



Vol. 4 No. 4 (April) (2026)

Illusion of Freedom in the Modern Digital Age: A Literary Analysis of *Extras* (2007) in the Realm of Surveillance Capitalism

Laiba Zahid

University of Education Lahore, Attock Campus Email: zlaiba073@gmail.com

Ayesha Liaqat

Visiting Lecturer, Division of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Education, Lahore
Email: ayeshaliaqat2562@gmail.com

Roquia Tufail

University of Sargodha, Sargodha Email: roquatufail@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This research explores the observation that human beings in the modern world are not free; usually their choices are influenced by subtle mechanisms of control in the modern digital world. The study tackles the illusion of freedom, by examining a work of fiction that mirrors the modern world. The chosen text is Scott Westerfeld's novel *Extras* (2007), which tells the story of a future city which functions under the system of reputation economy, where everyone's interpersonal value is determined by an open popularity score called a "face rank." The story revolves around a 15 years old girl, Aya Fuse, who considers herself an "Extra" due to lack of public face rank. Throughout the story, she thinks her actions to be free and her desire to become famous by "kicking" a unique story as a conscious decision, but usually her actions are wrapped in a desire to get social validation and recognition even if it means to steal a story of "sly girls", a group that hates fame and, as an act of rebellion and hacking the system, adventures on maglev trains without recording it. The purpose of this research is to build a concrete understanding of how this happens. It uses a theory called "surveillance capitalism," developed by Shoshana Zuboff, which explains how companies treat common users' private online actions as free raw material to predict what they are likely to do next. This study aims to connect this theory to the relatable story in *Extras* (2007). To do this, the study uses textual analysis, which means closely reading and interpreting the novel. By applying the key concepts of modern digital economic logic and a comprehensive theory, surveillance capitalism, the research demonstrates that the unreal "reputation economy" is not just a sci-fi plot but a reflection of real world digital control, where the illusion of freedom stems not from the existence of freedom but the lack of awareness of how the big tech companies conduct their economic actions. This research shows that Westerfeld's novel acts as a warning by showing a society that is based on steady scoring and ranking, modifying individuals' behavior from the inside out, making them complicit in their own control and creating an illusion of freedom.

Keywords: Behavioral Surplus, Prediction Products, Behavioral Future Markets, Instrumentarian Power, Face Rank, Reputation Economy, Feeds, Extras, Pretties, Ugliers.



Vol. 4 No. 4 (April) (2026)

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

"Great literature is simply language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree"

(Pound, pg. 58)

Ezra Pound's definition of literature, mentioned above, is coined in her book *ABC of Writing* (1934). Her definition goes beyond the embellishment of the traditional aesthetics linked with literature and, instead, touches on the profound purpose of literature which is to create a meaning. This definition shows how literature allows general readers to understand the subtle mechanisms of society, creating awareness. Generally, the term literature refers to a body of published scholarly works that constitutes the foundational knowledge on a subject. It acts as a reflection of life and does not merely describe but molds it. As Creswell defines it, literature represents "the foundational knowledge that researchers build upon when conducting new studies" (Creswell, 2014). As the term literature is the reflection of life, hence, this study aims to capture the reflection of the modern digital world, where individuals think their choices to be free. In this modern hyper digitalized world, individuals' online behavior is constantly stored that before the emergence of surveillance capitalism was termed as "exhaust data", as Zuboff puts it. But it is after 2001, when Google started using this data which is now termed as "behavioral surplus", as it is more than what is used for the better quality of service and is actively used by big tech companies, like Google and Meta, to create prediction products by studying the patterns of common users' data which, in result, allows these companies to run targeted and customized ads campaigns which create an illusion of freedom in users' mind and they think to be using the digital devices of their own accord but usually their online behavior is a systematic and engineered process done through algorithms and data history.

At the heart of this study is the concept of surveillance capitalism. This system, as defined by Shoshana Zuboff, represents an efficient order that claims private human experience as a raw, open material for behavioral data, which is then used for prediction and modification in commercial behavioral futures markets (Zuboff, 2019). This provides a framework for understanding the current condition, where the pervasive feeling of choice exists alongside the reality of data extraction and social engineering. This research specifically focuses on a social representation of this condition to explore how the mechanisms of surveillance capitalism manifest in a constructed social world and shape individuals' sense of self and freedom.

