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Pre-Produced Self-Narratives in Social Media – An Arendtian Perspective

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Abstract
Building upon Hannah Arendt's notions of acting and producing, and their implications for the public sphere, we introduce the concept of "pre-produced self-narratives", arguing that the practice of self-narration in the digital realm becomes like producing rather than acting. We analyze the structural features of "pre-produced self-narratives" such as materialization, the necessity of staging, altered temporality, the primacy of the visual, reward structures, and the pressure to narrativize experience. Finally, we explore the potential harms of this transformation, arguing that the dominance of pre-produced self-narratives not only constrains individual identity formation but also reconfigures the public sphere itself, shifting it from a space of plurality and interaction to one of market-driven self-presentation.

Keywords Self-narrative · Hannah arendt · Social media · Scaffolding · Narrative railroading · Mind-shaping

1 Introduction

According to the narrative approach to the self, our life story plays a crucial role for whom we take ourselves to be. These stories include memories, future plans, present beliefs, affective repertoires, embodied habits, and other aspects of our identity.[1] Certain aspects of a person's past –such as being a child of divorced parents, having grown up in a rural area, or having survived cancer – shape their life narrative in distinct ways. These experiences contribute to a particular self-story, just as other paths, such as growing up with five younger siblings, aspiring to be a nurse but ending up as a famous artist, or engaging in local politics, lead to different narratives. The stories we narrate about ourselves are also shaped by everyday practices, preferences, and attributes – being a person who is extrovert and funny, someone who devotes Sundays to car maintenance, someone who takes on a voluntary position, or is a wine connoisseur who carefully selects vintages for their collection. Phrased this way, one could think that self-narration is mainly an individual affair that concerns the idiosyncratic history of becoming who one is and wants to become, including personal characteristics, skills and preferences. This "internalist self-narrative approach" (Fabry 2024b) has been challenged by scholars claiming that self-narration is deeply embedded in social interactions, cultural frameworks, and material structures (e.g. Hutto 2016; Menary 2008; Heersmink 2018; Bortolan 2024). For example, the way individuals narrate their personal relationships is shaped by cultural expectations – consider how romantic experiences are framed differently depending on societal norms around love, commitment, and gender roles. Material structures also influence self-narration, i.e. when an old photograph acts as an *evocative object*, shaping how individuals recall and interpret past experiences (Heersmink 2018).

[1] For an overview of narrative identity, see Schechtmann 2011; Heersmink 2018. MacIntyre (1985) and Taylor (1989) argue that life gains coherence through a narrative structure oriented toward the good. Ricœur (1992) refines this by emphasizing the dialectic between narrative unity and disruption, linking identity to temporal experience. In contrast, Dennett (1992) and Strawson (2004) critique strong narrative views, with Strawson denying that selfhood requires narrativity. Schechtman (1996) and Velleman (2006) defend a constructivist approach, where selfhood emerges through autobiographical narration, while phenomenological perspectives (e.g., Zahavi 2007; Tengelyi 2015) argue for a pre-narrative minimal self.

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The increasing dominance of visual culture has shaped the way individuals construct and engage with their self-narratives, with social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok encouraging users to craft highly curated versions of themselves through aestheticized images, hashtags, and bios. Self-narration is becoming more and more dependent on social media as an environmental scaffold (Heersmink 2020).[2] While many of the contributions to a "situated approach" to self-narratives first focused on positive ways in which the environment shapes self-narration, attention has shifted to potential harms and dangers of the socio-material influence on forms and contents of self-narratives (cf. Fabry 2024a, b; Osler 2024; Byrne 2024). Narrative gaslighting (Fabry 2024b), for instance, occurs when a person's ability to narrate and understand themselves is undermined; narrative railroading (Osler 2024) points to the danger that social or technological environments limit available options for shaping self-narratives. Social media is not only used as a tool in order to *better* memorize or to get *richer* offers for self-expression (Bortolan 2024). As Lucy Osler suggests, it functions as a form of "mind shaping narrative device", influencing "the kinds of narratives that we self-ascribe, interpret others through, and act in accordance with" (2025, p. 445).

Picking up this important contribution to the discourse, we argue that social media does not only shape minds and narratives, but alters the very practice of self-narration. It restructures the conditions of self-narration by modifying its temporal structure, increasing reliance on external validation, and embedding it in infrastructures which go beyond digital specifics and encompass the norms and ideologies behind those. Hannah Arendt offers a particularly fruitful conceptual framework for this analysis, as her political anthropology centers on the idea that the "who" someone is, emerges through appearance, plurality, and action – not as a product, but in the presence of others. Using Arendt's distinction between acting and producing[3], we introduce the concept of "pre-produced self-narratives" – identity constructs formulated in advance and then used as interpretive lenses for feelings, actions and beliefs. Arendt emphasizes that identity does not arise through production, but through appearance in a shared space – through speech, interaction, and the presence of others. This understanding allows us to conceptualize pre-produced self-narratives as a shift away from emergent self-disclosure toward curated and anticipatory identity patterns. Pre-produced self-narratives precede experience itself, acting and functioning as templates that structure how individuals interpret and perform their identities – unlike self-narratives that grow retrospectively from lived experience. This does not deny the forward-looking dimensions of self-narratives generally, but highlights a shift from emergence to prefiguration. Arendt already pointed out the dangers of shifting from acting to producing in the public sphere, particularly in politics and social life. This distinction is crucial for understanding the transformation of self-narration in the digital age. When identity becomes a product – curated in advance rather than emerging through interaction – the conditions under which subjectivity is formed and expressed change. The implications of this shift manifest in concrete, and at times disturbing, ways. The documentary Girl Gang (2022) offers an unsettling glimpse into how teenage influencers construct their digital personas as marketable products, pre-emptively shaping their identities around engagement metrics and brand expectations rather than through vivid exploration. We aim to show that this transformation is not simply about individual agency or the performative nature of digital life; it signals a broader shift in subject formation, where self-narration becomes increasingly externalized, aestheticized, and pre-scripted.

