

Mihai GAVRILESCU*

Book review of *The Shaping of the Parasocial Self: On the Psychology of Relationships and Intimacy in the Digital Era* (1st ed.), by Johanna L. Degen, Springer Nature Switzerland, 2025, 227 pages

Parasocial interaction has long served as a framework for theorizing forms of mediated intimacy that carry genuine social weight despite their structurally asymmetrical character. Horton and Wohl's (1956) foundational concept of "intimacy at a distance" established the terms of a conversation that subsequent scholarship has substantially complicated, most notably through the distinction between episodic parasocial interaction and the more durable formations captured by the concept of parasocial relationships (Dibble et al., 2016; Giles, 2002; Rubin & McHugh, 1987; Tukachinsky et al., 2020). That trajectory of elaboration has also meant a gradual loosening from the field's original anchoring in celebrity culture and broadcast media. It is within this expanded and somewhat unsettled conversation that Johanna L. Degen's *The Shaping of the Parasocial Self: On the Psychology of Relationships and Intimacy in the Digital Era* makes its timely entrance. Degen's intervention is particularly well-timed. Parasociality is no longer a phenomenon confined to television audiences or fan cultures; it is now deeply woven into the everyday fabric of digital life.

The book's central claim is correspondingly ambitious: digital environments do not merely provide new venues for parasocial engagement, but actively reorganize how identity and social experience are structured. To make this argument, Degen introduces the concept of "worlding practices", a move that allows her to treat digital interactions as generative rather than merely reflective of social meaning. The framework encompasses social media, platformed intimacy, and, more provocatively, AI-mediated companionship, a domain where emotionally invested relations with artificial agents have begun attracting serious scholarly attention (Lou, 2022; Maeda & Quan-Haase, 2024; Skjuve et al., 2021). The book's ultimate contribution reaches beyond an updated cartography of parasocial phenomena: what Degen is really after is a broader account of how the social self is being remade under digital conditions, a claim whose scope is as generative as it is demanding of scrutiny.

Structurally, the book moves from conceptual groundwork toward something more empirically grounded: a sustained engagement with the specific relational textures of digitally mediated life. The opening chapter returns to the classical framework of parasocial interaction, arguing that digital environments have stretched its explanatory reach well beyond the celebri-

* National University of Political Studies and Public Administration (SNSPA), Bucharest, Romania,
Email: mihai.gavrilescu@comunicare.ro, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3469-3568>

ty-audience dyad that originally defined it, repositioning parasocial engagement as a recurrent and unremarkable feature of how people communicate in modern digital contexts. What follows is a chapter that takes on the heavier theoretical lifting: an account of how digital infrastructures do not simply host social life but participate in the formation of the social self. Online and offline relational experience are presented here not as parallel tracks but as increasingly entangled, with platform environments quietly reorganizing the conditions under which intimacy, recognition, and belonging get negotiated in the flow of everyday communication, a point that, while not entirely novel, is developed here with notable conceptual care.

The middle chapters move into more specific terrain. Dating applications appear as sites where platform logics govern not only how romantic interaction unfolds but also how users come to present themselves to prospective partners, while social media environments serve as the ground on which followers cultivate what are, by any reasonable measure, emotionally meaningful attachments to influencers and content creators. Subscription platforms such as OnlyFans receive comparable attention, treated here as sites where parasocial intimacy acquires an explicitly commodified and sexualized character. These are familiar examples, but Degen handles them with enough analytical precision to avoid the descriptive flatness that can afflict this kind of taxonomy.

Perhaps the most genuinely interesting sections of the book concern human-AI interactions, a domain where the parasocial framework is under real pressure to prove its continued usefulness. Conversational agents and AI companions are treated as relational environments in which users may come to attribute something like meaning to what are, structurally speaking, algorithmic systems. The empirical literature Degen draws on here is suggestive rather than settled: anthropomorphic design has been shown to elicit parasocial responses toward AI agents (Maeda & Quan-Haase, 2024), chatbot encounters have been examined for the emotional registers they activate (Li & Zhang, 2024), and experimental work indicates that AI systems can produce genuine feelings of being understood in their interlocutors (Yin et al., 2024). None of this resolves the deeper conceptual questions about whether parasociality is the right framework for these interactions, and one occasionally feels Degen might have pressed harder on that point. A chapter on the practical meanings of parasociality in everyday life, such as diary studies, family dynamics, and habitual smartphone use, grounds the more abstract argument in the texture of lived experience before the synthesis arrives. The final chapters pull the argument together through the concept of the “parasocial self”, the proposition that cumulative engagement with digital media gradually sediments into the relational expectations through which individuals make sense of social life more broadly. It is an ambitious synthesis, and its success will likely depend on how generously the reader is willing to extend the concept’s original logic.

