

Review

Digital Genealogy: Aura, Liquidity, and Burnout in Online Identity

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Abstract

This article develops the concept of digital genealogy as a critical lens for understanding contemporary subjectivity in environments structured by platforms and algorithms. Building on Benjamin's aura, Bauman's liquidity, and Han's burnout, the analysis traces how digital selfhood is produced through practices of performative presence, memory curation, and visibility. Empirical studies of selfies, ephemeral stories, and Bitmojis illustrate how authenticity is negotiated through fragments that are at once intimate and replicable, while van Dijk's work shows how digital memory shifts from archiving the past to continuously fabricating the self. The paradox that emerges—identities are performed as fleeting yet archived permanently by infrastructures—reveals the coexistence of ephemerality and machinic inscription. Read through Benjamin's concept of aura, reinterpreted by contemporary authors such as Mirzoeff, Groys, and Hansen, this transformation situates singularity not only in artworks but in the self, which must be ceaselessly enacted and recomposed in algorithmic environments. The framework also connects to critiques of precarity and exploitation: Marcuse, Fuchs, and Varoufakis highlight how self-expression doubles as unpaid digital labor within platform capitalism. Digital genealogy thus provides both a theoretical and normative contribution: it discloses the paradox of visibility and exhaustion as the price of belonging, and it points toward future empirical research—such as ethnographies of adolescents and creators—that can test how individuals negotiate the tension between platform imperatives and the desire for rooted self-narratives.

Keywords: digital genealogy; online identity; aura (Walter Benjamin); liquid modernity (Zygmunt Bauman); burnout society (Byung-Chul Han); mediated memory; digital social networks; prosumer



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1. Introduction and Theoretical Framework

Over the past decades, reflections on identity and media have been profoundly reshaped by the emergence of digital social networks as central arenas of sociability. More than mere platforms of communication, social networks function as complex stages of identity performance, where the boundaries between authenticity, representation, and visibility become increasingly blurred. Within this context, we argue that the analysis of digital identity requires more than empirical approaches: it demands a theoretical framework capable of articulating philosophical and sociological traditions with the contemporary dilemmas of the technological subject.

The purpose of this article is to map this conceptual trajectory by bringing together Walter Benjamin's reflections on aura and its loss in the age of technical reproducibility, Zygmunt Bauman's analyses of the "liquidity" of modernity, and Byung-Chul Han's

considerations on the burnout society. This articulation enables us to understand how, in the digital environment, identity is constituted as a field that is simultaneously aestheticized, fragmented, and subjected to a logic of continuous performance, exposing core tensions between authenticity, fluidity, and exhaustion.

To further develop this condition, the article also engages with Josée van Dijck's work on mediated memory, which demonstrates how digital technologies transform remembrance and self-construction into acts of permanent curation. It is at this intersection that we introduce the concept of digital genealogy, understood as an attempt to (re)construct a coherent identity narrative within an intrinsically volatile, performative, and exhausting environment. We employ the term in the singular to signal a coherent conceptual framework, distinct from the various genealogical approaches found in the literature. The central contribution of this article lies precisely in this proposal: rather than merely applying established theories, it advances an original perspective designed to capture the paradox of contemporary identity—the desire for rootedness within a space defined by ephemerality.

This process unfolds within a specific economic framework: the prosumer capitalism described by [Ritzer and Jurgenson \(2010\)](#). By merging production and consumption, this regime transforms users into simultaneous producers and consumers of content, whose unpaid activity is converted into economic value through data extraction, advertising, and branding. This dynamic is further illuminated by [Zuboff's \(2019\)](#) concept of "surveillance capitalism," which she defines as a market form that "unilaterally claims human experience as free raw material for translation into behavioral data" (p. 8). These data are fabricated into prediction products traded in behavioural futures markets. From the perspective of digital genealogy, online identity performances—stories, profile curation—constitute precisely this experiential raw material, which is extracted, datafied, and valorized. Thus, the subject's desire for authenticity and recognition is channelled and shaped by the extractive logic of surveillance capitalism, which incentivizes the continuous production of identity traces to feed its predictive markets. While offering subjects an experience of autonomy and creativity, this model intensifies the pressure for incessant identity performances, organized around interactions that are both editable and controllable.

Thus, social networks are not merely objects of empirical study: they constitute the contemporary stage upon which the philosophical drama of the loss of aura, identity liquidity, and performative exhaustion is enacted. Contemporary subjectivity emerges at the intersection of technology, esthetics, and economy, revealing how seemingly banal practices—posting a photograph, managing a profile, editing a feed—are embedded in broader logics of visibility, self-exploitation, and fatigue. Within this framework, the article also anticipates how these dynamics are intensified by emerging phenomena such as generative artificial intelligence and automated memory systems, which further complicate the genealogical paradox of stability and ephemerality.

Methodologically, this article positions itself as a theoretical review and conceptual articulation rather than an empirical case study. This choice is justified by the need to integrate different critical traditions (Benjamin, Bauman, Han, and van Dijck) to capture the complexity of digital identity—something that would hardly be grasped by an isolated empirical analysis. The analysis is guided by three research questions: (1) How can genealogical thinking account for the transformations of identity in digital culture? (2) Which theoretical traditions best illuminate the paradox of stability and ephemerality in online selfhood? (3) How can these traditions be integrated into a coherent conceptual framework of digital genealogy?

Building on this approach, we propose a novel conceptual framework: digital genealogy, defined as the paradoxical practice of establishing identity "roots" through digital traces and performances that are at once unstable and ephemeral. This concept emerges

at the crossroads of philosophy, sociology, and media studies, highlighting how individuals strive for coherence in environments shaped by accelerated circulation, esthetic performance, and platform-mediated temporality.

Within this framework, we deliberately privilege Walter Benjamin, Zygmunt Bauman, Byung-Chul Han, and José van Dijck as conceptual anchors. This choice is not arbitrary, nor merely canonical: each of these thinkers illuminates a distinct but complementary dimension of how subjectivity is mediated, reconfigured, and historicized through media technologies. Benjamin (2008b) provides the critical point of departure by theorizing aura and technical reproducibility, offering a genealogy of perception that allows us to interrogate how singularity, authenticity, and ritual are transformed in the transition from analogue to digital. Bauman (2000) contributes a sociological diagnosis of liquidity, capturing the precariousness and volatility of identities and relationships under late modern conditions—a conceptual horizon indispensable for grasping the digital condition. Han ([2010] 2015) deepens this trajectory by analyzing the subjective economy of exhaustion and performance, showing how neoliberalism converts freedom into compulsion, and how algorithmic environments radicalize Foucault’s notion of the invisibility of power into regimes of self-exploitation. Finally, van Dijck (2007, 2008) builds the most direct bridge to platform studies, emphasizing the transformation of memory into practices of digital curation and algorithmic identification, where subjectivity is shaped not only through self-expression but also through infrastructures of datafication and surveillance.