The paper is structured as follows: In section two, we sketch Arendt's notions of acting and producing and their implications for the public sphere. In section three, we introduce the concept of "pre-produced self-narratives", describing their key features and arguing that digital self-narration increasingly resembles production rather than action. In the final section, we explore the potential harms of this transformation, arguing that the dominance of pre-produced self-narratives not only constrains individual identity formation but also reconfigures the public sphere, shifting it from a space of plurality and interaction to one of market-driven self-presentation.

2 Hannah Arendt on Acting, Producing, Appearance and the Public Sphere

The way individuals reveal themselves in the world is not a straightforward process of self-expression but is deeply embedded in social and relational structures. According to Arendt, we do not simply disclose a pre-existing, stable identity; rather, who we are emerges through action and interaction with others. This "who" cannot be reduced to

[2] According to the scaffolding approach within the philosophy of cognition and affectivity, people actively use external structures for changing or improving their cognitive and affective capacities. Fabry made explicit use of the scaffolding paradigm for the narrative realm by arguing that textual narratives can play the role of a scaffold for people (Fabry 2023b).

[3] In the English version of Vita Activa (*The Human Condition*) Hannah Arendt herself uses the terms action (*Handeln*) and work (*Herstellen*). In order to emphasize the goal-oriented connotation of the German term *Herstellen* and the phenomenon Arendt works out with this concept, we use *produce* instead of *work* in this paper. Producing a self-narrative seems to capture more the nature of *Herstellen* in the sense of Arendt than to say that one works on or works our a self-narrative.

objective characteristics – such as profession, status, or background – but unfolds in the dynamic space of human plurality (Arendt 1998, p. 179). While this "who" becomes apparent to those around us, it remains elusive to ourselves; we cannot fully grasp or control how we appear (ibid.). As Loidolt puts it: "The intersubjective space of appearance is […] an anarchic space […] where, negatively formulated, I am entirely exposed to the uncontrollable, and, positively formulated, anything can happen that entangles me in the world" (Loidolt 2018, p. 10, translation is ours).

Unlike the activities of labor and work, which result in tangible objects that can be grasped and evaluated, the activities that bring us into appearance – action and speech – are not productive in a material sense. Their effects remain dependent on the presence of others and the condition of plurality in order to remain: "Their reality depends entirely upon human plurality, upon the constant presence of others who can see and hear and therefore testify to their existence." (Arendt 1998, p. 95). Therefore, Arendt describes action and speech – like thinking – as not producing anything, "they are as futile as life itself." (ibid.). In appearing, we can never be both the subject and object of our own perception at the same time. When action becomes overly controlled or strategically oriented toward shaping an image, it takes on the logic of production. Arendt's distinction does not mark a strict binary but points to two tendencies of engaging with the world – one characterized by openness and exposure, the other by control and fabrication. To persist in the world, the results of action must be transformed – remembered and eventually objectified. Arendt sees memory as the first step toward objectification, which can take the form of writing, imagery, or other material records. However, this transformation is neither guaranteed nor straightforward: "The materialization they have to undergo in order to remain in the world at all is paid for in that always the 'dead letter' replaces something which grew out of and for a fleeting moment indeed existed as the 'living spirit'. They must pay this price because they themselves are of an entirely unworldly nature and therefore need the help of an activity of an altogether different nature; they depend for their reality and materialization upon the same workmanship that builds the other things in the human artifice." (ibid). This also implies that any attempt to fix or narratively represent the lived moment must necessarily fail to capture its vitality. Arendt insists that the price for durability in the world is the loss of the original life of action. Even storytelling, which Arendt considers the only way to give permanence to action, is not authored by the actor themself: it is a retrospective construction carried out by others. The unique "who" of a person, which unfolds in the flow of human encounters, can never be fully captured in words (ibid., p. 181).

While human initiative is central to stories, according to Arendt, individuals should not be seen as authors of their own life stories: "Someone began it and is its subject in the twofold sense of the world, namely, its actor and sufferer, but nobody is its author" (ibid., p. 184). Action thus produces stories, but these stories are never authored in the sense that a product is designed and made. They emerge within a web of human relationships, and the meaning they carry depends not only on the actor's initiative but, along the way, these actions are received and remembered by others. "Even though stories are the inevitable results of action, it is not the actor but the storyteller who perceives and 'makes' the story." (ibid., p. 192; see also Rebentisch 2022, p. 38 and Cavarero 2014, pp. 24–25). In this light, Arendt's notion of narrative identity is marked by a profound tension: while speech and action reveal a person's unique "who," this revelation can never be fully fixed or made transparent through language. The living "who" always exceeds the narrative attempts to capture it. In order to be perceived as a person by others, we must step into the world and make ourselves visible. Genuine encounters and intellectual exchange require externalizing our inner life, rendering it comprehensible to others, and thus de-privatizing and de-individualizing ourselves. By making ourselves perceptible, we affirm our own reality: "For us, appearance – something that is being seen and heard by others as well as by ourselves – constitutes reality." (Arendt 1998, p. 50) Loidolt expresses this in her phenomenological reading of Arendt: "Who I am is not something 'behind' appearance, but it is only revealed in appearance. […] Our 'interiority' is enacted as a being-outside" (Loidolt 2018, p. 8, translation is ours).

