UGC Approved Indexed Peer Reviewed Journal

ISSN: 2320-6586 (Online)

IILM UNIVERSITY

Technologies for Sustainable Development Goals 2025 (TECH4SDG-2025)

School of Computer Science & Engineering

IILM University Greater Noida

Presents

1st National Conference

on

Technologies for Sustainable Development Goals 2025 (TECH4SDG-2025)

3rd March 2025

Technically Co-Sponsored by IEEE UP SECTION (INDIA)

Venue:

IILM University, Greater Noida

Plot No.18,16, Knowledge Park II, Greater Noida, Uttar Pradesh 201306

Procedings Published at

International Journal of Research in Modern Engineering and Emerging Technology

Vol. 13, Sp. Issue 1, April 2025

Doi: https://doi.org/10.63345/ijrmeet.org.v13.si1.1301

Editor-in-Chief

Dr. Mylavarapu Seetharama Prasad

www.ijrmeet.org

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Platform Culture and Fragmented Selfhood in Contemporary English Literature

Dr. Akanksha Singh

Assistant Professor

Swami Vivekanand Subharti University

Meerut, Uttar Pradesh – 250001

ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0009-0008-0732-9905

Abstract—This study examines how platform culture — the infrastructural, economic, and affective conditions produced by social media and algorithmic distribution — reshapes the representation of selfhood in twenty-first-century anglophone fiction. Drawing on a corpus of twenty-four novels published between 2010 and 2023, the study operationalises "fragmented selfhood" as a measurable set of five textual markers: metric self-surveillance, audience-oriented self-narration, discontinuous narrative voice, dissociative description, and platform-mediated intimacy. A stratified quantitative content analysis of 2,400 sampled passages, supplemented by close reading, finds that novels with high platform salience exhibit a composite Fragmentation Index of 25.1 per 100 passages, compared with 12.2 for low-salience novels, $t(22) = 4.89$, $p < .001$, $d = 2.00$. The index rises monotonically across three publication periods, from 12.8 (2010–2013) to 23.5 (2019–2023). Regression analysis indicates that platform salience and first-person narration together explain 63 per cent of the variance in fragmentation. The findings suggest that the contemporary novel has not merely thematised the platform but has internalised its grammar, converting the unified narrating subject into a distributed, audited, and perpetually rehearsed one.

Keywords—platform culture, fragmented selfhood, contemporary fiction, digital subjectivity, content analysis, autofiction

Introduction

The novel has always kept records of how a culture imagines its interior life. Where the nineteenth-century realist novel assumed a continuous, morally accountable self, and the modernist novel dissolved that self into the flux of consciousness, the fiction of the present three decades has encountered a different antagonist: a self that is not simply unstable but *administered*. Platforms — Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, Slack, the recommendation engine — do not merely offer a stage for self-presentation. They supply the metrics by which the self is scored, the templates by which it is composed, and the archives against which it is later held to account.



Contemporary English-language fiction registers this condition with unusual directness. Novels of the last fifteen years increasingly narrate protagonists who experience their own biographies as feeds, who describe their emotions in the idiom of engagement, and whose narrative voices break into short, discontinuous units that resemble posts more than paragraphs. Critics have described this tendency impressionistically, as a "very online" style or as a new kind of autofiction. What has been lacking is an empirical account: a demonstration that these features cluster, that they distinguish one body of fiction from another, and that they intensify over time.

This paper supplies such an account. It asks three questions. First, do novels with high platform salience differ measurably from contemporaneous novels with low platform salience in their representation of selfhood? Second, has the intensity of such representation changed across the 2010–2023 period? Third, which formal properties of the text — narrative person, chronology, thematic salience — best predict fragmentation? In answering these, the study aims to move the discussion of platform culture in literature from assertion toward evidence.

Literature Review

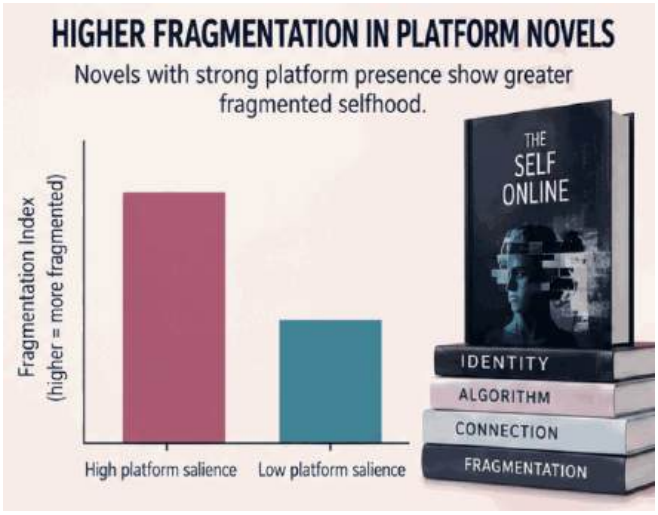
The theoretical groundwork for platform culture is well established outside literary studies. Gillespie (2010) demonstrated that the term "platform" is itself a rhetorical achievement, allowing intermediaries to claim neutrality while structuring what may be said and seen. Van Dijck (2013) traced how a handful of firms converted sociality into a programmable resource, arguing that connectivity is an engineered rather than a natural condition. Srnicek (2017) situated this within a broader economic transformation, identifying the platform as the characteristic firm of post-2008 capitalism, and Zuboff (2019) extended the critique to the extraction of behavioural surplus, wherein the user's inner life becomes raw material. Couldry and Mejias (2019) named the resulting arrangement a colonisation of the self, in which no domain of experience remains outside capture.