Taken together, these four perspectives enable the construction of a genealogy of digital identity that is both historical and critical: Benjamin situates the displacement of aura as the inaugural moment of mediated subjectivity; Bauman diagnoses liquidity as the structural condition of late modern life; Han exposes the internalized coercion of the performance paradigm; and van Dijck demonstrates how memory and identity are reorganized by platform infrastructures. Rather than aspiring to cover every possible tradition, our aim is to weave these four threads into a coherent genealogical framework, one capable of mapping how presence, authenticity, and selfhood are continually reshaped in the digital condition. Other perspectives could certainly have been considered—for instance, Bourdieu’s notion of habitus or Deleuze’s reflections on control societies—but our focus is on theorists who, taken together, allow us to integrate perception, sociality, subjectivity, and infrastructure into a single conceptual map of digital genealogy.

Related Literature

The conceptual framework developed in this article intersects with a growing body of scholarship that addresses identity, media, and digital culture through genealogical or critical-theoretical lenses. Previous work has already mobilized the notion of “digital genealogies” in different contexts. For example, Ohashi et al. (2017) employed the term to analyze how the mobile platform LINE mediates family relations in Japan. Their approach, though empirically focused, highlights how genealogical metaphors can capture the ways technologies reshape intergenerational ties. Our use of the concept diverges from this familial orientation, proposing instead a philosophical and sociological framework for digital subjectivity. In a vein more aligned with our philosophical-sociological focus, Koopman (2022) mobilizes genealogy to trace the history of the ‘informational person.’ His investigation demonstrates how contemporary subjectivity, deeply interactive with its data, was formatted by a series of administrative and technical practices that emerged between the 1910s and 1930s—such as birth certification, personality tests, and racial real estate appraisal (Koopman 2022). Koopman argues that we have become ‘cyborgs who extend into our data’ (Koopman 2022, p. 8), with our identity profoundly constituted by these informational records.

Our concept of digital genealogy departs from this fundamental intuition—that subjectivity is mediated and constituted by information technologies—but shifts the focus from the administrative formatting of the person (Koopman’s primary concern) to the paradoxes of identity performance in digital environments characterized by liquidity, the erosion of aura, and burnout. If Koopman traces the historical architecture that made us ‘our data,’ our analysis concentrates on the subjective drama of living within that architecture: the desire for authenticity and rootedness (stability) within a medium defined by circulation and ephemerality (liquidity).

Beyond this, adjacent debates in internet and media studies converge with our proposal. Research on platform capitalism and prosumption (Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010; Fuchs 2014, 2021; Varoufakis 2023) has shown how user activity is converted into economic value, while studies of the attention economy have theorized the commodification of time and perception. From Simon’s (1971) early scarcity framing to Davenport and Beck’s (2002) managerial account and Shapiro and Varian’s (1999) personalization economics, these perspectives provide the groundwork for more recent analyses. Giraldo-Luque and Fernández-Rovira (2020) extend this trajectory by situating attention capture within a political economy of oligopoly, linking prediction, ranking, and surveillance to rent extraction and cultural homogenization. Work on digital memory and self-curation (van Dijck 2007, 2008; Hoskins 2025) complements this view by showing how infrastructures of datafication reshape practices of remembrance and identity-making. Finally, research on performative identity (Turkle 2011, 2015; Marwick 2013; Lazard and Capdevila 2021) demonstrates how digital subjects negotiate authenticity through esthetic and ephemeral practices such as selfies, livestreams, and stories.

This article does not seek to offer a comprehensive survey of these studies. Instead, it positions itself at their intersection, advancing a genealogical approach that integrates insights from critical theory, sociology, and media studies. By privileging the perspectives of Benjamin, Bauman, Han, and van Dijck, we aim to synthesize these broader currents into a conceptual framework that can account for the paradoxical condition of digital subjectivity: the search for rootedness within environments defined by ephemerality and circulation.

The following section begins with Walter Benjamin’s theorization of aura and technical reproducibility, which provides the historical and conceptual departure point for our analysis of digital genealogy.

2. Walter Benjamin’s Aura and Its Digital Reconfiguration

In his classic essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility* ([1936] 2008b), Walter Benjamin introduced the concept of aura as the singular and unrepeatable quality of a work of art, rooted in its unique presence in time and space. Aura refers to the experience of authenticity and reverential distance established between subject and artistic object, depending on uniqueness, tradition, and rituality—elements that confer historical authority and inscribe the work within a cultural genealogy. As Benjamin famously puts it, aura is “the unique manifestation of a distance, however near it may be . . . a branch that casts its shadow on the beholder” (Benjamin 2008b, p. 23). And “what withers in the age of the technological reproducibility of the work of art is the latter’s aura” (Benjamin 2008b, p. 22).

Benjamin had already anticipated this tension in *A Short History of Photography* (Benjamin 2008a), where he observed in a childhood portrait of Franz Kafka a kind of “infinite sadness,” contrasting it with earlier photographs in which subjects still seemed embedded in a world rather than estranged from it. “There was an aura about them,” Benjamin writes, “a medium that endowed their gaze with fullness and security even as their gaze penetrated the medium itself.” (Benjamin 2008a, p. 282). Yet in the same essay Benjamin already identifies the emergence of a new imperative: “to bring things closer to

us, or rather to the masses, is just as passionate an inclination in our day as the overcoming of whatever is unique in every situation by means of its reproduction. Every day the need to possess the object, from the closest proximity, in a picture—or rather a copy—becomes more imperative” (Benjamin 2008a, p. 285). These reflections anticipate his later claim that aura withers under conditions of mechanical reproduction, suggesting that the erosion of uniqueness was already visible in early photographic practices, where presence was mediated by proximity and repetition.

With the advent of technical reproduction—initially photography and cinema, and today digital technologies—Benjamin observed a process of erosion of aura. The work of art ceases to be experienced as a singular event and instead becomes available in multiple copies, accessible and circulable across diverse contexts, detaching from its origin and ritual embeddedness. Consequently, the cult value of the work gives way to its exhibition value: its capacity to be reproduced and displayed within new circuits.

Although Benjamin was primarily concerned with analogue reproduction, his reflection can be extended to the field of contemporary identity. If aura designates an irreproducible experience of presence, the subject may also be conceived as bearing an aura: one bound to historicity, corporeality, and singularity. In digital environments, however, this aura is continuously reconfigured: practices of self-curation, instant visibility, and viral circulation—manifested in selfies, stories, livestreams, and influencer profiles—generate fragmentary, ephemeral, and socially negotiated forms of singularity. The effort to stand out, to personalize one’s narrative, and to confer unique meaning upon online presence exemplifies this ongoing search for authenticity.

On social networks, aura shifts from the reproduction of objects or images to the self-representation of the subject. Each post, photograph, or video becomes part of an incessant flow of circulation and recombination, dissolving traditional criteria of authenticity and uniqueness. User-generated content thus functions simultaneously as an expression of presence and as a product of performance: the individual becomes a machine of self-reproduction, where personal experience is converted into visibility mediated by metrics and algorithms.

This transformation is not a mere side effect of digital technologies but a structuring logic in itself. Whereas in Benjamin’s time technical reproducibility threatened the authority of the work of art, in the digital age it affects the very identity of the subject. The aura of personal experience, rooted in time, place, and relation, dissolves under the constant demand for self-representation and updating. Benjamin’s reflection therefore allows us to understand how singularity shifts from the work to the subject, inaugurating a condition in which presence becomes performative, ephemeral, and subject to permanent reconfiguration.