Although we never have full control over how we appear to others, Arendt distinguishes between two ways of interacting with others: self-display (*Selbstdarstellung*) and self-presentation (*Selbstpräsentation*). Whereas self-display refers to the inevitable way in which we make ourselves visible through action and speech, self-presentation involves a conscious effort to construct and manage one's image. It follows a different logic – one that aligns more closely with production than with action.

In contrast to action, which depends on the presence of others and cannot be fully controlled or prefigured, self-presentation resembles the process of making an artefact: it is deliberated, structured, and aimed at a particular outcome. Arendt notes that, while action reveals the uniqueness of the individual in a way that cannot be fully grasped or controlled, self-presentation attempts to fix identity into a coherent, recognizable form: "Self-presentation is distinguished from self-display by the active and conscious choice of the image shown; self-display has no choice but to show whatever properties a living being possesses. Self-presentation would not be possible without a degree

of self-awareness – a capability inherent in the reflexive character of mental activities and clearly transcending mere consciousness, which we probably share with the higher animals. Only self-presentation is open to hypocrisy and pretense […]" (Arendt 1978, p. 36). This presentation of the self through a constructed image introduces a logic of performance. Appearance is no longer a contingent effect of action but the intended result of self-design.

This distinction becomes particularly relevant in the context of visual social media platforms, where self-presentation is no longer an occasional act but a structural necessity[4]. While public appearance has always been shaped by social conventions and expectations, social media perverts this process by encouraging individuals to edit, refine, and optimize their self-image before exposing it to an audience. We now present an example to illustrate the phenomenon of "pre-produced self-narratives" which we analyze in the following section.

Consider Sarah, a woman in her late twenties, who carefully curates her online self-presentation. Her posts feature aestheticized self-representations in exclusive locations, each framed to align with a visually coherent, aspirational identity. Recently, her attention has been drawn to Lapland, a destination trending across social media. Her feed is filled with vast snowy landscapes bathed in soft sunset light, reindeer in winter wonderlands, husky sled rides, and the mesmerizing glow of the northern lights. Inspired by these polished depictions, she decides to travel there. Yet, her journey is shaped less by discovery than by pre-existing templates. Months before departure, Sarah's engagement with Lapland-related content intensifies. She follows influencers who have visited before her, watches travel vlogs, and saves posts that fit her vision. Even before setting foot in the Arctic, she envisions the precise moments she wants to capture: embracing a reindeer, posing on a frozen lake at sunset in her new Taylor Swift hoodie, riding a husky sled through pristine snow. Once in Lapland, executing these pre-planned images takes precedence: Despite the biting cold, she insists on the perfect shot on the frozen lake without a jacket, ensuring that her hoodie remains visible. When the guide warns against kneeling near a reindeer for safety reasons, she ignores it – after all, the iconic image of her embracing is central to her visual narrative. When a local herder speaks about the realities of reindeer husbandry, including slaughter and meat production, she finds herself irritated. The Lapland she envisioned was one of aesthetic beauty, not the complexities of indigenous livelihoods. Instead of engaging with the moment, she scrolls through the photos she has already taken, curating her digital memory in real-time. When the northern lights fail to appear, she is disappointed—until she discovers her phone camera captures auroras invisible to the naked eye. On the final evening, as the aurora finally becomes visible, she instinctively turns away from the sky to take selfies. The colours appear far more vivid on her screen than in reality— what counts is how the moment will be preserved and presented.

Back home, she curates a photo series that encapsulates the journey as she intended it to be remembered. Some details are adjusted – her rented snowsuit, marked with a hotel logo, is digitally replaced with an elegant deep-red outfit that better complements the scene. When she later recalls Lapland, she does not think of the freezing air or the silence of the snow, she sees herself in the perfectly composed photograph, wearing the deep-red snowsuit against the Arctic backdrop. The curated visuals have not merely preserved her experience; they have replaced it, overwriting the messy, unfiltered reality with the aestheticized version crafted for digital display.

3 "Pre-Produced Self-Narratives"

Pre-produced self-narratives, as we conceptualize them, are shaped by a dynamic interplay between product and process of narration. Drawing on Arendt's distinction between acting and producing, we argue that self-narration in social media increasingly takes on the characteristics of producing: rather than emerging retrospectively from lived experience and unfolding through interaction with others, these self-narratives are formulated in advance and serve as templates that structure future perception, decisions, and actions. They are neither purely individual nor master narratives[5] in the traditional sense, but they are permeated by dominant cultural scripts, algorithmically reinforced visibility structures,

[4] Of course, social media usage varies, and not every interaction online is an act of deliberate self-curation. Think, for example, of people caught up in a fast-paced comment thread, posting while drunk, or treating digital platforms as if they were private rather than public spaces. In such cases, users may not consciously intend to craft an image of themselves. Nevertheless, these acts still amount to a form of self-presentation, precisely because users are aware—at least tacitly—that they appear before others in a mediated public space. What varies is not whether self-presentation takes place, but how intentional, stylized, and consequential it is. Even on text-based platforms such as X or BlueSky, self-presentation is shaped by the articulation of political stances and stylistic choices that differ from offline public spaces. Our analysis focuses primarily on highly visual platforms such as Instagram, where aestheticized forms of self-representation are structurally embedded in the medium itself.

[5] For a discussion about the enculturation of narratives, see Fabry 2018, 2023a, 2024b. She draws on accounts from developmental psychology, narratology and feminist philosophy which – despite crucial differences and foci – have in common the view that "master plots manifest, perpetuate, and disseminate dominant ideologies." (Fabry 2024b, p. 5).

and externally provided scaffolds. As a result, pre-produced self-narratives do not merely reflect who someone is but rather who someone wants to be, operating within self-imposed and socially conditioned pathways[6] – they provide an individualized yet conformist trajectory for self-perception, structuring both how individuals understand their lives and how they act within the world.[7]

Before working out distinguishing features of "pre-produced self-narratives" in social media, we first need to emphasize that both, the strong intertwining of individual with master narratives, and the orientation towards (idealized) others are not unique to social media. Rather, these characteristics are essential to self-narration in general, and acknowledging this allows us to better delineate what is specific about the impact of social media as a socio-material structure.