This study uses Scott Westerfeld's young adult novel *Extras* (2007) as its text. The novel presents a future society built around a "reputation economy," where interpersonal and economical status is determined by a publicly ranked "face rank." The reputation economy is a system like social media that is run through narrow AI algorithms that show real-time face ranks, acting as external stimulus by influencing individuals' behavior and herding them in a specific direction of "fame", which is considered the ultimate goal of the citizens of reputation economy. The concepts of individual worth and self- decision become non-existent in a society which claims its system to be "meritocratic", hence masking a suppressing system as a natural social order where people are divided on the basis of how transparent their lives are through the stories they kick. Through this fictional world, the novel offers perceptible realization of the conceptual processes theorized by Zuboff, making it a significant text for examining the lived experience of data driven control. The novel's importance lies in its capacity to serve as a narrative laboratory, where the mental and interpersonal consequences of a



Vol. 4 No. 4 (April) (2026)

surveillance capitalist system can be observed in action through its social system.

The theoretical framework for this analysis is Shoshana Zuboff's theory of surveillance capitalism. This work provides the essential abstract tools, including behavioural surplus, prediction products, instrumentarian power, and the illusion of the value exchange, for consistently decoding the interpersonal dynamics of the novel. Application of this framework to the unreal "reputation economy" allows for an examination of how such systems modify behavior, commodify identity, and manufacture consent.

A comprehensive review of the active literature reveals a research gap. While strong scholarly work has been dedicated to defining and critiquing surveillance capitalism from sociological, economic, and ideological perspectives, there is a lack of work that consistently applies Zuboff's theoretical framework to a literary text. No comprehensive study has yet used the novel *Extras* (2007) as a case study to map the operations of surveillance capitalism onto a narrative world. This study addresses that gap. It moves from surface critique to narrative analysis, aiming to demonstrate how literature can function as a serious symbolic tool for understanding one of the subtle yet existing interpersonal realities of the modern world.

Objectives

To explore the illusion of freedom in the modern digital world

To investigate Scott Westerfeld's *Extras*(2007) using theoretical framework of Surveillance Capitalism

To analyze the selected novel's "reputation economy" and "kicker" culture

To evaluate subtle power dynamics in the fictional world of *Extras* and their compatibility to modern digital world

Statement of the Problem

In the digital age, individuals operate under a persuasive system of illusion of freedom, believing their online activities to be free and autonomous. However, usually, their behavior is systematically stored, predicted, shaped and commodified by the mechanisms of surveillance capitalism, which extracts behavioral surplus for commercial gain by undermining the individual and social freedom. This research investigates this illusion of freedom by using Shoshana Zuboff's Surveillance Capitalism as a framework to interpret Scott Westerfeld's novel *Extras* (2007), using its fictional reputation economy and the culture of face ranks to expose and critique the subtle architectures of control that undermine the idea of freedom which revolves around privacy, autonomy and authenticity. This research fills the gap of division of learning by exploring how individuals' autonomy is undermined in today's digital World.

Research Questions

How does the reputation economy in the selected novel function as a fictional representation of Surveillance capitalism's core processes?

How does the novel's system of Social control depict instrumentarian power?

Significance of the Research

From an academic perspective, this research holds significance because it translates complex concepts of Surveillance Capitalism into realistic case study, helping the readers to understand the workings of the digital economic model and how it undermines basic human rights highlighted by Zuboff, such as autonomy and privacy (Laniuk 67-71). This research helps academic figures to understand the effects of surveillance capitalism by



Vol. 4 No. 4 (April) (2026)

studying the case study of the young adult novel, *Extras* (2007), and interpreting it into the themes of subtle control.

Furthermore, the importance of this research is equally distributed to social circles and the general audience. Although the research deals with complex concepts such as behavioural surplus, prediction products, instrumentarian power, and behavioural future markets; it links these concepts with a fictional case study of Aya Fuse, a 15 year old girl and a fame-seeking protagonist, and the reputation economy, a type of society the economic and social system of which is based on fame. By linking the theoretical framework, Surveillance Capitalism, and the novel, *Extras* (2007), this research helps general readers and the public to strengthen their digital literacy, highlighting the importance of mindful consumption of digital technologies and the internalization of the trends and ideas spread in a society which is often run on the whims of digital moods and algorithms.

