be for fully grasping personal identity.[31] "History corresponds to the human being,"[32] Ricoeur writes, adopting an expression from philosopher Wilhelm Schapp.[33] Or, as V. Brugiatelli puts it: "Through the interpretation of one's own actions (and passions) as if they were a text, the agent interprets and understands himself."[34] Within this framework, the narration of one's own life-story appears as an anthropological fact. What makes Ricoeur's theory of narrative identity particularly interesting is not so much its ontological[35] scope as much as, as we noted above, its distinctly ethical dimension: ethical in nature, in fact, are the questions raised by social media[36] and by the construction of our online identities; or, our online identities are not something entirely different from their offline correspondents.[37] Nevertheless, users tend to disassociate their online identity from their offline selves – sometimes believing that their online identities are not "fully real," and that therefore their online actions are less effective (or damaging) than their offline ones. For recent empirical and theoretical studies on the gap (and overlap) between online and offline identity, see studies on online identity and authenticity overlap, research on online harassment (including but not limited to gendered abuse

31) Ricoeur himself further clarifies this crucial point of his argument in his article "Life in Quest of Narrative," by engaging with an argument formulated by critics – stating that life is lived and not recounted. Referring to the idea of an "emplotment," Ricoeur insists that a life-story is to be thought of as a synthesis of heterogenous elements, and that the storytelling itself is what can turn an otherwise "discrete succession … of incidents" into a proper plot, one that mediates "between the multiple accidents and unified story." (Ricoeur, "Life in Quest of Narrative," 36–37).

32) Ricoeur, "L'identité narrative."

33) For a cross-reading of P. Ricoeur and W. Schapp, cf. D'Alessandris, "The Limits of Narrative."

34) Brugiatelli, "La sfida dell' 'altro.'"

35) It is particularly significant in this context to recall that the tenth and final study in *Oneself as Another* is titled "Toward What Ontology?". The noticeable question mark concluding the most "ontological" of Ricoeur's works signals, in our view, the author's uncertainty regarding the very possibility of proposing a genuine ontology of the subject.

36) In making this remark, we follow Furia's conclusion, according to which "virtual identity … brings into the context of social networks the same ethical ambitions that characterize 'real life.'" Furia, "Identità e Narrazione." (English translation mine).

37) See for instance Lu, Li, and Jiang. "Online-Offline Self-Identity Overlap"; Bezzina, Sammut, and Scerri, "Surrounded by Predators"; and Valera, Alamos, Ramos and Vera, "Bodies in the Metaverse."

in online public and private groups and group chats), or multidisciplinary work on identity in the Metaverse. When the Self is refigured within narrative discourse, one witnesses a "hermeneutics of the recovery of meaning,"[38] which, the author concludes, "if not fruitful, is at least meaningful."[39] It is thus the quest for meaning inherent in narrative construction – proper to this process of self-narration – that becomes particularly significant when attempting to apply Ricoeur's theory to the social sciences, a direction advocated by J. Michel.[40]

In *Oneself as Another*, Ricoeur takes this a step further: through self-comprehension, the agent reaches an "ethical plan," that of *estime de soi*. In the movement that leads from mere interpretation to the teleology of a "good life"[41] lies the ethical weight of narrative identity. Therefore, a plot is not the mere succession of events that have happened, or of the things that I have done. The plot of my life story is what enables me to have a good consideration of myself, as someone capable of being responsible for others. "Self-esteem," writes Brugiatelli, "is bound to the other because the self, in order to have self-esteem, needs to be recognized by another as a capable self (capable of speaking, of doing, of telling a story, of responding to an accusation)." Ricoeur's insight shows how self-narration – and the dialectic between identification with, and recognition of, a character whose life story is coherent and meaningful – is essential both to the existence of a Self and to the Self's self-understanding. Narrative identity appears therefore to have a double ethical bind: it constitutes a self who is capable of responsibility, and it is never exclusively subjective. Every story demands the presence of another, therefore: storytelling is a social act.

3. When Plot Replaces Meaning: A Ricoeurian Critique

In this section, I will argue that what we see happening in the context of the "Do it for the plot" trend is, in fact, the exact opposite of what Ricoeur's theory of narrative identity describes. Paradoxically, the focus on the mere plot of events leads agents

38) Ricoeur, "L'identité narrative," 103.

39) Ibid.

40) Michel, "Narrativité, narration, narratologie."