That "self-narratives, textual or otherwise, are never created entirely from scratch" (Fabry 2024a, p. 5), but are rather shaped by "master narratives" is not unique for the digital sphere. "Master narratives are culturally shared stories that tell us about a given culture, and provide guidance for how to be a "good" member of a culture; they are a part of the structure of society. As individuals construct a personal narrative, they negotiate with and internalize these master narratives – they are the material they have to work with to understand how to live a good life." (McLean and Syed 2015, p. 320) Annie Ernaux describes this process of understanding by trying to get into the perspective of her 12-year old self – how she took the conventions and ordinary routines of living for granted. She recalls the common practice of observing others in order to tell stories about them. "People's conduct was scrutinized and their behavior analyzed in minute detail, including the most personal traits; these signs were gathered and interpreted, shaping the history of other people. A sort of collective novel, with each of us making our contribution, adding the odd detail or a few narrative flourishes to the general picture, which people in the store or around the table usually summed up by 'he's a good guy' or 'she ain't worth much'." (Ernaux 2023, p. 42) It was the main goal to be like the others – i.e. to understand the master narrative and to live accordingly: "Those who were different were thought to be eccentric or even *deranged.* The dogs in our neighborhood were all called Rover or Spot." (ibid., p. 45) This collective storytelling served as a mechanism for social cohesion, reinforcing shared values and expectations while delineating the boundaries of acceptable behaviour. Deviation from these implicit scripts risked social exclusion, making conformity a powerful force in shaping individual self-narratives. "For many individuals whose lives fit in with societal structures, these master narratives are functional and unproblematic. Others, however, may need to construct or adopt an alternative narrative, which at minimum differs from, and at maximum resists, a master narrative." (McLean and Syed 2015, p. 320)[8]

Madame Bovary, the protagonist of Gustave Flaubert's novel of the same name, serves as an example of an individual resisting a master narrative – specifically, the premise that a happy life is synonymous with an ordinary, conforming existence. She refuses to identify with the expectations placed upon her scripted provincial life in 19th-century France, yearning for a reality shaped by passion, beauty, and grandeur instead. However, her rejection of the master narrative does not lead her to a position of genuine critical distance or self-determined identity formation. Instead of gaining an alternative perspective through reflection, she adopts a different pre-scripted identity, one shaped by the emerging consumer culture and its idealized representations in novels and women's magazines. She dreams about love, eroticism, fashionable dresses and elegant residences (Illouz 2024, pp. 78–79) – stereotypical significants preparing her with the illusion to belong to consumer culture of society (ibid., p. 77). What she perceives as individuality is an imitation of ready-made fantasies that offer the illusion of distinctiveness while remaining entirely conventional. Eva Illouz calls it the "psychology of cliché" (ibid.; translation is ours). "Emma is characteristic of modernity because she revolves her inner emptiness around a large quantity of mass-produced signifiers, brimming with emotion and expectation" (ibid., p. 79; translation is ours). Her longing is not simply for an alternative life but for a self that is narratable and recognizable within a predefined cultural script. In the end, as Siri Hustvedt interprets, Bovary breaks down of this narrative and despairs, she fails because of "the absurd but all too human desire to inflate the story of oneself, to see

[6] This aligns with the concept of narrative railroading (Osler 2024), which describes how pre-existing narrative structures limit the range of possible self-narratives which are shaped by external constraints, reinforcing patterns of conformity even within seemingly individualized expressions of identity.

[7] Yet, we do not suggest that individuals possess a single, all-encompassing self-narrative; rather, we conceive of self-narration as a fragmented process in which multiple, sometimes conflicting, narratives coexist. Social media does not eliminate this multiplicity but facilitates the emergence of pre-produced self-narratives in certain domains – particularly those tied to high visibility and external evaluation. These narratives can coexist, overlap, or even contradict one another, shaping different aspects of self-presentation while structuring how individuals navigate socially legible identity categories.

[8] While pre-produced self-narratives are deeply intertwined with such cultural scripts and draw from them as narrative resources, we conceptualize them as a distinct phenomenon: they describe not shared or collective frames, but individualized and anticipatory narratives that are intentionally crafted to guide future identity performance. As such, they mark a shift from drawing on cultural templates to actively shaping one's life according to a personally adopted narrative plan, materially externalized and continuously adjusted in the digital sphere.

it reflected back as heroic, beautiful, or martyred." (Hustvedt 2012, p. 10).

One crucial step in the constitution of what we call pre-produced self-narratives was the emergence of mass-produced stories consumed through media, particularly novels. Inspired by the narratives they consumed, individuals began to materialize their self-narratives through forms like diaries, though these were not intended to be read by anyone else. With the advent of mass media, the ability to create and share self-narratives expanded, making it possible to materialize self-narratives for a larger audience. However, this practice was only adopted by a small number of people. The invention of the camera allowed people to create self-images, family portraits, and other visual representations which they could reflect. This enabled them to view themselves, sometimes years later, in a materialized form. The rise of television further broadened the range of consumable narratives, allowing even more individuals to materialize their selves for a larger public. Social media, however, has brought about a radical change, enabling *anyone* at *any time* to make their materialized self-narratives publicly available to a broad audience. Individuals do not merely consume identity templates anymore but also actively produce and circulate them. As we will argue in the following, social media self-narratives do not just reinforce dominant cultural scripts; they actively precede lived experience, dictating in advance what can be felt, expressed, and recognized as a valid identity. We first illustrate distinguishing features of pre-produced self-narratives in social media and afterwards show why we consider these features not merely as neutral shifts but as posing harms.