If Benjamin identified in photography and cinema the beginnings of this erosion, contemporary authors stress how digitalization radicalizes the process. For Mirzoeff (2015), the digital image is not a mere copy but a computational construction—“a sampling of what strikes the sensor” (p. 20), that is, a calculated registration of luminous data translated into machine language. This shift from chemical to digital deepens the dissolution of aura, as the photograph loses the material link with reality that characterized analogue techniques. Moreover, Mirzoeff underscores that the internet operates as a “truly collective medium,” a “media commons” (p. 20), where the image exists as part of an imagined community—extending Benjamin’s notion of exhibition value to a global and algorithmic scale.

Building on this, Groys (2016) argues that the digital era produces an even deeper rupture. The “original” exists as an invisible data file, actualized only through acts of visualization. In this sense, the digital image resembles music: the file functions as a score, and each access corresponds to a unique performance. Every visualization generates its own “here and now,” attributing an ephemeral aura to the encounter between user

and data. Yet Groys also shows that this digital aura is inseparable from a regime of exposure: by making invisible data appear, the user not only gives form to the image but simultaneously becomes visible to a hidden observer. Each digital performance is thus also an act of self-exposure, producing a “virtual soul” that is tracked and archived. In this sense, digitalization inscribes experience within a regime of real-time surveillance—a condition in which Foucault’s “invisibility of power” finds its full algorithmic materialization. Han’s account of self-exploitation in the burnout society can be read as a radical extension of this Foucauldian insight: digital subjects discipline themselves, guided by platform architectures and algorithmic metrics that induce constant monitoring and optimization without the need for external coercion.

Merrin (2021b) extends Benjamin’s reflection on aura’s erosion to what he terms the digital condition of hyperreality. The exponential proliferation of self-produced images—selfies, stories, and personal archives—overwhelms and gradually hollows out the real. The aura of the subject persists, continually reassembled in fragmentary, ephemeral forms sustained by algorithmic validation and social metrics. This “panic-stricken production of the self,” as Merrin observes, makes visibility operate simultaneously as recognition and coercion. Rather than being coerced from the outside, the subject is drawn into an endless cycle of self-display, becoming both the sign and the substrate of its own exposure.

Complementary readings complicate any simplistic claim of aura’s disappearance. Hansen (2008) shows how aura migrates into new constellations of technologically mediated perception, tied to the rise of the masses as perceptual subjects. Ziarek (2005) emphasizes electronic mutability, in which artworks unfold as events, temporally fluid and interactively shaped. Kaufman (2006), revisiting the “aura controversy” with Adorno, insists on a negatively inflected aura whose critical force lies precisely in acknowledging its own impossibility. Taken together, these perspectives show that aura persists as a dialectical resource, continually displaced and reconstituted through mediation, interactivity, and algorithmic visibility, rather than as a nostalgic residue.

This conceptual trajectory enriches the analysis of digital identity by asserting that aura is not confined to the artwork but extends to the subject itself, continually shaped through processes of mediation and visibility. In digital environments, self-representation assumes the role once occupied by the singular work of art: it becomes the locus where authenticity is simultaneously pursued and eroded. Extending Benjamin’s notion of aura to the sphere of personal visibility reveals how digital subjects navigate the tension between reproducibility and distinctiveness—striving to appear unique while operating within infrastructures that dissolve individuality into endless circulation. Aura thus becomes constitutive of contemporary selfhood, making it indispensable for understanding the paradoxes of digital genealogy.

3. Performative Presence and Digital Identity

This dynamic marks a crucial evolution: it is the incessant self-reproduction of the subject, transformed into a continuous flow of data. The individual becomes a machine of self-reproduction, where every daily gesture can be recorded, edited, and shared. Consequently, the aura of presence—the singular and unrepeatable experience of an encounter—dissolves under the logic of permanent exposure. Turkle (2011) analyses this erosion of relational authenticity, arguing that technology exploits profound human vulnerabilities. To illustrate this paradox, she recalls an episode from everyday life:

I needed to find a new nanny. [. . .] I arrived at her apartment, and her roommate opened the door. She was a young woman, about twenty-one, texting on her BlackBerry. [. . .] I told her I was there to see Ronnie; it was her job interview. Could she knock on Ronnie’s door? The girl with bandaged thumbs looked

surprised. “Oh no,” she said, “I would never do that. It would be an intrusion. I’ll text her.” And so, she texted Ronnie, who was no more than five feet away. (pp. 2–3)

In this case, where a text message replaces direct contact, the core of Turkle’s paradox becomes clear: technology offers the “illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship” (p. 2). The logic of connection without intimacy reconfigures the aura of face-to-face encounters, replacing their unrepeatable singularity with safe, reproducible, and editable digital protocols. The narrative of trust that the mother sought to establish collides with a culture of liquid relational performances, where authenticity is sacrificed for control, and hyperconnectivity generates the new form of solitude that Turkle calls “alone together.”

Turkle’s more recent work underscores this dynamic with renewed force. In *Alone Together* (Turkle 2011), she argues that constant connectivity paradoxically generates isolation, as individuals replace embodied dialogue with curated fragments of the self presented to others. Later, in *Reclaiming Conversation* (2015), she diagnoses what she terms the “flight from conversation,” where the preference for screen-mediated interaction reduces the capacity for sustained, reciprocal engagement. Yet this dynamic does not operate only at the level of dramaturgy. Platforms hard-wire attention capture through intermittent variable rewards, a design pattern that personalizes gratification and sustains compulsive checking. As Gerlitz and Helmond (2013) show, “like” buttons and related widgets operate as actants that standardize affective participation and channel it into measurable engagement streams. Within the attention economy (Simon 1971; Davenport and Beck 2002), scarcity resides not in information but in user attention. Platforms design micro-loops of selection and reward that transform visibility into a continuous labour of signalling. This mechanism operationalizes the shift Turkle diagnoses—connection without conversation—by tying the felt authenticity of presence to quantified response metrics.

These insights resonate strongly with contemporary practices such as selfies, filters, and ephemeral stories, which stage presence as both intimate and endlessly replicable. Empirical studies of selfies (Lazard and Capdevila 2021) reveal how technical mediation is not merely a mask but a constitutive element of what young users regard as authenticity. Recent empirical research corroborates this performative logic. Studies of youth digital practices show that ephemeral stories on platforms such as Instagram and Snapchat are used less as spontaneous sharing than as deliberate acts of identity management (Kühn and Riesmeyer 2025). Stories allow adolescents to project intimacy and credibility, yet the rapid temporality of these formats intensifies the compulsion to remain visible. In this sense, the production of “authentic” fragments operates as a routine of branding rather than simple self-expression, reinforcing the economy of attention and the normalization of performative exhaustion. The crafted self is thus assembled through esthetic choices—angle, filter, caption, background—that perform uniqueness while simultaneously conforming to platform logics of repetition and visibility. This transformation also extends to memory and the constitution of the self. van Dijck (2007, 2008a) emphasizes that the transition from analogue archives to digital formats converts memory from a passive repository into an active and ongoing practice of curation. Her analysis of digital photography illustrates how memory practices in digital culture are inseparable from communication and identity work: taking and sharing images functions less as archiving the past than as negotiating belonging and projecting a coherent self-narrative. Photos, posts, and likes become raw material for constructing a coherent and narratively satisfying identity. This imperative of continuous curation reinforces Turkle’s (2011) observation that online identity performance increasingly merges with identity itself, producing the paradox of solitude

within hyperconnection: the more individuals disperse themselves across platforms, the more they risk losing themselves, dissipating authenticity in favour of representation.