Delimitation

This research is delimited to the analysis of young adult fiction novel *Extras* (2007) as a primary text which is examined in the light of Surveillance capitalism.

While Surveillance capitalism is a socio-economic media theory that broadly examines data extraction and its impacts on democracy and political sovereignty, this research concentrates specifically on its core operational mechanisms such as the extraction of behavioral surplus, the fabrication of prediction products, and the implementation of behavioral modification to cultivate an illusion of choice. Likewise, the literary analysis of the novel, *Extras* (2007), is delimited to its portrayal of the reputation economy as a system of control. Although the selected novel also touches on journalism ethics, and post-utopian society, these concepts are considered only where they show how the characters respond to surveillance and social engineering. The study looks at how Surveillance capitalism affects the novel, setting aside broader implications and secondary themes such as political coercion, and traditional ways of surveillance and control.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A literature review is an essential tenet of any research study as it provides a foundation for understanding what has already been explored and what remains to be discovered. According to Creswell (2014), a literature review “provides a framework for establishing the importance of the study and a benchmark for comparing the results.” This chapter examines both theoretical and textual research relevant to the present study. It starts with Zuboff’s Surveillance Capitalism and its different concepts, studying how different researchers have conducted study on the theory using various perspectives such as democratic implications, individual rights, and digital dimensions. In addition, it examines discussions on the selected novel, *Extras* (2007), pinpointing a research gap and highlighting the uniqueness of this study.

Surveillance Capitalism

Freedom in the Age of Surveillance Capitalism: Lessons from Shoshana Zuboff by Yevhen Laniuk

Surveillance capitalism has become a significant area of academic research which is analyzed through various lenses. In his 2021 article, “Freedom in the Age of Surveillance Capitalism: Lessons from Shoshana Zuboff,” Yevhen Laniuk provides a philosophical breakdown of Shoshana Zuboff’s work highlighting how surveillance capitalism acts as a



Vol. 4 No. 4 (April) (2026)

direct assault on human freedom. Laniuk breaks Zuboff's argument into three core ethical dimensions. First dimension is freedom that is eroded through the loss of privacy as individuals' personal experiences become raw material used by companies such as Google and Meta to commercialize personal and private experience. The second dimension is increased undermining of autonomy as people's "will to will" is bypassed by nudges or "behavioral modification" which is manifested through targeted ads and online services, projecting the thoughts on individuals. And last dimension is the illusion of authenticity where means for self-expression become tools for manipulation (Laniuk 67-71). It's a significant explanation of why this system is ethically corrosive, focusing on the human cost when these systems work exactly as intended.

While Laniuk provides a moral compass for what people lose, privacy and autonomy, in modern digital scenarios by agreeing to users service policy, his work does not fill the gap of a tangible social case study such as this research does. He diagnoses the "what" and the "why," but the "how" these mechanisms create a lived reality of manipulation and illusion of control remains theoretical. The present research on the application of Westerfeld's *Extras* (2007) picks up here. By analyzing the novel's society, where data extraction and prediction products create an algorithmic meritocracy, invisible manipulation becomes apparent. This work explores how "instrumentarian power" functions through a "reputation economy", showing how "behavioral modification" is masked as meritocracy which creates social trends and moves the unusual trends of self worth through public face ranking to new normal. This study moves from the theoretical framework to a social system of surveillance Capitalism which highlights how individuals become complicit in their own control without knowing the subtle mechanisms that replace their authentic selves and unique personalities with "already created images," resulting in the tragic illusion of the freedom crisis Laniuk outlines.

Navigating Surveillance Capitalism: A Critical Analysis through philosophical perspectives in Computer Ethics

Angelica Sofia Valeriani in her research paper "Navigating Surveillance Capitalism: A Critical Analysis through Philosophical Perspectives in Computer Ethics", published in May 2023, examines the phenomenon through utilitarian and deontological ethical frameworks. She defines surveillance capitalism as a practice that collects and analyzes massive amounts of user data for targeted advertising and other forms of monetization, a system also leveraged by military technology for national security purposes (Valeriani). She argues that although Jeremy Bentham's utilitarianism can justify the means of Surveillance Capitalism as it "focuses mostly on pleasure and happiness", however this phenomenon cannot be justified under Kantian framework, especially reciprocity principle, which "underlines the subjectivity of pleasure and happiness for each individual, and the difficulty in objectively measuring the effects" (5).