3.1 Distinguishing Features of Pre-Produced Self-Narratives in Social Media

3.1.1 Materialization

Distinctive of self-narrative practices in social media is that the self-narrative gets materialized through a profile, which is viewed, curated and staged as an external object. Today's Emma Bovarys *themselves* appear publicly in form of digital personas continuously externalized and presented through profiles. This materialization of identity introduces a fundamental shift: individuals can now observe and control their own self-representation as if from an external perspective. Although before social media individuals have depicted themselves in self-portraits, autobiographies, and symbolic representations, these earlier forms were static artefacts – a painted self-portrait is never mistaken for the person it depicts, and an autobiography remains a retrospective snapshot rather than a fluid entity. In contrast, the social media profile is inherently mutable, designed for continuous modification and optimization. With regard to political propaganda, Arendt describes the phenomenon of "image making", in which everything that is likely to disturb the desired "image" of an event, a nation or a person can be denied: "for an image, unlike an old-fashioned portrait, is supposed not to flatter reality but to offer a full-fledged substitute for it. And this substitute, because of modern techniques and the mass media, is, of course, much more in the public eye than the original ever was." (Arendt 1983, p. 252). What in Arendt's time only characterized the public appearance of celebrities and politicians, in contemporary society has become a daily practice for many individuals.

3.1.2 Inevitable Presentation

The presentation of curated, performative expressions as genuinely authentic creates a fluid interplay between intentional self-presentation and the perception of authenticity. This blurring does not remain confined to the digital realm; it spills over into everyday life, influencing how individuals conceive of and perform their identities beyond social media. The digital mediation of self-narratives introduces a decisive difference between online and offline identity construction. Unlike offline interactions, where individuals engage with the world as embodied individuals in time and space, online identity construction always involves an additional layer of representation—an avatar, a profile, a curated symbol of the self. This additional layer distances individuals from their immediate engagement with the world and subjugates self-narratives to continuous revision, external validation, and algorithmic visibility criteria.[9] While self-presentation is certainly a part of offline interactions, it is not an inherent or unavoidable aspect of every situation. By contrast, appearance in social media based on visuals, by its very structure, cannot be anything other than self-presentation. Every appearance within these platforms necessarily involves a degree of self-staging, making it impossible to separate expression from presentation.

3.1.3 Temporal Structure

Social media alters the relationship between lived experience and self-narration, reversing the temporal logic that Arendt describes. Whereas for Arendt, the meaning of a life story can only be fully recognized in retrospect – constructed not by the actor but by the storyteller who follows – digital self-narratives increasingly precede lived experience. Instead of acting first and allowing meaning to take

[9] This is not to suggest that the digital realm is separate from "the world" in an ontological sense. However, the structures of digital platforms introduce layers of mediation that shape self-narrative practices in ways distinct from unmediated, embodied interactions.

shape through interaction and memory, individuals increasingly pre-produce their self-narratives, aligning their lives with existing narrative templates. For Arendt, "who one is" is revealed in the public realm through speech and deeds, yet this revelation remains elusive to the individual themselves, only becoming a coherent story when taken up by an external narrator. In contrast, the logic of social media encourages individuals to assume the role of both actor and author in advance, crafting a version of themselves that is meant to be lived out rather than retroactively understood. The story is not discovered in hindsight but manufactured beforehand, requiring reality to conform to an already-established framework.

Whereas Arendt describes the objectification of action as an inevitable yet partial process – one that inevitably reduces the living spirit of human encounters to the dead letter of narration – social media shifts the emphasis toward fabrication. The self-narrative is less something that arises from the contingencies of action and interaction; rather, it is pre-designed as a kind of ready-made artefact, awaiting enactment.

3.1.4 Primacy of the Visual

The increasing dominance of visual culture has profoundly shaped the way individuals construct and engage with their self-narratives. Rather than recounting their lives in the form of extended stories or reflective introspection, individuals now often think, remember, and plan in photographs and video clips. The potential for aestheticization becomes a central criterion in decision-making—events are envisioned in advance through the lens of how they will appear in photographs, experiences are structured around their visual potential, and identity is staged through carefully composed snapshots. This process has been significantly amplified by the logic of social media, where engagement metrics and visibility reinforce the value of an experience primarily as an image. The phenomenon of post-wedding photoshoots provides a striking example: after their actual wedding, newlyweds dress again in their bridal attire and travel to scenic locations for an elaborate staged shoot. This practice underscores the shift in emphasis from the lived experience of the wedding itself to the perfected visual representation of an idealized moment. This transformation extends to everyday life, where the most mundane activities—eating a meal, visiting a place, even moments of self-reflection—are shaped by their photographic potential. The images of a social media profile become the dominant reference points for past experiences, shaping how individuals present their lives to others and how they perceive their life story retrospectively.

3.1.5 Reward Structure

Unlike in offline social dynamics, the narratives presented via social-media profiles get direct evaluation in form of visible and quantifiable measures: Likes, Emoticons, Follows, Shares etc. translate into the felt acceptance or rejection of a presented self-narrative. Narrating a story about oneself outside of social-media also aims at recognition or admiration, for example when telling heroic stories instead of those revealing weakness and failure. Yet, even if others react immediately in form of say, admiration or contempt about a story we tell, these evaluations typically take a personal form that is not publicly shared and that is not standardized into a catalogue of possible likes and dislikes. Social media platforms, however, embed evaluations within an economic and algorithmic infrastructure designed to maximize engagement. As profit-driven enterprises, these platforms use algorithmic curation to amplify certain narratives over others, shaping visibility based on commercial rather than purely social logic (e.g. De Vries 2010). The structure of feedback is embedded in a system that incentivizes specific forms of self-presentation while reinforcing patterns of interaction that align with platform objectives.