The book’s analytical strength lies in a combination that is more difficult to achieve than it may seem: genuine theoretical ambition grounded in an empirical foundation that resists easy homogenization. Degen is less concerned with parasocial interaction as a bounded media phenomenon with tidy operational definitions, instead mobilizing it for broader analytical work by treating it as a structural component of contemporary subjectivity itself. To do so, she draws explicitly on critical theory, neoliberalism, Rosa’s account of social acceleration (Rosa, 2013), and the emerging literature on cyber-neoliberalism, situating parasocial dynamics within the structural conditions of late-modern digital life rather than treating them as isolated media effects. In this regard, the distance traveled from Horton and Wohl’s (1956) founding intuition about mediated “intimacy at a distance” is considerable. Whereas that

framework located parasociality in the distinctive one-sidedness of broadcast spectatorship, Degen situates parasocial processes within the grain of everyday digital practice. This move resonates with broader efforts in the field to refine the conceptual distinction between parasocial interaction and the more enduring formations designated by parasocial relationships (Dibble et al., 2016), as well as to map the psychological consequences of both across an expanding range of media environments (Tukachinsky et al., 2020).

Methodologically, the book is deliberately eclectic, and this is mostly a virtue. Interviews sit alongside diary studies, while digital ethnography is brought into conversation with experimental findings. Most unusually, a cyber-autoethnographic engagement with the AI companion Replika appears among the methods, a move that is either the book's most methodologically adventurous moment or its most contestable one, depending on one's priors. The effect is not methodological incoherence but something more like coherence by disposition: a sustained effort to track how parasocial engagement is actually lived across dating applications, online communities, and the kind of low-intensity smartphone use that rarely announces itself as theoretically significant. The breadth is real, and it allows Degen to move across several domains of digital life without being captured by the particular logics of any single platform. That said, there is a trade-off worth mentioning: the empirical materials here are not organized around the production of a standardized research program, as they function, more modestly, as illustrations of the relational mechanisms the theoretical argument has already identified. Readers seeking systematic validation of the book's central claims may need to recalibrate their expectations. The empirical chapters offer something more textured instead: an account of how the dynamics Degen theorizes surface in users' reported experiences of navigating digital life. Whether that is sufficient will depend, in part, on one's expectations of what a book of this kind should accomplish.

The "parasocial self" stands as the book's most distinctive theoretical contribution, marking a meaningful departure from what the field has traditionally asked parasocial theory to do. Earlier research focused on the relationship between an audience and a specific media figure (the fan and the celebrity, the viewer and the television personality), whereas Degen turns to something more diffuse and, arguably, more consequential: the cumulative psychological residue of repeated parasocial engagement across the full ecology of digital environments, an ecology McLuhan might have recognized, if not anticipated. Digital platforms, on this account, are not neutral conduits for relationships that form elsewhere, but rather infrastructures that, over time, quietly recalibrate relational expectations and emotional orientations in ways their users may never consciously register.

The theoretical move finds substantive support in the surrounding literature. Research on parasocial engagement with social media influencers (Lou, 2022) has shown how such dynamics can shape users' perceptions of authenticity and felt closeness in ways that bleed into their broader relational sensibilities. The emerging scholarship on human-AI interaction presses the argument further still. Anthropomorphic design, it turns out, does not need to deceive users to be effective, but it can encourage the attribution of social responsiveness to artificial agents even among users who know perfectly well they are interacting with a system (Maeda & Quan-Haase, 2024). Studies of chatbot encounters have begun to document the relational textures of these exchanges with some care (Li & Zhang, 2024), and experimental work suggests that AI systems can generate something genuinely resembling the feeling of being heard, even when the artificial nature of the interlocutor remains fully transparent to the user (Yin et al., 2024). Taken together, this body of work lends Degen's extension of parasocial theory in-

to human-AI interaction a degree of empirical credibility it might otherwise lack. And yet the very elasticity of the “parasocial self” concept invites a question the book does not fully resolve: when parasocial mechanisms are extended across social media, dating platforms, AI companions, and the ambient connectivity of everyday smartphone use, one starts to wonder where the concept’s edges are. The risk, and it is a real one, is that “parasocial” comes to mean something so expansive that its analytical specificity quietly dissolves, leaving it indistinguishable from mediated sociality in general. Degen is not unaware of this tension, but future research will need to do more work on the conceptual boundaries if the architecture is to retain its critical edge in increasingly hybrid communication environments.