In addition to the comparison between Utilitarianism and Kantian perspectives, she considers the potential risks of Surveillance Capitalism and highlights the need to "prioritize individual rights and work towards greater transparency, accountability, and education" to minimize the potential abuse of Surveillance Capitalism (8). While Valeriani's academic approach, Bentham's Utilitarianism and Kant's Reciprocity Principle, helps individuals think about surveillance capitalism in philosophical terms, it misses a concrete example to ground these ideas. This is where this research steps in. It aims to bridge that gap by taking the core mechanisms of surveillance capitalism, particularly through the Kantian concern for individual autonomy, and applying them to



Vol. 4 No. 4 (April) (2026)

the fictional world of Scott Westerfeld's *Extras* (2007). This research helps general readers to understand and relate to the mechanisms of Surveillance Capitalism by using the novel as a case study. This research helps individuals move from abstract theory to a systematic exploration of how these systems of control actually look and feel in a lived-in society, making the complex theory not just understandable, but real.

Surveillance capitalism and the surveillance state: a comparative institutional analysis by Alshamy, Coyne, and Hall

The academic discourse on surveillance capitalism has largely been explored by critiques focusing on its erosion of individual autonomy and democratic principles. However, a significant contribution by Alshamy, Coyne, and Hall (2023) reframes this discourse through a comparative institutional analysis. Their work, "Surveillance capitalism and the surveillance state: a comparative institutional analysis," argues that data collection is not inherently good or bad, but that its welfare effects depend on the institutional context. They argue that while private corporations, surveillance capitalism, and the government, the surveillance state, engage in mass data collection, the consequences differ due to their underlying structures and purpose of collection for which data is collected. A key distinction they make is that "weak agency", where individuals lack knowledge and control over their data, is likely more pronounced within the secretive, monopolistic surveillance state than in the more rivalrous, and therefore potentially more responsive, realm of surveillance capitalism (Alshamy et al.).

This comparative framework provides a theoretical lens that moves beyond blanket condemnations to a more nuanced understanding of power dynamics. Yet, while this framework maps institutional landscape, its analysis remains at the macro-level, focusing on systems and market structures. This is where the present research functions to fill the gap.

This research aims to bridge this gap by applying the core mechanisms of surveillance capitalism, specifically the prediction and modification of behavior that Alshamy, Coyne, and Hall describe, to a tangible, narrative world. Although the above mentioned researchers consider the implications and manipulation carried out by the process of Surveillance Capitalism at a private level through "Advertising as information", "Advertising as entrepreneurship and persuasion", and "Advertising as competition" where individuals are manipulated and their behaviors predicted and sold in behavioral future markets like products, they do not take into account the effects of the Surveillance Capitalism on individuals and how it changes their perception of success, life and belonging (7-9). Moreover, the researchers also provide examples from history like surveillance in United states of America during "War on Terror", Chinese rampant surveillance, and Biden's administration's act of pressuring "social media companies—Facebook, Twitter—to censor COVID-related content that it deemed to be disinformation" to delineate how Surveillance Capitalism can be practiced by the governments forming "Surveillance states" on macro-level (18). They emphasize that "the surveillance state can engage in legal coercion", undermining collective freedom (18). Despite a complete panorama of collective vulnerability of masses in the face of economic exploitation and State Surveillance, the above mentioned research does not capture the human condition and universal experience of individuals, who unaware of subtle tactics of power, succumb to the "manufactured" social expectations and start measuring their self-worth on the standards of algorithmic driven trends and predictive patterns of the behaviors. Therefore, this research uses Scott Westerfeld's novel *Extras* (2007) as a fictional case study to explore how the "weak agency" theorized by Alshamy,



Vol. 4 No. 4 (April) (2026)

Coyne, and Hall manifest psychologically and socially. The novel's "reputation economy," where social status is determined by an algorithmic "face-rank," examines how individuals internalize these systems of control, often believing they are free agents in a meritocracy. By doing so, this research complements the institutional analysis of Alshamy, Coyne, and Hall by providing a human-scale, narrative exploration of the very concepts they outline, demonstrating how the illusion of freedom is not just a systemic outcome, but a powerfully engineered personal reality.