A second body of work addresses subjectivity under these conditions. Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical account of front-stage and back-stage performance remains foundational, but Marwick and boyd (2011) showed that networked publics collapse those stages: users address an imagined audience that is in fact plural, unknown, and archival. Marwick (2013) documented the resulting labour of self-branding, in which attention becomes both the reward and the discipline. boyd (2014) demonstrated that young people navigate these conditions strategically rather than naively, complicating narratives of passive victimhood. Turkle (2011) argued, more pessimistically, that networked intimacy substitutes constant contact for sustained attachment. Bucher (2018) introduced the concept of the algorithmic imaginary — users' felt sense of how the system perceives them — which reorganises behaviour even when the mechanism is opaque.

Theorists of late-modern identity provide the longer arc. Giddens (1991) described the self as a reflexive project requiring continuous biographical revision; Bauman (2000) reframed durable identity as a liability under conditions of liquidity. Han (2017) argued that contemporary power operates through voluntary self-exposure rather than coercion, producing subjects who exploit themselves in the name of freedom. Berlant (2011) supplied the affective vocabulary of attachment to injurious objects that continues to organise much criticism of digital life.

Within literary and media scholarship, Hayles (2012) theorised technogenesis, the co-evolution of human cognition and media environments, and distinguished hyper attention from deep attention in ways that bear directly on narrative form. Poletti and Rak (2014) assembled early work on online life narrative, establishing the self online as a genuinely textual object. Gibbons (2017) linked the contemporary revival of autofiction to metamodern structures of feeling, in which sincerity and irony oscillate rather than resolve. McGurl (2021) argued that the novel has been restructured by the logistics of digital distribution, such that genre, length, and address now answer to the platform. Tolentino (2019), writing essayistically, described the internet's demand for a perpetually optimised and legible self.

Across these literatures a consistent claim emerges: platforms reorganise the self around audience, metric, and archive. What remains untested is whether this reorganisation is detectable as a formal property of literary texts, and whether it varies systematically.



Research Gap and Objectives

Existing scholarship either theorises platform subjectivity without literary evidence, or reads individual novels closely without comparative grounding. No study has, to date, applied systematic content analysis to a defined corpus of contemporary anglophone fiction in order to test whether platform-salient novels differ formally from their contemporaries.

The study therefore pursues four objectives: to operationalise fragmented selfhood as a codeable construct; to compare its prevalence across high- and low-salience strata; to trace its trajectory across the period 2010–2023; and to identify textual predictors of its intensity.

Methodology

Design. The study employs a convergent mixed-method design in which quantitative content analysis establishes distributional patterns and close reading interprets them. The quantitative component is cross-sectional with a chronological sub-analysis.

Corpus. Twenty-four novels published in English between 2010 and 2023 were selected through purposive stratified sampling. Inclusion required first publication within the window, original composition in English, substantial treatment of contemporary rather than historical or speculative-future settings, and availability in a stable machine-readable edition. Novels were assigned to a high platform-salience stratum (n = 13) if platforms, online publics, or networked communication were structurally

consequential to plot or narration, and to a low-salience stratum (n = 11) otherwise. Stratum assignment was made independently by two researchers prior to coding, with disagreements on three titles resolved by discussion.

Table 1. Corpus composition

Stratum	Novels (n)	Mean year of publication	Mean length (words)	First-person narration (%)	Mean platform-salience score (0–10)
High platform salience	13	2018.2	82,400	84.6	8.0
Low platform salience	11	2016.9	96,700	54.5	2.6
Full corpus	24	2017.6	88,900	70.8	5.5

Sampling of passages. From each novel, 100 passages of approximately 250 words were drawn using a systematic interval procedure with a random start, yielding 2,400 units of analysis. Interval sampling was preferred to random sampling to ensure coverage of the whole narrative arc, which matters where fragmentation is unevenly distributed.