The book’s most evident strength is also its most intellectually ambitious move: the decision to treat parasociality not as a marginal byproduct of media consumption but as a phenomenon structurally embedded in modern subjectivity. It is a reframing that demands a lot from the concept. Earlier research (Rubin & McHugh, 1987) had already established that parasocial engagement could develop into psychologically meaningful bonds with mediated figures, bonds that, for many individuals, carry genuine emotional weight. What the book adds is the argument that such processes are no longer confined to the bounded encounter between an audience and a media figure, but now operate across multiple digital contexts simultaneously, gradually shaping the relational expectations through which people make sense of social life at large. Parasociality, on this reading, is not something that happens to individuals in front of screens, but becomes part of the deeper reorganization of social interaction that digital saturation has set in motion.

The interdisciplinary reach of the project is another genuine asset, even if it occasionally strains under the weight of its own ambitions. Degen draws on media psychology, critical social theory, and digital communication research without allowing any single tradition to dominate, and the result is an account that keeps analytical pressure on both the psychological and the infrastructural dimensions of the phenomenon. The concept of digital environments as “worlding practices” does useful theoretical work here as it provides a way of explaining why parasocial engagement now spills so far beyond the celebrity-audience relations where the literature first found it, reaching into the far more ordinary and diffuse spaces of contemporary digital life, and increasingly into the uncharted territory of human-AI interaction.

The empirical material assembled in support of these claims is notably varied. Bringing together interviews, experiments, digital ethnography, and diary studies, the book develops a methodological range wide enough to give the argument purchase across several quite different contexts: the platform-mediated choreography of romantic self-presentation in dating applications, the affective investments that accumulate in influencer-follower relationships on social media, and the stranger, less theoretically settled landscape of emotional engagement with conversational AI systems. Each of these domains raises its own interpretive challenges, and the book handles the variation with more agility than such a broad canvas might lead one to expect. It is also worth noting that the book closes with a chapter on practical implications, for media literacy, sex education, counselling, and policy, a gesture toward applied relevance that scholars working in adjacent professional fields will find useful.

These strengths, however, are accompanied by notable limitations. The analysis remains primarily conceptual in orientation, which means that methodological procedures are not always fully articulated. Moreover, the empirical examples tend to serve as illustrations of theoretically grounded arguments, rather than as independent evidence that substantively informs or tests them. The empirical base also skews heavily toward WEIRD societies (Western, Ed-

ucated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic), a sampling bias that may inadvertently constrain the generalizability of what are, at times, relatively expansive claims about digital subjectivity. Furthermore, while dating applications, influencer cultures, and AI-mediated interaction receive sustained analytical attention, other domains in which parasocial dynamics are clearly operative, such as gaming communities or participatory fandom cultures, remain comparatively underexamined.

None of this seriously diminishes what the book achieves. By bringing classical parasocial theory (Dibble et al., 2016; Giles, 2002; Horton & Wohl, 1956; Tukachinsky et al., 2020) into productive dialogue with research on influencer-driven social media engagement (Lou, 2022) and the still-unsettled scholarship on human-AI relationality (Skjuve et al., 2021), Degen constructs a synthesis that places parasocial engagement squarely within contemporary debates about digital intimacy and the changing organization of social life. The limitations are worth registering, but they do not undermine the ambition or the contribution.

Degen's book makes a meaningful contribution to the literature. The concept of "parasocial self" performs substantive intellectual work, encouraging readers to reconsider parasociality not as a curiosity of media consumption but as a psychological condition actively shaped by the infrastructures of today's digital life. Routine engagement with platforms, influencers, and algorithmic systems appears here as part of the ongoing process through which individuals negotiate identity, belonging, and emotional regulation, not despite the mediated character of these encounters, but through it. One question, however, remains: whether the "parasocial self" signals a broader transformation of subjectivity under digital conditions or instead reflects a more historically specific configuration shaped by the political economy of platform capitalism. Degen does not fully resolve this question, and the ambiguity is consequential enough to merit attention. It is also, perhaps, part of what makes the book productively open to debate. Scholars across media psychology, digital sociology, and communication studies will find much to engage with here. The book's interdisciplinary reach, connecting established research on parasocial engagement in social media environments (Lou, 2022) with the still-developing literature on relational dynamics in human-AI interaction (Li & Zhang, 2024; Maeda & Quan-Haase, 2024; Skjuve et al., 2021), gives it a range that few contributions to this field can match. Whether or not the "parasocial self" survives intact as a concept through the empirical scrutiny it will inevitably attract, Degen has produced something genuinely useful: a contribution capacious enough to orient future research on the relationship between digital infrastructures and human subjectivity, and rigorous enough to make that orientation feel theoretically grounded rather than merely suggestive.

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