While established theories highlight surveillance capitalism's systemic and ethical threats, they often focus on macro level implications such as institutes and states rather than individuals and psychological perception. This research grounds these theories in the human experience by analyzing Scott Westerfeld's *Extras* (2007), using its narrative to expose how data extraction and algorithmic ranking, merits and face ranks, create a world where social credit is masked as meritocracy, ultimately dismantling self-worth and revealing the human cost of having one's value determined algorithmically.

Reviews on Scott Westerfeld's "Extras" (2007)

The conversation surrounding Scott Westerfeld's *Extras* (2007), the final novel in the *Uglies* series, largely focuses on its oracular social commentary. Existing reviews on the text and its analysis map the selected novel's core premise, a fame-obsessed, reputation-based economy, but often stop short of a rigorous theoretical analysis that connects its dystopian vision to the specific mechanisms of surveillance capitalism.

"Review: Extras by Scott Westerfeld" by Melanie Noell Bernard

Melanie Noell Bernard's 2016 blog post offers a structured literary analysis that focuses on the novel's pacing, world-building, and character development. Bernard describes the society as one "where fame is everything" and frames the plot as a "rebirth" narrative for Aya, who matures by learning the dangerous consequences of her fame-seeking actions (Bernard). The review is significant in its analysis of the plot's necessity, arguing that Aya's naive drive is the very engine that exposes the wider conspiracy, ultimately leading to a hopeful, interstellar solution for humanity's resource scarcity.

Despite its narrative insights, Bernard's review lacks a specific socioeconomic or technological critique. It accepts the "fame economy" as a given setting rather than deconstructing it as a logical evolution of digital capitalism. It does not take into account the subtle post-Utopian societal fabric where every individual considers themselves to be free but in reality all of them are at the mercy of "feeds", and stories that they "kick" which decides the level of their fame. In such an environment it becomes inevitable for the citizens of a reputation economy to seek social validation though kicking the most famous stories which makes them hollow from inside and the question of individuality and soul gets buried into algorithms. The review does not explore how the constant surveillance via "bazillion different cameras" and the act of "kicking" stories constitute a form of instrumentarian power, where individuals are indirectly given incentives to participate in their own datafication. This research builds on Bernard's plot analysis by demonstrating that Aya's journey from a self-centered "kicker" to a more conscious individual, whose goal shifts from becoming famous to saving humanity by the help of Tally Young Blood, mirrors the struggle to achieve authenticity within a system designed to commodify the self, a core ethical concern in the critique of surveillance capitalism.



Vol. 4 No. 4 (April) (2026)

"Looks Aren't Everything" by James Hynes

James Hynes's review in *The New York Times* is a sophisticated one, positioning *Extras* (2007) firmly as a "thoughtful novel of ideas" and a "brilliant parody of the modern obsession with fame" (Hynes). Hynes makes the crucial connection that the world of *Extras* (2007) is the "opposite of the enforced egalitarianism of beauty" in the earlier books, showing a society where the "market of media exposure determine[s] individual worth." He frames it as a world where everyone is "simultaneously a celebrity and his or her own paparazzi," a formulation that comes closest to describing a system of participatory surveillance.

Hynes's analysis is powerful, yet its gap is its framing. He identifies the novel as a satire of fame and a market-driven media landscape, but he does not have the vocabulary of "surveillance capitalism" at his disposal. He sees the "market of media exposure" but not the underlying prediction products derived from human experience that would be sold in a behavioral futures market. Although he captures the essence of the novel by arguing that each individual is their own "paparazzi" and the novel's society is a place where the "market of media exposure determines individual worth", he does not take into account the engineered society. His review stands firm on individual level and the individual responsibility but he abstains from highlighting how algorithms and "feeds" control each individual's mindset, rendering constant "hovercams" as normal. This research extends Hynes's foundational insight by arguing that the "face rank" economy is a direct narrative representation of a surveillance capitalist society. This research uses Zuboff's theory to name the processes Hynes describes in which the hovercams are data extraction tools, the "kickers" are unwitting generators of behavioral surplus, and the entire social structure is a manifestation of a reputation economy that systematically dismantles individual self-worth in favor of algorithmic validation.