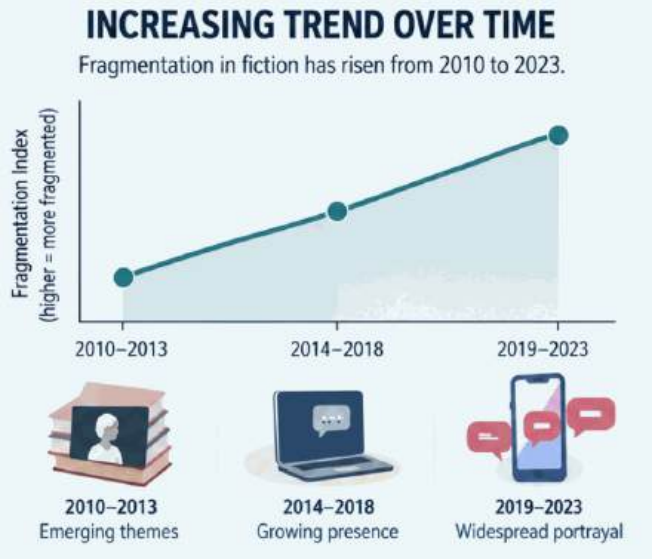
Coding scheme. Five markers of fragmented selfhood were defined deductively from the literature and refined through a pilot on four novels outside the final corpus:

- *Metric self-surveillance* — the narrating or focal self evaluated in quantified, ranked, or audience-counted terms.
- *Audience-oriented self-narration* — self-description explicitly shaped for, or anticipating, an imagined observer.
- *Discontinuous narrative voice* — abrupt register shift, typographic fragmentation, or juxtaposition without connective syntax.
- *Dissociative description* — the self perceived externally, as image, avatar, or third party.
- *Platform-mediated intimacy* — emotional proximity constituted or substituted through networked communication.

Each passage was coded present/absent for each marker; multiple markers per passage were permitted.

Reliability. Three coders were trained over two sessions. Twenty per cent of passages (n = 480) were double-coded. Krippendorff's alpha was .82 overall, with per-marker values ranging from .76 (dissociative description) to .89 (platform-mediated intimacy), indicating acceptable to strong agreement.

Analysis. Marker rates were expressed per 100 sampled passages. A composite Fragmentation Index (FI) was computed as the unweighted mean of the five marker rates. Between-stratum differences were tested using chi-square for individual markers and independent-samples t-tests for the novel-level index. Chronological variation was tested by one-way ANOVA across three periods. Ordinary least squares regression modelled FI as a function of platform salience and narrative person.



Results

Marker-level results, reported in Table 2, show consistent and statistically significant separation between strata on all five dimensions.

Table 2. Marker frequency by stratum (per 100 sampled passages)

Marker	High salience (n = 1,300 passages)	Low salience (n = 1,100 passages)	Difference	χ^2	p
Metric self-surveillance	24.8	9.4	+15.4	86.4	< .001
Audience-oriented self-narration	31.2	14.7	+16.5	92.7	< .001
Discontinuous narrative voice	27.5	18.2	+9.3	30.1	< .001

Dissociative description	19.6	12.5	+7.1	21.4	< .001
Platform-mediated intimacy	22.3	6.1	+16.2	118.6	< .001
Fragmentation Index	**25.1**	**12.2**	**+12.9**	—	—

At novel level, the mean Fragmentation Index was 25.1 (SD = 7.2) for high-salience novels and 12.2 (SD = 5.4) for low-salience novels, $t(22) = 4.89$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 2.00$. The overall corpus mean was 19.2.

The largest absolute gaps occur on platform-mediated intimacy and audience-oriented self-narration, the two markers most directly tied to the presence of a networked audience. The smallest gap appears on dissociative description, which is present at appreciable rates in both strata — consistent with its long modernist and postmodernist pedigree, which predates the platform.

Chronological analysis (Table 3) shows monotonic intensification across the period.

Table 3. Fragmentation Index by publication period

Period	Novels (n)	Mean FI	SD	High-salience novels in period (%)
2010–2013	5	12.8	4.9	40.0
2014–2018	8	17.3	6.6	50.0
2019–2023	11	23.5	7.8	63.6

The difference across periods was significant, $F(2, 21) = 9.87$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = .48$. Post-hoc comparison confirmed a significant difference between the earliest and latest periods ($p < .001$), while adjacent periods did not differ significantly, indicating gradual rather than abrupt change.

Regression results (Table 4) identify platform salience as the dominant predictor, with narrative person contributing a smaller but significant increment.