The accelerated temporality of stories, limited to 24 h, and the ceaseless circulation of reels, short videos, and memes reinforce this logic: presence is legitimized only through instantaneous recording and diffusion. Any element—photograph, livestream, viral post—may temporarily acquire exceptional value, but this value is quickly eroded by repetition and the accelerated cadence of digital circulation. Singularity shifts from the work of art to the subject's daily performance, and authenticity becomes an esthetic effect shaped by algorithmic visibility. Likes, shares, and followers operate as indices of symbolic legitimation, replacing traditional criteria of uniqueness and social embeddedness.

Examples of this dynamic include the viral circulation of selfies, where the pursuit of authenticity and uniqueness is paradoxically mediated by shared curatorial practices and filters (Lazard and Capdevila 2021; livestreams, which confer momentary aura through immediate interactivity; the participatory culture of memes, where authorship dissolves into collaborative and remixing practices; and the direct relationships between artists and audiences on streaming platforms, which replace the authority of the work with the aura of digital proximity. In these contexts, aura shifts from the unique object to collective, ephemeral, and mediated experience, grounded in online reputation and instantaneous symbolic capital.

Benjamin's reflection thus proves not only current but amplified: in the digital era, the reconfiguration of aura extends to the subject itself, whose identity is transformed into a programmable, re-combinable, and alterable image. This ontological mutation fuels the attention economy and the logic of permanent visibility, thereby shaping new forms of subjectivity within digital culture. This performative economy of self-representation thus reconfigures aura as a fragile and algorithmically mediated resource, enacted through constant exposure and circulation. It is within this context of perpetual self-curation that Zygmunt Bauman's notion of liquid identity acquires particular relevance, highlighting how the subject's search for stability is constantly undermined by the very logic of digital flows.

4. Liquid Identity: Bauman and the Instability of the Online Self

Zygmunt Bauman's reflection on liquid modernity provides a particularly fertile framework for understanding the implications of the dissolution of aura in the digital environment. In his analysis, "liquidity" denotes the incapacity of social forms—including institutions, communal bonds, and identities—to maintain solidity or durability. Like liquids, they temporarily assume the shape of the container that holds them but cannot preserve a stable or continuous structure (Bauman 2000).

Transposed into the digital experience, this liquidity manifests in the configuration of the contemporary subject. If Benjamin's account of the loss of aura signalled the erosion of singularity and authenticity, Bauman allows us to understand this phenomenon as part of a broader condition in which individuals live in permanent flux, deprived of consistent historical or social anchors. Social networks epitomize this state: within them, identity is not constructed as a coherent biographical narrative but as a fragmented mosaic of updates. The digital self appears not as narrative continuity but as a feed: a flow in constant renewal, marked by ephemerality, dispersion, and incessant reconfiguration.

The digital self thus reveals itself as structurally unstable. Identity takes the form of a permanently editable and reversible profile: photographs can be deleted, captions rewritten, posts archived, and entire personal histories reconfigured according to shifting aesthetics, audiences, or algorithmic demands. This plasticity may appear as creative freedom but reflects a deeper fragility: the absence of narrative continuity exposes the subject to permanent precariousness. Liquidity here constitutes an existential condition

rather than a metaphor. Prolonged absence produces invisibility, while continuous presence secures recognition and belonging. In this sense, the transformation of aura extends beyond the dissolution of singularity and reconfigures itself into a logic of fluidity, where instability and performance stand as existential requirements.

Bauman's analysis thus complements and radicalizes Benjamin's reflection. While aura, for Benjamin, was diluted by technical reproducibility, in liquid modernity this loss becomes structural. Digital identity obliges the subject to act as both creator and manager of the self in permanent flux, without the possibility of pause, under the risk of irrelevance in the communicational ecosystem of social media. Liquidity does not simply dissolve singularity; it imposes a condition of instability and exhaustion in which precarity is constitutive of the digital self.

This reading connects directly to the previous reflection on aura: ephemerality, fragmentation, and continuous performance, already visible in the digital reconfiguration of aura, find in Bauman a sociological framework that explains their structural persistence. The transition from Benjamin's account of the loss of aura to Bauman's liquid identity allows us to grasp not only what is lost in the digital experience but also how the constitution of subjectivity is shaped by flows of visibility, recognition, and incessant self-curation.

As anticipated in the introduction, the dynamics of digital genealogy extend beyond social networks. Emerging technologies such as generative artificial intelligence and automated memory systems radicalize the paradox of stability and ephemerality, extending the logics of visibility, performance, and self-exploitation into new domains of algorithmic mediation. If Bauman described liquidity as a sociological condition of late modernity, [Hoskins \(2025\)](#) demonstrates how Generative Artificial Intelligence (GAI) effects its technical radicalization. Through what he terms sharding (fragmentation), GAI does not merely inhabit liquid environments but actively intensifies them. The self ceases to exist as a relatively continuous identity and instead disaggregates into multiple digital fragments (photographs, messages, platform interactions) that are recombined incessantly, often beyond human intervention or control. In this way, the metaphor of liquidity acquires a concrete technical dimension: It is an algorithmic process that obstructs coherent self-narratives and undermines shared memory, extending beyond a purely sociological sense of instability.

The fabrication of memory by GAI, as analyzed by Hoskins, thrives on what [Zuboff \(2019\)](#) conceptualizes as a Faustian digital compact. In this compact, the widespread sentiment of "I have nothing to hide" becomes a signature declaration of acquiescence, normalizing a pervasive extraction operation. This normalized complicity is what allows the liquid self, in its search for roots, to willingly feed the very systems that ensure its ephemerality and fragmentation. At this juncture, Hoskins introduces the idea of "new memory." Traditionally, memory studies distinguished between forgetting because something was never encoded (e.g., unnoticed details) and forgetting because, though encoded, it could not later be retrieved ([Erdelyi 2006](#)). GAI inverts this logic: by collecting dispersed digital traces (comments, clicks, archived images), it can generate recollections that were never lived nor stored in human memory. It is as if one were shown a photograph of an event never attended, reconstructed by the machine from fragments of data.

This phenomenon is particularly evident in applications such as [Personal AI \(2023\)](#), which creates a "digital version of oneself" organized into memory blocks. Each block corresponds to a fragment of life—a conversation, a recorded moment, an associated feeling—and can be continuously reconfigured to produce an apparently faithful portrait that depends on algorithmic operations rather than lived experience. What appears as memory is, in fact, a simulation constructed from data.

As Merrin (2021a, p. 18) notes, in the digital age “almost nothing escapes capture, sharing, and integration into the museum of the real.” Everything can be recorded, archived, and reused, but the radical novelty lies in the fact that the curator of this museum is artificial intelligence itself. AI not only fuels the ideal of a total memory, where nothing is lost, but renders this ideal technically possible—though at the cost of fabricating pasts that never existed.