The active literature provides a significant but disconnected diagnosis of surveillance capitalism's threats. While theorists like Zuboff outline the conceptual economic logic and moral corrosion, formal criticism begins to grasp its narrative manifestation in a fame obsessed reputation economy. A gap persists, however, between this macro-level theory and the perceptible human experience, which this research intervenes by using the notional framework as a lens for analyzing Scott Westerfeld's *Extras* (2007). This research connects the dots between Zuboff's concepts and Aya Fuse's world, arguing the novel supplies the essential narrative missing from the theory, demonstrating that the "face rank" is the reasonable endpoint of a behavioural futures market, that "kicking" stories generates behavioural surplus, and that the city acts as an instrumentarian system replacing authentic self-worth with algorithmic validation. In doing so, this work not only explains the profound human costs of surveillance capitalism as portrayed in the dystopian fiction but also proves the urgent necessity of using such narratives to understand the emerging realities of the new world.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The novel by Scott Westerfeld entitled *Extras* (2007) is analyzed using the concept of surveillance capitalism. John Bellamy Foster and Robert McChesney used the term "Surveillance Capitalism" Monthly Review in July 2014 to describe data monetization practices. However Zuboff used the term in 2014 who defined it as an economic system focused on extracting and selling personal data to predict and influence human behavior. Shoshana Zuboff used the term in her 2019 monumental work "The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: A Fight for Human Future on a New Frontier of Power". In the



Vol. 4 No. 4 (April) (2026)

contextualization of Zuboff's paradigm, human personal experience is considered as the material base for raw data extraction, consequently transformed into forecasts about future behavior that can be traded as commodities. This paper utilizes some relevant notions from the theory of Surveillance Capitalism to demonstrate, through examples from *Extras* (2007), how actual processes involving engineered consent and control are represented within a fictional society described in Westerfeld's novel.

This study is framed by the qualitative research paradigm as Denzin and Lincoln have discussed. Qualitative research means a "multimethod," "interpretive, naturalistic approach" where an investigator researches something "in their natural settings" to interpret the meanings people assign to them (2). Therefore, this study considers Scott Westerfeld's *Extras* dystopic society as its natural setting by diving deep into the narrative for social meaning translation of its "reputation economy." The analysis will be interpretative because it tries to make sense of motivations similar to those that characters like Aya Fuse might have in relentless pursuits of "face rank" and how such desires are structured or shaped by systems of algorithmic control within a novel. By applying the theoretical lens of surveillance capitalism to this fictional world, the study creates a holistic picture of how the illusion of freedom is created, thereby using qualitative principles to explore the complex integration between technology, social validation, and human autonomy.

The text from Taylor & Francis expounds Inductive reasoning as "a process of drawing general conclusions based on observed data or facts, by identifying patterns or structures within the observations" ("Inductive Reasoning"). This study applies inductive reasoning since it closely analyzes specific details in Scott Westerfeld's *Extras* (2007) about how reputation economy works and how characters obsessively pursue 'kicks' and 'face rank.' It is therefore through narrative patterning that a general conclusion can be drawn concerning the manner in which the novel's fictional systems seem to work as an application of surveillance capitalism whose end result is to create, for its citizens, a powerful illusion of freedom.

Exploratory study has been described as that kind of investigation "used to investigate a problem which is not clearly defined" ("Exploratory Research"). This paper dwells much on *Extras* (2007) and surveillance capitalism; hence, this research paper takes the exploratory approach. It tries to find out how freedom has been made possible through an illusion, which is rather complicated and not-so-well-defined in terms of literary analysis. To apply the concepts of surveillance capitalism to the novel, this study does not intend to try answering the question conclusively but rather understand the question better and thereby gain new insight and ways for future research.

Research Method

A research method is the structured framework of academic inquiry which falls under the practical plan for carrying out an inquiry. As per the definition by Gabriele Griffin in her book *Research Methods for English Studies*, "It describes how you conduct a given piece of research." In short, it is the structured procedure that will be adopted by a researcher to collect and analyze evidence. For this study, the chosen method is textual analysis. This approach involves a close examination of the selected novel to interpret how its narrative, social structure and identity explain the functions of surveillance capitalism, thereby providing a clear path for the investigation.