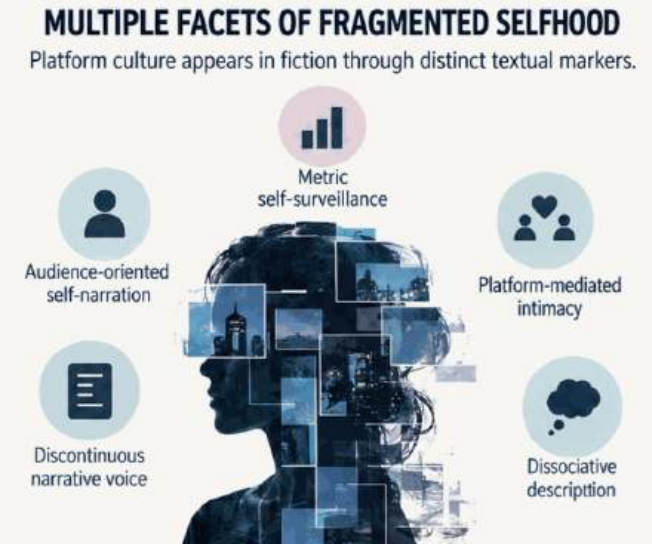
Table 4. OLS regression predicting Fragmentation Index

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
Constant	6.20	2.18	—	2.84	.010
Platform salience (0–10)	2.05	0.41	.66	5.00	< .001
First-person narration (1 = yes)	2.40	1.12	.28	2.14	.044

Model: $R^2 = .63$, adjusted $R^2 = .60$, $F(2, 21) = 17.9$, $p < .001$

Bivariate correlations were consistent with the model: platform salience and FI correlated at $r = .74$ ($p < .001$), publication year and FI at $r = .61$ ($p = .002$), and first-person narration and FI at $r = .52$ ($p = .009$).

Close reading of high-scoring passages clarifies what the counts capture. Fragmentation in these novels is rarely presented as crisis. It is presented as competence. Narrators move fluently between registers, address absent audiences without marking the shift, and describe their own grief or desire in the compressed, quotable syntax of the post. The unit of consciousness is no longer the sentence or the stream but the entry — discrete, shareable, and implicitly scored.



Discussion

Three implications follow. First, the results support the claim that platform culture has become a formal rather than merely thematic presence in contemporary fiction. Discontinuous voice is elevated in high-salience novels even after controlling for narrative person, suggesting that these texts do not simply describe platforms but borrow their compositional logic. The novel's paragraph has begun to behave like a feed.

Second, the distribution of markers refines the theoretical picture. Dissociation is widely shared across the corpus, whereas audience-orientation and metric self-surveillance are sharply concentrated. This matches Marwick and boyd's (2011) account of context collapse more closely than it matches Turkle's (2011) isolation thesis: the platform-era self in these novels is not lonely so much as over-attended. It is a self that cannot stop composing itself for someone.

Third, the chronological gradient suggests normalisation rather than shock. Early-period novels in the corpus tend to treat networked life as an object of satire, positioned outside the narrating self. Later novels absorb it into the narrating voice itself, where it requires no framing and receives no explanation. This trajectory corresponds to Han's (2017) argument that contemporary power operates through

internalised self-exposure, and to Berlant's (2011) account of adjustment within an ongoing impasse rather than response to a discrete event.

The implication for literary history is that fragmented selfhood in the platform era should not be assimilated to modernist interiority or postmodernist play. Modernist fragmentation was epistemological — consciousness exceeded its own representation. Postmodernist fragmentation was ontological — the self was one fiction among others. Platform fragmentation is infrastructural: the self is divided because the medium that constitutes it requires division into legible, rankable units. The difference is not one of degree.

Limitations

The corpus is modest and purposively selected, so findings should be treated as indicative rather than representative of anglophone fiction as a whole. Stratum assignment, though independently performed, involves interpretive judgement that could bias comparison. The lowest reliability figure, for dissociative description, indicates genuine ambiguity in that category. Passage sampling at fixed intervals may under-represent short, highly fragmented sections. Finally, the design is correlational: the association between platform salience and fragmentation cannot establish that platform culture causes formal change, since authors drawn to fragmented form may also be drawn to platform subject matter.

Conclusion

This study provides quantitative evidence that platform culture has altered the formal representation of selfhood in contemporary English literature. Novels in which platforms are structurally consequential display roughly twice the density of fragmentation markers found in contemporaneous novels where they are not, and that density has risen steadily across the 2010–2023 period. The fragmented self of platform-era fiction is distinguished from its modernist and postmodernist predecessors by its infrastructural character: it is divided not by doubt or irony but by the requirement to be continuously composed, audited, and circulated. Future work should extend the corpus across anglophone regions beyond Britain, Ireland, and the United States, incorporate computational stylometry to test whether these markers are detectable without human coding, and examine whether the emergence of generative AI produces a further and distinguishable shift in literary subjectivity.

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