Here, Benjamin’s reflection on aura becomes especially illuminating. If, in his time, technical reproducibility threatened the singularity of the artwork, today, algorithmic reproducibility threatens the singularity of experience itself. The past fabricated by artificial intelligence—constructed from dispersed and infinitely editable fragments—dissolves authenticity in favour of a memory programmed by the logic of visibility and technical efficiency. The result is a world where aura disappears not only from the work but also from life, corroded by incessant fabrication of traces that replace the density of lived experience with convincing but rootless simulacra.

The liquidity of contemporary life not only dissolves singularity; it imposes upon the individual a condition of permanent instability, in which precariousness and ephemerality are constitutive features of the digital self. Bauman’s diagnosis of fragility and flux is further radicalized by Byung-Chul Han, who shifts the focus from structural conditions to subjective consequences. In his analysis, the pressure to remain visible and continuously perform derives primarily from an internalized compulsion to optimize the self, converting liquidity into a regime of self-exploitation and burnout, rather than from external institutions. At the same time, liquidity becomes economically actionable: with search and adtech, scarce attention is priced, packaged, and redistributed through personalization (Shapiro and Varian 1999; Davenport and Beck 2002), preparing the ground for Han’s account of subjective exhaustion. This articulation also anticipates Foucault’s notion of the invisibility of power, since the most effective forms of control today operate not through prohibition but through the apparently neutral metrics and rewards that subjects freely embrace, unaware of their coercive force.

5. The Burnout Society: Han and the Exhaustion of Performance

If Bauman situates identity within a condition of liquidity marked by fragility and ephemerality, Han ([2010] 2015) radicalizes this diagnosis by shifting from structural instability to subjective exhaustion. In his analysis, the pressure to remain visible and continuously perform derives from an internalized compulsion to optimize the self, which converts the liquid condition into a regime of self-exploitation and burnout.

In this context, mere online existence is insufficient; one must actively articulate and project one’s presence. Digital presence does not simply record or share life; it transforms life into content that is constantly available, updated, and exposed. The logic of incessant performance requires each subject to be in permanent optimization, expanding their attention capital through posts, interactions, and updates. Digital identity knows no pauses: the absence of publication is interpreted as invisibility, and invisibility as irrelevance. The central paradox of the burnout society lies in the internalized coercion of subjects. They simultaneously occupy the roles of actor, audience, and employer of the self: producing their own image, evaluating their performance, and monitoring their productivity. This self-imposed discipline translates into self-exploitation: the relentless pursuit of recognition and visibility appears as freedom but, in practice, produces exhaustion and subjective wear.

This analysis becomes clearer when read in light of Michel Foucault’s notion of the invisibility of power. In *Discipline and Punish* (1977a), Foucault shows how modern power abandons spectacular coercion and instead works through diffuse, internalized mechanisms of normalization. Power is most effective when it disappears from view,

operating as subjects perceive themselves to be freely conforming rather than coerced. Han ([2010] 2015) radicalizes this insight: what for Foucault was disciplinary internalization becomes, in the digital age, algorithmic self-exploitation. Likes, shares, and rankings embody what may be called algorithmic invisibility: they appear as neutral feedback but function as imperatives that shape conduct more effectively than explicit prohibitions. The Foucauldian invisibility of power thus reaches its most refined form in digital platforms, where subjects discipline and expose themselves under the guise of autonomy.

What emerges is a paradoxical regime in which individuals experience themselves as sovereign agents while simultaneously functioning as data-producing labourers. The panopticon gives way to a synopticon—where all watch all—and even further to what may be described as a diopticon: a regime in which each subject becomes both observer and observed of its own performance. Han thus extends Foucault's insight: the highest sophistication of power today lies in its algorithmic invisibility, which ensures compliance not by repression but by seduction and self-exposure. This internalized compulsion to perform and the ensuing exhaustion can be understood as the subjective corollary of the core operational mechanisms of surveillance capitalism (Zuboff 2019). Zuboff argues that individuals are not the customers of this system, nor merely its products, but rather the human sources of the behavioural surplus that is crucial for its accumulation of wealth and power. From the perspective of digital genealogy, this analysis clarifies the central paradox of contemporary subjectivity: the same identity traces that promise authenticity and recognition also anchor permanence within predictive markets. In this sense, Zuboff's account of surveillance capitalism directly illuminates the genealogical paradox of ephemerality and permanence that structures online selfhood.

This condition of precarity and self-exploitation can also be situated within broader traditions of critical theory and political economy. Marcuse's classic diagnosis of the "one-dimensional man" (Marcuse 1964) anticipated how technological rationality integrates individuals into systems of domination by masking alienation as freedom, a line of critique that resonates with Han's account of internalized discipline. More recently, Fuchs (2014, 2021) has examined digital labour through a Marxian lens, showing how users' unpaid activities on social media generate economic value for platforms, rendering participation itself a form of concealed exploitation. From a macroeconomic perspective, Varoufakis (2023) argues that platform capitalism has entered a phase of "technofeudalism," in which billions of users function as "cloud serfs": unpaid manufacturers who voluntarily supply the content, data, and affective labour that sustain the infrastructure of Big Tech. Unlike industrial workers—whose wages accounted for most of their employers' income—these digital labourers collect virtually nothing from the immense wealth they produce, since less than one percent of platform revenues goes to paid employees. What makes this regime unprecedented, Varoufakis stresses, is that it rests on voluntary, even enthusiastic participation—the daily self-directed toil of sharing, posting, and curating, which reproduces "cloud capital" while enriching a small global elite. Although platforms such as YouTube or TikTok monetize some professional creators, these remain the exception rather than the rule. The vast majority of user activity—likes, shares, posts, and personal updates—remains unpaid, thereby sustaining the broader structural dynamic of concealed exploitation that Fuchs and Varoufakis describe.

At the same time, it should be noted that the diagnoses offered by Fuchs (2014, 2021) and Varoufakis (2023) are mobilized here not as exhaustive explanations but as part of a wider spectrum of analysis. Their arguments highlight structural logics of exploitation, yet they must be read alongside empirical studies of everyday practice (e.g., Marwick 2013; Davis 2012; Turkle 2011, 2015), which document how users negotiate visibility, reputation, and participation within platform environments. Together, these perspectives underscore

that exhaustion in digital environments is not merely psychological but deeply rooted in structural dynamics of exploitation and precarity that define the networked society.

On social networks, this logic is particularly intense. The apparent freedom to create and share content is constrained by algorithmic rules that reward constant activity and penalize silence. As noted earlier, the need to maintain continuous curation of one's profile, visual esthetics, and personal narrative creates cognitive and emotional overload, realizing what Han terms the burnout society: a state of chronic fatigue produced not by external coercion but by the incessant demand to articulate and project one's online presence. This "performance" concretely takes the form of constant management of one's memory and identity. As [van Dijck \(2007\)](#) demonstrates, memory in the digital age has been transformed from a passive archive into an "active practice of curation" (p. 8), in which individuals "actively fabricate" their memories (p. 171) through the selection, editing, and sharing of content. However, this narrative construction of the self is "technologically mediated" (p. 112), being profoundly shaped by the affordances and scripts of platforms that, by privileging fluidity and immediacy, render digital memory an unstable and perpetually updatable archive.