3.1.6 Pressure To Narrativize

Social media intensifies the pressure to integrate contingent aspects of life into a coherent self-narrative, often driven by the fear of deviating from dominant norms. While personal identity has always been shaped in negotiation with broader cultural frameworks, social media amplifies the need to construct, articulate, and align one's life with an intelligible – and "likeable" – story. The materialized narratives in form of a profile or historic thread can be scrolled through and as their chronological order fits narrative structures they emphasise the need for coherence. Jacobsen's (2020, p. 1082) concept of "algorithmic emplotment" denotes this "processes through which data, people, experiences, and complex temporalities are ordered, woven together, and presented as coherent, frictionless narratives in the present." If a narrative for a manifest aspect of their daily life is missing, this lack can create disorientation, compelling the person to suppress or try to get rid of this aspect or to seek external validation and structure for this aspect that might otherwise remain fluid or unremarkable.

The structural characteristics outlined manifest in concrete ways in how individuals engage with social media self-narratives. To illustrate these we sketch another example and point out concrete harms they can pose afterwards.

Olivia is a woman in her early thirties who had always assumed that motherhood would be part of her future. She never consciously decided on this path, it simply seemed

natural. She loved children, her friends were becoming parents, and her siblings' growing families surrounded her with the daily realities of childcare. Yet, as she became more closely involved in their routines, she realized she did not want children herself. Now, at the very moment in life when she had always envisioned herself as a mother, she finds that her life feels whole without children. However, society does not allow this realization to remain a quiet fact. Friends and relatives repeatedly ask when she plans to start a family, warning her she might regret her decision. Social expectations position adulthood as a trajectory toward marriage and parenthood, making her choice appear as a deviation that requires justification. Feeling increasingly alienated, she actively searches for voices articulating what she struggles to express on Instagram. She follows hashtags like #childfreebychoice and finds an influencer, Madeleine, whose posts offer not just a rejection of motherhood but a coherent alternative – filled with travel, career ambitions, and personal freedom. For the first time, Olivia sees her decision not as an absence but as a valid identity. She returns to Madeleine's posts whenever she is confronted with expectations of motherhood, using them to articulate her own stance. The sense of legitimacy she draws from this external script subtly shifts into a feeling of needing to conform to it in order to maintain coherence. She notices herself adopting the same rhetoric, framing her decision in terms of personal freedom, career ambitions, and a rejection of societal expectations – even though these were not initially the main reasons for her choice. When friends ask why she does not want children, she no longer says that she simply does not feel the desire to have them. Instead, she repeats the talking points she has internalized from Madeleine, presenting a polished and seemingly rationalized justification. She begins posting about the benefits of a childfree lifestyle, even though she never felt the need to advocate for this choice before. The pressure to define herself through this framework becomes increasingly rigid: rather than simply being *someone who does not want children, she feels compelled to* become *a certain kind of childfree person, one who fits within the narrative she has absorbed.*

3.2 Risks and Harms of Social-Media Self-Narratives

The resulting image of the distinguishing features of preproduced self-narratives in social media provides reason for concern. The materialization of a self-narrative, the inevitability of staging one's narrative, the different temporal structure, the primacy of the visual, the reward structure and the pressure to narrativize any aspect whatsoever result in a complex mixture of harms we want to explicate in this final section – using the two examples for illustration.

3.2.1 Rigidity of Narratives: Pressing Identities in Corsets

The example of Olivia demonstrates both the empowering and constraining effects of social media on self-narration. While online spaces offer new possibilities for articulating identities that deviate from dominant norms and thus are at risk in offline spaces, they also reinforce the necessity of positioning oneself within a predefined narrative structure. We do not claim that there are no benefits of social media in regards to self-understanding. Cases of hermeneutical injustice (Fricker 2007) and affective injustice (Gallegos 2023) might be mitigated here. People might find ways for making sense what remained obscure before, thereby enlarging their "hermeneutic equipment" (Munch-Jurisic 2022) for understanding themselves or getting "emotional uptake" (Whitney 2023) that was withheld so far. Especially for marginalized identities, social media provides a space for articulation and self-exploration.[10]

However, we aim to highlight the underexplored aspect of the urge to find a narrative in the first place and to integrate it into – or fully make it – one's identity. Consider an alternative approach: In the family of the writer Siri Hustvedt, everyone was passionate about skiing, so she thought she had to be too. As in many Norwegian households, skiing was associated with joy, family bonding, and cultural heritage. The practice is deeply embedded in both, the concrete family everyday life and the larger cultural context – and for both it builds an important aspect of the narratives people tell about their identities. One day, however, 17-year-old Siri realized that she did not like skiing. "A way of thinking about something can become so ingrained, we fail to question it, and this failure may involve more than a tumble on a ski slope." (Hustvedt 2012, p. 19) […] "My poor judgment was the result of both an alienation from my feelings and a lack of sympathy for myself." (ibid.)

According to Siri, there is no compulsion to create a narrative of herself as a non-skier. Rather, she explores an alternative path to coping with this deviation, which involves developing self-awareness and fostering a compassionate, non-narcissistic relationship with herself.

[10] Pressing examples of how social media serve as empowering spaces for the articulation and self-exploration of marginalized identities include online communities for individuals with mental health conditions, where people share personal experiences, raise awareness, and combat stigma (Bortolan 2024; Longo 2025). Feminist movements use social media to amplify women's voices and challenge patriarchal structures (e.g. the #MeToo), which provided a global platform for survivors of sexual harassment to share their stories and demand change (Hänel 2022). Queer communities utilize online platforms to express diverse sexual and gender identities and challenge heteronormativity (Siebler 2016). Black activists address racial inequality and reclaim cultural narratives online. Disabled individuals use social media to challenge ableism and create networks of advocacy.