41) Ricoeur, *Soi-même comme un autre*.

– who become "users" in the digital realm – to forget about the bigger picture: the meaning and reasons underlying their behaviors and choices. By telling other people – who interact with the "content" not as an audience but from the deeply asymmetrical position of "followers" – that they aim to free themselves and live happier lives thanks to what is, fundamentally, an oblivion of essential ethical concepts, such as that of responsibility. Creators simultaneously forget about themselves – the meaning of their own life story – as well as about others: those around them and those who follow their adventures on a screen. This strategy risks reinforcing the very lack of freedom these users are trying to resist. Doing things merely for the sake of the plot risks leaving them entrapped in a series of random and meaningless circumstances. Some might be fun and endearing, others sad and frightening; the point is not whether one should act in one way or another. Rather, the issue touches on the distinction between an Aristotelian, teleological understanding of ethics, which Ricoeur adopts – where actions are guided by the pursuit of a meaningful and coherent life, a good life – and a Kantian, deontological view of morality, grounded in duties and universal principles. The trend's emphasis on isolated actions "for the sake of the plot" neglects both: it abandons the ethical horizon of shaping a purposeful life, while also disregarding any moral framework of obligation. Rather, recentering the meaning of an entire plot could offer, as I suggested earlier, an ethical corrective to the lack of authenticity and the neurotically curated existences these users are denouncing. The lack of spontaneity, along with the fear of failure and judgment – both online and offline – might be eased through an understanding of one's own motives and desires, one's fragilities and passions, and by showing vulnerability to someone on the other side of a screen who might then recognize me as someone who is, just like them, a "fallible human," to quote once more Paul Ricoeur. The most intriguing aspect of the trend is how it emerged: showing at the same time the potential of a narcissistic tendency toward the spectacle of the personal[42] and an amplified version of what twentieth century sociology has called the performance of everyday life.[43] The dynamic Debord anticipated when he wrote that "Everything that was directly lived has moved away

42) Debord, *La société du spectacle*.

43) Goffman, *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*.

into a representation"[44] encounters Goffman's theory in social media, as is echoed in the social media and mediatization scholarship of Couldry and Hepp,[45] Kellner,[46] and Meyrowitz[47]. For instance, the mediatization of the self described by Couldry and Hepp can be read as the macro-structural counterpart of the micro-performances Goffman outlined; Kellner similarly interprets contemporary media culture as the convergence of self-presentation and spectacle; and Meyrowitz shows how electronic media dissolve the boundaries of front- and back-stage, effectively staging everyday life in a manner that resonates with Debord's critique. Every moment of personal life – filmed, directed, edited, and finally published – can become (or at least seems invited to become) a performance for the gaze of the other. Yet this does not imply a unidirectional technological determinism: social media do not impose performativity so much as they provide a stage on which existing social dynamics of appearance, recognition, and self-presentation are intensified. In many ways, we return here to Ricoeur: recognition, as mutual or reciprocal recognition, already pointed a way forward in *Oneself as Another*, suggesting that subjectivity can only be fully understood through the mediation of the other. But if in Ricoeur this mediation involves the recognition of personal fragility – discovered in the encounter that allows the other to appear as a fellow "fallible human" – what often emerges on social media is instead a narrowed form of encounter, one that risks functioning primarily as a gaze. This gaze, in Sartrean terms, carries an objectifying power:[48] as Sartre showed, to be seen is to be momentarily fixed, turned into something-for-others, deprived of one's fluidity as a subject.

In a dialectical inversion, it transforms the individual – once the narrator of their own story – into a mere object of spectacle, valued less for the meaning of their narrative than for its legibility within a public economy of attention. The pressing issue, then, is what space remains for agency and genuine subjective autonomy in such a context. The challenge is not simply theoretical but ethical: can we reclaim

44) Debord, *La Société Du Spectacle*, 15. English translation mine.

45) Couldry and Hepp, *Mediated Construction of Reality*.

46) Kellner, "Intellectuals and New Technologies."

47) Meyrowitz, *No Sense of Place*.

48) Sartre, *L'Être et Le Néant*.

narrative identity not only as an interpretive framework, but as a resource to resist the flattening effects of performativity that contemporary platforms accentuate? And if so, what kinds of practices – individual or collective – might allow subjectivity to emerge again as something other than an image crafted for the gaze?