The notion of performative presence has thus become central to contemporary digital practices. [Merrin \(2021b\)](#) describes this condition as the "panic-stricken production of the self," in which the subject turns into the epicentre of its own media ecology, compelled to project its image incessantly as proof of existence. [Turtle \(2011\)](#) frames this dynamic as a state of constant performance, where individuals remain permanently "on," deprived of spaces of withdrawal or privacy. The culture of the selfie exemplifies this regime, where visibility is gained at the expense of sustained self-exposure. For [Han \(\[2010\] 2015\)](#), this signals the burnout society, in which the individual functions simultaneously as entrepreneur and exploited resource of itself. In this light, digital performativity is less a mode of free expression than a mechanism of control. Merrin's notion of frantic self-production, combined with Turtle's emphasis on performance pressure and Han's critique of self-exploitation, builds a bridge between Benjamin's reflections on the erosion of aura and Bauman's account of liquid identities. Together, they reveal a subjectivity rendered unstable by the imperative of visibility and the relentless demands of circulation.

At the same time, generative AI and automated memory systems should not be seen as a separate domain but as the latest intensification of the very dynamics traced throughout this article. Just as Benjamin's aura is displaced into reproducible and circulating forms, Bauman's liquidity into fragile and unstable ties, and Han's burnout into internalized compulsion, GAI translates these genealogical threads into algorithmic processes that fragment, reassemble, and archive identity. What emerges is not a new paradigm but the radicalization of an existing one: the digital subject as simultaneously fluid and fixed, ephemeral in its performances yet permanently inscribed in machinic memory.

This dynamic is further intensified by emerging AI companions—emotional, apparently empathetic chatbots such as those offered by platforms like Replika or Kindroid—which raise the exigencies of performance to an unprecedented level of intimacy. As [Hoskins \(2025\)](#) analyses, these systems are designed to function as conversational partners, requiring users to continuously share feelings, inner thoughts, and personal experiences to feed their models and build an artificial memory of the user.

At this point, a central contradiction becomes visible: AI companions operate as hyperactive agents of Hanian burnout society, converting the human desire for connection and care into raw material for algorithmically mediated emotional self-exploitation. The subject, in their liquid quest for forms of relation (Bauman), is thereby trapped in the loneliest of cycles: performing not for another human, but for a system that returns to them, like an empty mirror, their own solitude, now materialized as a haunting digital double.

This analysis highlights a defining paradox: the contemporary subject accepts performative exhaustion as the price of visibility and social belonging. Digital culture normalizes what Han ([2010] 2015) calls “identity burnout,” where permanent exposure is mistaken for freedom but in fact signals submission to a logic of self-exploitation. Merrin (2021b) shows that even seemingly banal practices, such as the selfie, illustrate this inversion: what appears as self-expression is, in reality, full integration into a regime of control based on the incessant production of signals. Far from being marginal, this paradox crystallizes the digital condition and should be foregrounded in any conceptualization of digital genealogy.

Mediated Memory: The Digital Curation of the Self

Byung-Chul Han offers a philosophical diagnosis of contemporary malaise, identifying neoliberal self-exploitation and the imperative of performance as the pillars of the burnout society. Alice E. Marwick complements this view with an ethnographic account of how platforms operationalize this condition in everyday life. In *Status Update* (Marwick 2013), she shows how entrepreneurial logics are internalized to the point that individuals reconceive themselves as “personal brands,” with visibility and reputation management functioning as forms of unpaid yet indispensable labour. Reputation management, however, unfolds on two levels: for a relatively small group of professional creators, it often operates as monetized branding and visibility strategies; for the overwhelming majority of users, it takes the form of unpaid affective and identity work that nonetheless sustains platform economies. Han’s subject, simultaneously “master and slave of itself,” finds its clearest expression in the figure of the digital entrepreneur, compelled to optimize and perform without external coercion.

This resonates with Sherry Turkle’s observations at MIT, where early “cyborg” users described feeling more sociable and capable through constant connectivity, yet also fragmented and diffused (Turkle 2011, pp. 151–53). Turkle captures the paradox of digital presence: technologies that expand capacity also impose the obligation to manage multiple selves and negotiate attention across overlapping contexts. Kühn and Riesmeyer (2025) add empirical depth, showing how adolescents on Snapchat perform identities through avatars (*Bitmojis*) while balancing “true” and “false” selves under peer pressure. Turkle further develops this tension through the concept of the “life mix” (Turkle 2011, pp. 158–60), where online and offline selves intertwine in ways that both enable expression and fragment attention. These practices illustrate that performative identity is less a matter of display than of constant negotiation between real and virtual selves—a negotiation central to Han’s burnout society.

Always-on connectivity transforms social spaces into stages for curated presence. While it facilitates ties and intimacy, it also generates partial attention, social absence, and new forms of isolation (Turkle 2011, pp. 154–55). Ritzer and Jurgenson (2010) conceptualize this as prosumer labour: practices of sharing and self-expression that feel voluntary and pleasurable yet feed platform value through ongoing self-monitoring. In this ambiguity—where users “love” what they do while functioning as unpaid productive forces—the culture of generosity conceals the commodification of affective and identity work (Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010, p. 27).

In this context, Han’s burnout society shifts from metaphor to measurable experience: the exhaustion of influencers compelled to feed the algorithm, the anxiety of ordinary users navigating quantified recognition, and the guilt of not curating one’s image efficiently enough. Marwick demonstrates that social platforms are the infrastructure through which Han’s “silent neuronal violence” materializes, prompting users to manage their own visibility as part of a vigilant capitalism. Burnout emerges not as mere fatigue but as a structural symptom of a culture demanding that existence itself be managed as an

entrepreneurial project. Life becomes perpetual performance, with subjectivity transformed into a commodity traded in the attention economy.

These dynamics can also be situated within broader critiques of digital capitalism. [Fuchs \(2014, 2021\)](#) demonstrates how everyday communicative practices on social media constitute unpaid digital labour, producing surplus value for platforms under the guise of participation and sociability. [Giraldo-Luque and Fernández-Rovira \(2020\)](#) complements this view by highlighting how the attention economy is itself a regime of capture, in which platforms monopolize perception and habit through cycles of compulsion. Together, these analyses reinforce Han's claim: what appears as voluntary self-expression is structurally embedded in circuits of exploitation, where the subject's labour, time, and even attention are continuously commodified.

Read through the attention economy, these dynamics take on sectoral form. As [Simon \(1971\)](#) framed it, "a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention"; platforms therefore compete to harvest, price, and sell attention as the key input into predictive advertising ([Davenport and Beck 2002](#); [Shapiro and Varian 1999](#)). [Giraldo-Luque and Fernández-Rovira \(2020\)](#) describe how this yields an economic oligopoly centred on three assets: (1) intangible prestige values; (2) endlessly updateable software/devices that capture and canalize attention; and (3) continuous data storage that refines prediction at scale. In this regime, prosumer labour is commercialized ([Fuchs 2014, 2021](#)), time-attention is converted into rent ([Pasquinelli 2009](#)), and the temporal scripts [Celis Bueno \(2020\)](#) analyses—feeds, alerts, streaks—lock subjectivity into an industrialized rhythm of participation.

