

## **Exploring the Threats and Consequences of Contemporary Digital Life in William Ford Gibson's *Pattern Recognition***

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### **Abstract**

This academic paper centers on the multifaceted terrain of modern digital existence as depicted in William Gibson's seminal novel, *Pattern Recognition*. In a society where technology pervades all aspects of our lives, the narrative of *Pattern Recognition* serves as a compelling microcosm reflecting the challenges, risks, and ramifications linked to our continuously expanding digital realm. The paper delves into the novel's portrayal of the character Cayce and her community, characterized by extensive surveillance, data harvesting, and the pervasive impact of global conglomerates such as Blue Ant. Employing an interdisciplinary approach, it conducts a critical examination of the socio-political and cultural implications of the digitalized era as illustrated in Gibson's world. The research scrutinizes the novel's presentation of the perils of surveillance capitalism, the erosion of privacy, and the vulnerabilities individuals encounter in their digital engagements. From a wide range of contemporary discourse on technology, surveillance, and cyberculture, this article endeavors to provide a comprehensive overview of the threats and consequences associated with contemporary digital life, as presented by Gibson. By doing so, it sheds light on the prescient nature of the author's vision and prompts readers to reflect on the challenges and ethical dilemmas that confront us in an increasingly interconnected and data-driven world. Through this analysis, it becomes evident that *Pattern Recognition* not only serves as a compelling work of fiction but also as a thought-provoking commentary on the complex and intricate web of contemporary digital existence.

**Keywords:** Digital Life, Digital Forum, Digital Threat, William Gibson, *Pattern Recognition*

The article examines the risks and outcomes of modern digital platforms, as indicated in William Gibson's *Pattern Recognition*. This article illuminates the multifaceted realm of online digital forums and the digital existence, delving into the numerous dangers they present and the subsequent influence these dangers have on individuals and society as a whole. While digital forums provide a plethora of opportunities for intellectual enrichment, social interaction, and knowledge dissemination, they are also abundant with a variety of risks that require our attention. From cyberbullying and disinformation to breaches of privacy and radicalization, the perils associated with these virtual spaces are both diverse and troubling. The repercussions of these dangers reach far beyond individual experiences, impacting the very structure of our online and offline communities, as well as our collective feelings of security and trust in the digital domain.

Gibson pin points the threats of online digital forum and the potential repercussions for an individual's digital in his novel *Pattern Recognition*. Through The protagonist Cayce Pollard, Gibson vividly depicts the problems of digital life and its subsequent aftermath. She is represented as an iconic digital user of the contemporary times. Through her, Gibson analyzes the life of a person's digital existence. In her role as an advertising consultant, Cayce diligently traces the origins and recurring patterns present in this domain. Being a part of marketing agency and as a logo designer, she decodes every other pattern of the online viral footage. In relation with the same, she enters a random digital forum called F:F:F where she finds the clue for the anonymity behind the creator – “Guerrilla creator” (47).

After developing curiosity, Cayce joins the digital forum namely F: F: F. Fetish: Footage: Forum which is a website, discussion forum, and chat room that Ivy truly created and is similar to contemporary social media groups. The purpose of the website, which Cayce often checks, is to critique anonymous movie posts. Cayce makes connections with other people who share her obsession with the video clips through her involvement in F: F: F, and she becomes excited about the community's efforts to find the footage's origin and significance. As the novel elaborates,

There are perhaps twenty regular posters on F:F:F, and some much larger and uncounted number of lurkers. And right now there are three people in Chat, but there's no way of knowing exactly who until you are in there, and the chat room she finds not so comforting. It's strange even with friends, like sitting in a pitch-dark cellar conversing with people at a distance of about fifteen feet. (4)

In the case of Cayce, the Blue Ant advertising agency watches all her moves through lurkers of the forum and manipulate her. It is the marketing tech behind Cayce's moves. They utilize the anonymous video clip to create curiosity among the digital consumers. For that people like Cayce in real world become prey for it in their digital life. The Marketing firm Blue Ant after finding her expertise they make her to enter into the digital forum. The idea of digital social media life and its algorithm working on people's personal interest is clarified by Tim Markham in *Digital Life*:

In order to function efficiently, algorithms have to operate at high levels of abstraction, maximizing predictability by reducing the range of possible outcomes in any given interaction between individuals and digital objects. It is not that the programmer decides and enforces outcomes, but that less likely and more chaotic chains of events are excluded, resulting in a social space in which those futures are less likely. It is not a question of rewiring our minds or overriding our capacity for free will; the point is that selfing is always a process not a state of being, a set of practices we more or less manage using whatever resources we find to hand as we make our way about. We do not develop a toolkit and then go out into the world to be us; we do it as we go. This is not to say that we simply make it up, but the process is necessarily experimental or of the footage. (11-12)