4. Conclusions: Re-Thinking Performativity

The process of meaning-making that Ricoeur attributes to narrative identity operates *a posteriori*, in an individual's understanding of their own life-story – an understanding that is both conveyed to and reinterpreted with the other through storytelling. A personal history is, by nature, fragmented: it consists of the events that happen to us. Narrating them as moments within a coherent story is precisely what enables us to grasp them fully as a life-story. One could say that the plot is what each person makes out of what has happened to them and what they have done. Moreover, storytelling discloses the dialectic of activity and passivity that lies at the heart of Ricoeur's conception of the self. In narrating a life, the subject recognizes themselves simultaneously as capable – someone who initiates actions, makes promises, assumes commitments – and as vulnerable to the other and to the events that exceed him: the beginning of our own life-story, Ricoeur notes, does not belong to us, nor does its ending, our death. This tension is, as Ricoeur argues in the tenth study of *Oneself as Another*, the very ontological structure of selfhood. The "who" that narrates is never the pure author of its own life, nor merely the patient of external forces; it is a being whose identity emerges from the interplay between what it does and what happens to it. Narrative thus becomes the privileged space in which this duality is made intelligible: by arranging actions and sufferings into a plot, the subject can grasp how initiative and exposure, power, and fragility, co-constitute the unity of a life. The prescription "Do it for the plot" instead operates in a programmatic and anticipatory register. It asks the subject not to interpret actions retrospectively – as Ricoeur's narrative identity requires – but to pre-script them according to the imagined demands of a story yet to be lived. What results of it is a sequence of disconnected events, without any possible meaning: the exact opposite of what a plot is. In this shift, the subject abides from its own ethical responsibility, turning, as this paper has argued, into an actor for the "follower's" gaze. The imperative suggests that any action will do, so long as it propels the "plot"

forward, reducing the complexities of desire, commitment, and consequence to the simple requirement of narrative momentum. In that sense, it risks emptying life of meaning altogether, replacing lived ethical engagement with a hollow choreography of gestures staged for an imagined audience. As Girard wrote concerning the purpose of his own philosophical work, that of ensuring that "meaning is one with life,"[49] the telling of a life-story should be that of integrating meaning with life.

A potential strategy for resolving this conflict could be that of reading the prescription of "Doing it for the plot" as a form of play: as psychoanalyst Winnicott has argued, play can be interpreted as a "form of doing"[50] as well as a liminal zone, carrying the potential for enrichment, "between mother and baby."[51] Play as a strategy for meaning-making could enrich this practice with sense – or at least help us argue for the potential of a renewed authenticity. Ricoeur seems to situate his own reflection in this very line of thought, although not being a theorist of play:[52] in the presentation "Post-scriptum: une dernière écoute de Freud"[53] he stated that "in fact, real resolution of conflicts is impossible; only a symbolic solution is accessible. Dreaming, playing, daydreaming, poetry – they play dice with death. They play, in the end, as losers; but faced with the final checkmate, they lead us back to wisdom." Yet, the ethical issues previously underlined remain: specifically, that of the objectifying gaze of the other on the performance (instead of the aliveness) of a life-story, and the abiding of moral and ethical responsibility for the sake of the "plot." On the other hand, the integration of a Ricoeurian interpretation of narrative identity, as well as that of a theory of play as a practice of meaning-making, could prove a possible ethical corrective to this online trend – which, as it has been previously argued, should be interpreted as bigger than "just an Internet thing." This is precisely where Ricoeur's thought proves invaluable for the social sciences today. In a field dominated by theories of performativity – highly effective at describing how individuals stage, curate, and negotiate their identities in public – Ricoeur offers a meaningful complement, one that helps rein-

49) Girard, *Des choses cachées*. English translation mine.

50) Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*.

51) Ibid.

52) A colloquium on a potential fruitful reading of Ricoeur as a theorist of play was held at the University of Milan in May 2024. Cf. "*Gioco e ri-scrittura del mondo*," *PhilEvents*, https://philevents.org/event/show/132594.

53) Ricoeur, "Post-scriptum." English translation mine.

troducing dimensions that often disappear in analyses of social media. A Ricoeurian account of narrative identity insists that individuals are not only performers or effects of scripts, but also interpreters and bearers of responsibility. Through Ricoeur, we recover the idea that subjectivity is neither the product of uninterrupted self-curation nor simply an accumulation of "plot points," but the outcome of a long, fragile, and ethical labor of interpretation.

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