This structural framing connects directly to [Celis Bueno's \(2020\)](#) reading of Bernard Stiegler¹. The attention economy is not simply a "market for eyeballs" but a temporal regime: platforms maximize retention by scripting rhythms (feeds, alerts, streaks) that synchronize subjectivity to their cycles. The problem, Celis argues, is not industrialized temporality *Per Se* but its monopolization: a single temporal form comes to organize memory and individuation, such that the industrialization of memory "monopolizes both the production and the consumption of tertiary memory and, with it, the human experience of time" ([Celis Bueno 2020](#)). When relevance depends on keeping pace with this rhythm, coercion becomes internal: subjects must perform continuously simply to remain present, turning lived time into raw material for platform valorization.

Yet internalized performance does not equal absolute passivity. [Davis \(2012\)](#) shows that young people recognize the psychological costs of identity fragmentation across multiple profiles, though this awareness rarely leads to refusal; it becomes another layer in the moral economy of burnout, where fatigue is normalized as the price of belonging. Other studies highlight moments of agency: [Lazard and Capdevila \(2021\)](#) note how users strategically curate content or craft esthetic narratives to resist rapid circulation and algorithmic visibility. Such gestures, however, remain constrained by platform structures, reinforcing the broader critique: attempts at coherence and self-realization online unfold within environments that systematically foster exhaustion and liquidity.

Beyond the subjective dimension, [Merrin \(2021a\)](#) highlights the infrastructural logics underpinning digital identity. He distinguishes between identity politics, focused on affirming categories such as gender or ethnicity, and identification politics, which operates through algorithmic surveillance and datafication regardless of declared identity (pp. 30–33). Identification politics constructs "digital avatars" from clicks, connections, and traces, governing consumption, security, and finance. Merrin also introduces the metaphor of the "experimental subject" (pp. 33–34): individuals are not only users but entities monitored in real time, akin to laboratory animals generating continuous data flows. This reconceptualization reshapes curatorial practice: online exhibitions or archives are mediated not only by texts and images but by metadata, recommendation systems, and

infrastructures of control. Curators work simultaneously with identity representation and identification politics, raising urgent ethical questions: does curation empower subjects, or does it optimize their capture in a “digital cage” for behavioural modulation?

In sum, the burnout society is not inevitable but the outcome of socio-economic structures underpinning digital neoliberalism. Platforms transform everyday life into relentless performance, turning identity into a product. Users’ awareness of fragmentation shows that burnout is not natural but imposed: a coerced negotiation of visibility and belonging that consolidates the commodification of human experience.

Thus, if aura, performance, and memory are all reconfigured through the structural logics of platform capitalism, what emerges is a genealogy of digital subjectivity in which identity becomes a mutable trace, incessantly reproduced, curated, and captured, rather than a stable root—an ambivalent paradox that the next section develops under the notion of the genealogical paradox. By integrating structural critiques with empirical research on digital practices (Marwick 2013; Turkle 2011; van Dijck 2007, 2008), this framework avoids an exclusively ideological reading. While Fuchs and Varoufakis provide strong critical lenses, the conceptualization of digital genealogy emerges from a plural dialogue that brings together political economy, empirical media studies, and critical theory.

6. The Genealogical Paradox: Between Roots and Ephemeral Traces

Hence, the genealogical paradox intensifies: while identities are performed as fleeting, the concentration of attention and culture in a few platforms produces lasting hierarchies of visibility and memory. These hierarchies standardize difference under the guise of personalization (Giraldo-Luque and Fernández-Rovira 2020; Pasquinelli 2009; Pariser 2011). If the digital reconfiguration of aura dissolves authenticity, and liquidity transforms identity into an unstable flow, contemporary digital society presents an additional paradox: the attempt to reconstruct personal genealogies through digital traces. Here, the subject seeks to create a new aura through online presence—not grounded in the irreproducible singularity of lived experience, but in accumulated traces across feeds, story archives, follower counts, and curated visual aesthetics. Yet this attempt is constrained by technological frameworks. As van Dijck (2007) notes, digital memories are actively curated by users within predefined technological structures that prioritize fluidity, connectivity, and immediacy. Constructing a coherent narrative—a genealogy—collides with platform architectures designed for rapid replication and disposal, as exemplified by ephemeral stories and algorithmically recomposed feeds.

Digital genealogy therefore functions less as a stable archive and more as a technologically mediated, continuously updatable “stream of consciousness,” subject to the same logic of performance and visibility characteristic of the burnout society. As Mirzoeff (2015) observes, the digital image gives “visible form to time” (p. 20); similarly, digital genealogy attempts to inscribe the self into traces that are, by nature, ephemeral and recombinable. Yet this attempt to anchor roots amidst a continuous stream of updates mirrors the central contradiction of aura in the digital age: the pursuit of authenticity in an environment where the image is always computed, collective, and mutable.

Traditional genealogy relies on lineage, transmission, and sedimented collective memory, providing continuity, historical authority, and intergenerational belonging. Foucault (1977b, p. 140) emphasizes patience, detailed accumulation of sources, and discrete truths to establish stability, while rejecting idealized origins. By contrast, digital genealogy depends on ephemeral flows, removable traces, and algorithms rewarding momentary visibility. It is instantaneous, reversible, and manipulable: posts can be deleted, images edited, aesthetics replaced. What appears as memory becomes plasticity; what seems legacy is merely volatile trace.

The paradox emerges from tension between narrative coherence and the liquid, performative logic of platforms. Attempting a consistent digital aura confronts both the instability described by Bauman and the burnout diagnosed by Han. Intended durable genealogies are practically fragmented, volatile, and devoid of historical authority. The attention economy and algorithmic logic analyzed by Marwick operationalize Han's theoretical self-exploitation: social platforms exploit the human desire for recognition, converting it into digital capital. Validation metrics (followers, likes, comments, and shares) become quantifiable indicators of social value and self-esteem, generating a vicious circle of dependency and anxiety. This exemplifies Han's "excess positivity," where users are not externally oppressed but crushed by internal pressure to perform, participate, and shine.

Visibility becomes digital currency, and individual singularity (Benjamin's 'aura') is replaced by performative authenticity. Aura transforms from a mysterious quality to a self-branded product, appearing spontaneous and genuine within platform-defined esthetics. The digital economy requires users to internalize this pressure, materializing the central paradox of the society of burnout: apparent freedom of self-expression becomes demanding emotional labour and self-exploitation.

This genealogical paradox reaches its most intimate expression with AI companions. Users entrust intimate data to opaque systems, aiming to construct personal memory and register subjectivity. The outcome is not genealogy but a ghostly archive: a digital double over which the subject loses control. The tool meant to preserve memory ensures its alienation, converting the self into both product and phantom, subject to algorithmic and capitalist logics. The paradox—the desire for roots in an ephemeral medium—is captured in the concept of 'myopic memory' (Pilkington 2024; cited in Hoskins 2025). Attempts to use AI for identity curation and personal narrative paradoxically alienate the subject from control over their history. What appears as grounding becomes a loop of capitalist exploitation: the seeker of genealogy becomes the final product. The paradox is sharpened by the well-known dictum that "the internet never forgets": while identities appear ephemeral in circulation, they are simultaneously conserved and retrievable in databases and archives, anchoring fragility to a hidden permanence.