Through the character Cayce, Gibson underscores the life style of contemporary youngsters who are involved much in digital life and their active participation in digital

forums like F:F:F. Initially, to engage her time she enters the forum but unfortunately she becomes addicted to the forum. She considers the forum as a comfortable space - “forum has become one of the most consistent places in her life, like a familiar café that exists somehow outside of geography and beyond time zones” (158). Gibson relates the current generation being sensitive to cyberspace in this way. Gibson also highlights the slow pace of her psyche getting addicted to the video clips and her development of curiosity to the anonymous video clips – “It’s time to check in on Fetish Footage Forum and see what Parkaboy and Filmy and Mama Anarchia and her co-obsessives have made of that kiss” (38). Due to over consumption, she becomes addicted. The interest for the pattern behind the footage is the trap of the digital medium, for which she becomes a prey and get into it. The marketing company blue ant serves as the brain behind this online trap.

To get the curiosity the creator employs a branding technique, called guerilla marketing – “Regardless of everything else, the footage has already been the single most effective piece of guerilla marketing ever. I’ve been tracking hits on enthusiast sites and searching for mentions elsewhere” (64). Through these marketing techniques Cayce like individuals develop curiosity and get trapped in the tech companies’ wish. In this case, Cayce’s aimlessness in cyberspace is used by these cyber experts and their marketing strategies. This kind of aimless surfing on the internet can be associated with the term cyber flaneurs. John Hendel in his article *The Life of the Cyberflâneur* underscores the strolling of the cyberflâneur in a chaotic cyber world:

A cyberflâneur, by definition, strolls through the Internet. Little purpose guides his journey, and hours slip by as the individual explores the many different crevices of the ever-growing web, from Wikipedia to Tumblr, from popular news sites to Twitter, from obscure journals to social media. He crawls through them all and is all the stronger for it. How do you turn a corner into the unknown online? You click a link. You go places. Who cares where? The cyberflâneur strolls more for the journey, the experience, the flow of the digital landscape, all to seek without any one destination or goal. He pokes around in Pinterest and dives into Digg, cruises Archive.org and gazes deep into Google Books, ventures into Vimeo and calculates Kickstarter potential. There's never been a better, more suitable time to be a cyberflâneur, after all.

Cayce is one of those cyberflâneurs, who is drawn to cyberspace, as seen by her fixation with the forum and the video. Gibson through the character Cayce underscores the key attraction of cyberspace and the life of users in digital life. Since cyberspace helps them distract from the hard hitting real they opt for the quick transition from reality to the virtual fantasy world like social media platforms. Learning the psychological needs of these people tech companies monetize their time. They also build social media platforms as per the interests of people which makes them choose to stay in that cyber world for an extended period of time for long hours.

For building the social media platforms the tech companies undergoes study of the behavioural patterns of digital users. This data is generated by observing and tracking individuals' actions, behaviors, preferences, or interactions, often used for personalized recommendations or targeted advertising. However in the case of Cayce, the lurkers of

the forum F:F:F: surveil her in all aspect for Blue Ant company's owner Bigend – “The idea that Bigend, or his employees have been lurking on F:F:F: will take some getting used to” (65). Keeping a person under surveillance and tracking their behaviour and capitalizing is said to be surveillance capitalism according to Shoshana Zuboff. This is an illicit surveillance endeavor wherein the behavioral data is meant for commercialization according to Shoshana Zuboff's *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*:

Surveillance capitalism is the puppet master that imposes its will through the medium of the ubiquitous digital apparatus. I now name the apparatus Big Other: it is the sensate, computational, connected puppet that renders, monitors, computes, and modifies human behavior. Big Other combines these functions of knowing and doing to achieve a pervasive and unprecedented means of behavioral modification. Surveillance capitalism's economic logic is directed through Big Other's vast capabilities to produce instrumentarian power, replacing the engineering of souls with the engineering of behavior. (241)

As per Zuboff, here the puppet master is Bigend and his company Blue Ant who is watching Cayce's every move and made her work for finding the anonymous creator - “Bigend- financed search for the maker of the footage” (102). However after surveillance concept, one another threat Gibson highlights is the development of online friendship and the impersonation attacks behind it. For example, Cayce befriends the forum member Parkaboy. The friendship starts with a pop up mail from him regarding the clue of the online anonymous video clip - “Parkaboy's e-mail is text free. There is only the attachment” (22). In this case of Cayce developing trust for a random strange member from the online forum is the contemporary digital users' representation of Gibson. Soon after, within a short span Cayce tells – “Parkaboy is her favourite, on F:F:F” (39). Through which Gibson highlights people developing trust over virtual relationships and the possibility of developing lasting online friendships via social networks. In *Privacy as Trust: Information Privacy for an Information Age*, Ezra Waldman says about the logics behind people's trust on strangers:

Furthermore, a friend in need may ask another friend for advice regarding a particularly sensitive, intimate, or personal problem; trust and confidentiality are implied in context. Trust may be implied from certain professional contexts, like between doctors and their patients and between fiduciaries and their beneficiaries. These explicit and implicit indicia of information security allow the disclosing party to trust that the recipient of her information will continue to respect prevailing norms of confidentiality, thus encouraging sharing by mitigating the risks of disclosure. (53)

As per Ezra Waldman, it can be concluded that Cayce befriends Parkaboy because he helps her professionally to get her the clues of the anonymous video clippings – “But they know one another's passion for the footage” (38). Also it is clear that the social media active members like Parkaboy target the regular digital users by helping them reach their goal. However Cayce gets to know that Parkaboy is just a name of the social media

handle but not the original one. The person behind that impersonates to be Parkaboy and remains the same until the reality is revealed:

She'll find the quickest flight and have your ticket waiting at O'Hare. And I know this seems completely insane, but I need your name. I don't actually know it."

"Thornton Vaseltarp."

"Sorry?"

"Gilbert?"

"Gilbert?"

"Peter Gilbert. Parkaboy. You'll get used to it. What's the bottom line on this flight to Moscow?" (278)

According to Gibson, in the era of social media, this is a serious issue to be concerned about people trusting random strangers of social media forums. Cayce on a circumstance is reminded of her ex-boyfriend when speaking to Parkaboy – "And finds herself remembering the experience of lying more or less happily, or at least pleasantly abstracted, beneath a boyfriend named Donny" (39). The Psychological aspect of Cayce here is revealed for her comfort and trust built with a random internet friend Parkaboy.

Nevertheless Gibson reveals the potential dangers of internet identity and the trustworthiness of an internet character through Parkaboy. Because in an instance he creates a fake digital identity called Keiko to collect a watermark code from a Japanese expert - "I returned to Chicago, then, and Darryl and I, curiosity's cats began to lovingly generate a Japanese persona, namely one Keiko, who began to post, in Japanese, on that same Osaka site"(76). And in another circumstance, Parkaboy shares his worries about his inability to appear in a video call due to his fake identity - "He wants Keiko facetime, and I remain, your frustrated Parkaboy" (77). A user's digital identity is their online social handle on websites and other social media platforms and this proves to be fake and misled identities in most cases, like that of Parkaboy.

Parkaboy is a man in this digital scenario, but he pretends to be a woman in order to take advantage of his personality. Gibson refers to this concept of a man pretending to be a woman on an online platform to get more attention as Gender-bait. Gender-bait is defined as a man posing online as a woman to get the attention of other men and this term is first used by Gibson in his *Pattern Recognition*. This is a part of digital manipulation; the scammers do in the contemporary digital era. Nevertheless, the concept of pretending to be someone who never exists digitally is termed as Synthetic ID theft in the book *Cyber Attack Survival Manual: From Identity Theft to The Digital Apocalypse and Everything in Between* the concept - "That's when an identity that has never before existed is created by scammers" (11).

Considering the effects of digital identity in a cyber-world where information and media are extremely influential and paves way for scams using fake digital identity. The digital identity of a person or a community is considered a valuable digital asset since it is traded in online markets and also for beneficial benefits people use it. Therefore, it is implied that the sense of disconnection from one's genuine self and a loss of authenticity result from the commodification of identity. In the case of Parkaboy, The identity Keiko is monetized to get the watermark clue in return. In relevance with this situation of

Parkaboy's pretention and other digital identity issues Demetra Garbaşevschi in his *Infoselves: The Value of Online Identity* says - "Cyberattacks targeting personal data have increased in frequency and size. Once released online, identity information is no longer controllable by its originator and can, at any point, be subject to aggregation, appropriation or cybertheft, reaching unintended parties with unknown consequences" (14).

Users like Parkaboy of online social media are able to design their individual profiles the way they wish merging the authentic real life personality and the flavoured online personality. Therefore, ignoring their shortcomings and other negative traits to attract Cayce like individuals for their monetary benefits and others as well; the identities of these individuals vary based on the contextual needs. The digital self contrasts with the actual, offline self. Through the characters Cayce, Parkaboy, and the tech company Blue Ant, Gibson highlights the threats of digital life and the consequences an individual face after joining a random digital forum. The consequences are part of the digital life as said by Demetra Garbaşevschi in his *Infoselves: The Value of Online Identity* - "Having an online identity has become unavoidable for anyone with an online presence and is part of the consequences of leading a connected life" (14). Therefore, the study reaches the conclusion that those who engage in digital activities should exercise caution and remain cognizant of the various risks and repercussions that may arise from their digital existence.

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