Why does Olivia feel compelled to define herself as a childfree woman, whereas Siri can simply accept that she dislikes skiing without integrating it into a broader story of who she is (e.g. "A non-skiing Norwegian who constructs her whole identity towards this deviation from the norm")? The answer lies in the social necessity of legibility – certain deviations from dominant norms require explanation because they are not self-evident within the available narrative structures. Social media reinforces this imperative by making identity highly public and performative: rather than quietly existing outside a norm, individuals must actively position themselves in relation to it. Even within epistemic bubbles or echo chambers, users perform their identities in front of a (homogeneous) audience, where visibility is constant, audience responses are quantified, and coherence is rewarded. This pressure extends beyond Olivia's case. Consider a woman with ADHD who initially finds reassurance in online communities that share her experience (Longo 2025). Over time, however, she begins to interpret her entire life through this framework, seeing every difficulty, every emotional response, every challenge as an extension of her ADHD identity. What began as a helpful lens for understanding herself becomes a fixed interpretative framework, shaping how she experiences reality. The risk here is not that individuals find meaning in self-narration, but that identity becomes overdetermined by narrative coherence (see also Jacobsen 2020) rather than lived experience and get streamlined and limited, i.e. through the permanent confrontation with (algorithmically reinforced) categorizations (Osler 2024, 2025). Instead of allowing for ambiguity, contradiction, and evolving perspectives, social media fosters a mode of self-conception that demands alignment with pre-existing templates. The world ceases to be a space of free action and instead becomes a stage upon which identity must be constantly performed, defended, and refined in accordance with available scripts.

3.2.2 Distraction from Experience and Decoupling of Form and Content

Instead of allowing experiences to unfold unpredictably, individuals increasingly shape their actions and emotional responses to fit an already-determined framework.[11] The paradox is that while this structure offers a sense of control, it ultimately restricts the space of becoming, reducing identity formation to a process of narrative conformity rather than existential openness. Self-narratives are no longer confined to immediate social contexts but become materialized content, permanently accessible, subject to reinterpretation, and detached from their original intent. Unlike in a fleeting conversation, where a statement is shaped by the moment and its participants, social media fragments identity into fixed, extractable pieces that can be decontextualized and repurposed indefinitely. A post made in one context can resurface in another, detached from the evolving self, reinforcing a static version of identity that may no longer align with the individual's present self-understanding. This possibility for a materialized de-contextualization, distortion or alienation of narrative-fragments can be intentionally misused by others. Next to a co-construction of our narratives by others through tagging, sharing or re-telling content or commenting on pictures and thereby influencing or changing the meaning of our self-presentation, shitstorms and deepfakes can deprive us of the control over our self-narratives with irreparable consequences.

Beyond this, the very nature of presence and engagement changes as well. As seen in Sarah's case, her attention is divided between experiencing an event and preparing its documentation. Instead of being fully immersed in the moment, she remains oriented toward its future representation. This creates a paradoxical distance from lived reality: individuals are physically present, yet mentally engaged in curating their future memory.[12] From an Arendtian perspective, this shift undermines the conditions for genuine action, which involves vulnerability, letting go of control, and exposing oneself to unpredictable interpretations by others, by eliminating the "space between" individuals where human relationships and discourse unfold unpredictably. If individuals enter the world as already pre-narrativized actors, the open-ended, relational space of action is replaced by a controlled stage for self-presentation. The act of self-narration increasingly resembles a paint-by-numbers exercise, where individuals fill in the outlines of an already-determined.

The spontaneous, unmediated act of "appearing" is largely replaced by a controlled production process. In this sense, social media does not just mediate self-narration – it pre-structures the conditions of social existence, replacing discourse with display, and action with scripted performance. Instead of engaging with the world in a spontaneous, meaningful way, individuals may find themselves locked into a cycle of constant self-monitoring and "impression management" (Goffman 1959). While action involves initiating change in the world, digital self-representation encourages a performative mode of engagement, in which

[11] As Zawidzki nicely formulates it, by selecting from the "palette of narratives" (Zawidzki 2013, p. 60) we are surrounded by, we not only tell a story who we are but also prescribe and adapt our behavior to be in line with.

these stories. See also Haslanger 2019; Maiese and Hanna 2019; Tanesini 2022 for approaches on how narratives are mind-shaping.

[12] The phenomenon of "nowstalgia" (Korin 2016) further illustrates how individuals anticipate their future longing for a moment even as they experience it, shaping self-presentation toward an imagined retrospective gaze rather than the present moment itself.

identity work becomes an end in itself. Rather than actively participating in anti-racist initiatives within one's community, for example, one's focus may shift toward crafting an online identity as an anti-racist subject. The preoccupation with how one appears overrides the imperative to act, substituting involvement with symbolic positioning.

3.2.3 Prescription of the Formats for Memorizing

The images of a social media profile become the dominant reference points for past experiences, shaping not only how individuals present their lives to others but also how they perceive their own past. Bortolan (2024) notes that the selective curation of one's profile sometimes leads to a more positive assessment of one's life trajectory. However, these profiles do not simply reflect unmediated experiences. Every moment shared is already filtered through a pre-existing self-narrative, one shaped not only by personal intent but also by external aesthetic and normative frameworks. Social media does not merely provide a platform for self-expression; it conditions the way experience itself is structured and remembered. In this environment, the production of the self-narrative is not a solitary act but a distributed process (Heersmink 2020; Osler 2025). Thinking, feeling, and storytelling are increasingly structured by digital formats. "Identity" is articulated in hashtags, emotions are condensed into emojis, and experiences are validated through engagement metrics. This external structuring of self-expression alters not only how individuals present themselves, but also how they perceive and experience their own lives. As filters enhance colors and compositions standardize emotions, the boundary between representation and reality becomes increasingly blurred. What remains is not simply a digital archive of a life lived but a visual script that dictates how life is imagined, staged, and retrospectively understood.