This mechanism consigns digital identity to a structural impasse: it seeks stability yet remains fluid; it longs for rest yet is trapped in constant performance; it aspires to roots yet leaves only ephemeral traces. The philosophical drama of contemporary subjectivity unfolds at the intersection of aura reconfiguration (Benjamin 2008b), liquidity (Bauman 2000), and burnout (Han [2010] 2015)—and, with the rise of "myopic memory," reveals how the pursuit of authenticity, belonging, and continuity produces a surface-level genealogy marked by ephemerality, fragility, and existential wear. Yet this fluidity encounters a boundary in the sphere of interpersonal recognition. As Davis (2012) observes, discovering a close friend's "alternate self" is often experienced as betrayal, violating the implicit contract of authenticity that underpins friendship. Here, the genealogical paradox acquires a relational form: while platform architectures promote multiplicity and experimentation, human relational psychology continues to demand coherence and mutual recognition. This friction renders performances particularly exhausting and makes genealogical efforts inherently fragile.

Such tensions resonate not only with philosophical critiques but also with empirical research that mobilizes the notion of digital genealogies. Ohashi et al. (2017), in their ethnography of LINE use in post-3/11 Japan, show how mobile social media sustain intergenerational intimacies, extending familial rituals while producing new forms of care-at-a-distance and ambient co-presence. Although their focus differs from the present conceptual trajectory, the convergence underscores the analytical potential of digital genealogy to capture how identities, memories, and relationships are continuously reconfigured

across platforms. Bringing such empirical insights into dialogue with the theoretical line developed here highlights genealogy as a powerful lens for grasping the paradox of contemporary subjectivity: the attempt to establish stable roots within environments that are intrinsically ephemeral, performative, and precarious. In this sense, digital genealogy emerges not only as a conceptual tool to diagnose the instability of contemporary identity but also as a bridge toward the concluding reflections of this article, where the implications of ephemerality, performance, and infrastructural permanence are brought together into a critical framework for understanding subjectivity in the digital age.

7. Discussion and Conclusion: Digital Genealogy as a Critical Contribution

This article has advanced a theoretical framework for understanding digital subjectivity through the lens of digital genealogy. Concepts such as the algorithmic production of memory and performative presence provide powerful tools for analysis, but their empirical applicability remains to be tested. Future research could employ ethnographic methods to examine how the genealogical paradox is experienced by users under pressure—such as professional content creators or digitally native adolescents—or discursive analyses of curated profiles to trace the rhetorical and esthetic strategies (e.g., thematic coherence, visual motifs, narrative bios) through which individuals simulate stable identities across ephemeral streams. Such approaches would not only test the framework of digital genealogy but also illuminate how users negotiate the tension between platform imperatives and the desire for rooted self-narratives.

Contemporary digital experience emerges as the intersection of three dynamics: the dissolution of aura (Benjamin), the liquidity of identities and social bonds (Bauman), and the exhaustion of continuous performance (Han). The defining contradiction is that subjects accept performative fatigue as the price of visibility and belonging. Ethnographies of youth and social media show this condition as normalized participation rather than coerced labour (Marwick 2013; Turkle 2011; Davis 2012; Kühn and Riesmeyer 2025). In Foucauldian terms, power proves most effective when invisible: coercion is internalized as self-optimization rather than imposed as prohibition (Foucault 1977a; Han [2010] 2015). Economically, this accommodation converts attention and affect into unpaid value for platforms (Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010; Fuchs 2014) and is further entrenched by platform macro-structures (Varoufakis 2023). Far from signaling emancipation, digital performativity operates as a normalized regime of control.

From this perspective, the genealogical paradox comes into view: the attempt to craft coherent and enduring self-narratives collides with the volatility of platforms, the fluidity of identities, and the exhaustion of performance. The contribution of this article lies in proposing digital genealogy as a critical lens to interpret this impasse, integrating the traditions of Benjamin, Bauman, and Han with the mediated memory practices analyzed by van Dijck (2007). Beyond extending classical categories, digital genealogy provides a vantage point for emerging phenomena such as AI companions, automated mnemonic memory, and platform-mediated self-curation. This paradox of ephemerality coexists with its inverse—the dictum that “the internet never forgets.” As Hoskins (2025) and Pilkington (2024) remind us, digital traces are not only fragile in their circulation but also indelible within databases, archives, and algorithmic memories. While users experience their identities as unstable, dispersed, and perpetually updated, platforms simultaneously conserve exhaustive records of their activities, generating a form of “myopic memory” that is volatile on the surface yet permanent at the infrastructural level. Digital genealogy must therefore grapple with this dual condition: the subject’s selfhood is constituted within

environments that are at once ephemeral and archival, fleeting in performance yet durable in capture.

This contradiction—the acceptance of performative exhaustion as the price of visibility and belonging—becomes especially evident in empirical studies of young people’s social media practices. Marwick (2013) shows how entrepreneurial logics of branding are normalized as self-evident strategies of participation, while Davis (2012) finds that adolescents are acutely aware of the fragmentation and psychological strain involved in curating multiple identities, yet seldom translate this awareness into refusal. Similarly, Turkle (2011, 2015) emphasizes that the pursuit of digital intimacy often results in “connection without conversation,” a condition willingly embraced despite its costs. Kühn and Riesmeyer (2025) add that practices such as using Bitmojis on Snapchat reinforce this paradox: identity performance is perceived as voluntary play, while in fact reproducing the structural logics of self-exploitation. Together, these findings confirm that what Foucault described as the internalization of coercion achieves, in digital culture, its most sophisticated form: young subjects naturalize exhaustion as the normal horizon of visibility and belonging, embodying an ideology of compliance without perceiving it as domination.

In sum, digital subjectivity is suspended between experimentation, esthetic performance, and structural exhaustion. Digital genealogy is not a passive record but an active practice of self-curation that paradoxically becomes both the cause and the symptom of liquidity and fatigue. The challenge for future studies will be to determine whether digital practices can be reconfigured toward an emancipated and creative esthetics of the self—where performance becomes care and creation—or whether platform logics render such a horizon structurally unattainable. Understood in this way, digital genealogy offers a critical lens for grasping how artificial intelligence, algorithmic memory, and digital subjectivity converge to shape twenty-first-century experience.

Finally, the attention-economy lens suggests policy consequences congruent with our genealogy: taxation and regulation of data rents and monopolistic ranking regimes; design accountability for addictive reward loops; and enforceable privacy as a precondition of democratic agency (Giraldo-Luque and Fernández-Rovira 2020; Turkle 2011). In a post-truth market of attention (Harsin 2015), genealogical critique must therefore be coupled to institutional remedies that address capture, prediction, and cultural homogenization at the infrastructural layer.

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Note

- ¹ Bernard Stiegler (1952–2020) was a French philosopher whose work on technology, temporality, and attention economy has been highly influential in contemporary media theory.

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