3.2.4 Necessity of Self-Staging Prohibits Rather Than Enables Self-Understanding

Bortolan further argues that specific forms of social media use can enhance self-reflection and self-understanding. She suggests that "the use of social networks can heighten self-consciousness too, as here we have the possibility to easily check, over and over again, how others see us" (Bortolan 2024, p. 2408). In her view, this heightened awareness of one's public persona can lead to a deeper engagement with one's own identity, offering opportunities to refine and solidify self-conceptions. She posits that certain social media practices allow individuals to strengthen the connection with themselves, thereby fostering self-development. Bortolan acknowledges that digital spaces might seem problematic for those who equate authenticity with spontaneous and unreflective self-expression (Bortolan 2024, p. 2408). However, the issue is not that self-expression must be spontaneous and unreflective in order to be authentic. The problem lies in the fact that self-presentation on social media is always staged: identity online is unavoidably mediated through symbolic representation and shaped by the platform's affordances, rather than unfolding in embodied, co-present interaction.

Although a distancing from the first-person perspective—stepping back from lived experience—is necessary to narrate one's identity, as Illouz (2024, p. 101) notes, the persistent gap between how we experience ourselves and how we want to be seen by others can *prevent* self-understanding. While it seems plausible that this distancing enables engagement with autobiographical memory, future planning, and self-conception, living in this mode of expectation results in a mechanism of endless desire, an ongoing seeking for something that should fill the emptiness and nurture self-perception (ibid.; see also Illouz 2024; Chap. 2). If authenticity is increasingly equated with *performing* authenticity, then the boundaries between self-exploration and self-marketing dissolve. This dynamic does shape both how individuals present and how they understand themselves – a process that is further reinforced by the recursive feedback loop between digital profiles and offline self-perception.

3.2.5 Industrialization of Self-Narratives: Turning Identities into Products

Social media alters the logic of public appearance by collapsing the boundary between creator and consumer. Social media users do not simply inhabit existing narratives; they pre-produce their self-narratives according to marketable templates and then adapt their lived experiences to fit these predefined structures. This industrialization of identity construction follows the logic of consumer capitalism and neoliberalism, where selfhood is no longer an emergent process but a pre-assembled product, crafted from mass signifiers before it is even lived. The underlying reward structures reinforce this process: validation is quantifiable in the form of likes, shares, and algorithmic visibility, which standardize identity performance into measurable engagement metrics. And these "likes" and "follows" lose their meaning when used inflationary and get economized, thus used for different purposes, for instance when people "follow" or "like" a shop or Café in order to get discounts. The constant drive for visibility and validation fosters an economy of self-performance, where individuals both consume and produce identity narratives according to market logic. The public sphere, rather than being a space of discourse and interaction, risks becoming a void where identity is displayed, evaluated, and exchanged according to norms

deprived of meaning connected to individuals instead of businesses. The logic of digital identity production seeps into offline interactions, reinforcing a cultural shift in which personal narratives are increasingly structured by external validation and aesthetic optimization, decoupled from values and aims individuals might actually care about. Arendt's notion of action as something unpredictable and relational is thus eroded in favour of a mode of being that prioritizes self-presentation, turning the public space from a realm of human engagement into a marketplace of curated selves.

4 Conclusion and Outlook

Contributing to the growing literature on "scaffolding bad" (Spurrett et al. 2025) and the potential harms of environmental factors and social structures on narrative practices (cf. Fabry 2024a, b; Byrne 2024; Osler 2024, 2025), we argue in this text that social media not only shapes the minds and concrete narratives of individuals, but also that it alters the very practice of self-narration. Drawing on Arendt's differentiation between acting and producing, we characterized the outcome of social media self-narrative practices as "pre-produced self-narratives" – identity constructs formulated in advance and then used as a lens to interpret feelings, actions and beliefs. In order to understand the implications of this transformation, we identified key features of social media self-narratives, such as their materialization, inevitable staging, altered temporality, visual primacy, reward structures, and the pressure to narrativize experience. We then examined how these features introduce new constraints, expose individuals to heightened external influences, and contribute to the standardization of self-expression. While social media encourages for self-expression and self-curation, it also introduces new forms of constraint, exposure, and instability. The digital self is both more malleable and more vulnerable, shaped as much by external forces as by individual agency. What seems as an empowering tool of self-fashioning operates within a structure that profoundly influences self-narration, experience, and self-understanding.

We notice that our focus on the constraints imposed by social media, we risk overlooking the significant agency individuals have in resisting or subverting these influences. While we highlight the standardizing effects of social media, users may actively shape or challenge the narrative structures these platforms offer. Additionally, our analysis may not fully capture the varying impacts of social media across different cultural and demographic contexts, where experiences of self-narration can differ significantly. Our concern lies in the narrowing of narrative and experiential possibilities. When selfhood is increasingly shaped by pre-scripted templates, the space of appearance itself becomes less open to difference and transformation.

A particularly promising direction for future research concerns the role of gender in the formation of pre-produced self-narratives. Normative life scripts and expectations may shape the aesthetic forms through which individuals present themselves, particularly in visually oriented media environments. This raises important questions about for whom selfhood is allowed to appear as open-ended and plural, and for whom it remains tightly scripted.

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