Textual Analysis as a Research Method

Textual analysis serves as an established methodology for conducting tabular formal



Vol. 4 No. 4 (April) (2026)

interpretation. Catherine Belsey's essay "Textual Analysis as a Research Method," referenced in Gabriele Griffin's comprehensive guide *Research Methods for English Studies*, provides a structured framework for this approach. Belsey defines textual analysis as the process of "assembling ideas that have not been brought together in quite that way before" (163). This research employs this methodological approach by creating a dialogue between the narrative world of Scott Westerfeld's *Extras* (2007) and the theory of surveillance capitalism that helps to create modern productive insights.

According to Belsey's framework, textual analysis requires the researcher to draw upon three different categories of knowledge: gross ethnic understanding, private pedantic orientation, and established lowly sources (164). In this study, the gross knowledge component consists of the ethnic context of contemporary digital society, peculiarly examining how interpersonal media dynamics and online reputation systems create special interpersonal conditions due to which individuals find themselves in the center of an extremely surveillance system where they succumb to the interpersonal validation driven by algorithms. The private interest driving this inquiry focuses on applying surveillance capitalism theory to explore how capitalist systems create exploitive interpersonal mechanisms that generate illusions of meritocracy while producing feelings of emptiness in individuals. This dimension also leads to hyper isolation and increased delusional sense of individuality which separates a person from authentic social circle and creates an echo chamber where their ideas, even defected ones, get validated as long as they conform to algorithmic control. The secondary sources supporting this analysis include foundational theoretical texts on surveillance capitalism, critical examinations of dystopian social structures, and established literary criticism.

Shoshana Zuboff's theory of surveillance capitalism provides a simple abstract framework for this research. Its core concepts, including behavioural surplus, prediction products, and instrumentarian power, establish an analytic structure for examining the reputation economy portrayed in the novel. Belsey emphasizes that textual meaning is inherently dynamic, noting that it "subsists in the relation between people, inscribed in signifiers" and remains "inevitably plural" (167). This research utilizes surveillance capitalism as an instructive lens to develop a synchronous reading of *Extras* (2007) that addresses the novel's commentary on up to date interpersonal control systems. The analysis specifically investigates how the text represents mechanisms of interpersonal manipulation and their consequences for singular autonomy and identity formation.

This study presents an interpretation of *Extras* (2007) through the analytic framework of surveillance capitalism. It demonstrates the capacity of formal analysis to engage with contemporary interpersonal concerns by examining how dystopian fiction reflects and critiques evolving interpersonal conditions and power structures.

Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework outlines the basic concepts and ideas that support and show the way to the research study. It is the framework that helps the researcher to find the way in the data he/she has collected, introducing a certain vocabulary and a nice logical structure for the subject. In this study, the theory of surveillance capitalism is the main theoretical lens giving the ideas used to understand the social aspects of Scott Westerfeld's *The Extras* and framing its story as a kind of critical commentary of the digital age.

Based on Zuboff, Surveillance capitalism is "a new economic order that treats human experience as the 'free' raw material for secret commercial operations of extraction, prediction, and sales" (8). To make it even clearer, all the online activities that people do like clicking, searching or social interacting are viewed as resources full of value that



Vol. 4 No. 4 (April) (2026)

have to be mined, and very often people are not even informed about this or asked for their consent. This raw data, or behavioral surplus as it is called, is later handled by algorithms in order to create prediction products that lead to the most probable future behaviors. Thus in the case of Zuboff's terms behavioral futures markets are the places where the sale of these predictions happens, hence the businesses are the buyers who place their bets on us as to what we will do, buy, or think next.

The author in her well-known 2019 work "The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power" explains how this capitalistic logic profoundly impacts the society at large in the changes it makes to move from the internet realm to different big areas of society (Zuboff 15). Besides, she maintains that their goal, system's, is not the mere forecast of user's behavior but the actual intervention to change and shape it by remote control of users so that commercial ends are achieved, giving at the same time a feeling of choice to users, who are at the same time the victims of this trick (Zuboff 15). This theoretical journey finds direct application in the world of *Extras* (2007), where the interface rings constantly mine the lived experiences of characters, a public ranking calculates the social worth, and an algorithmic feed shepherds the desires, all of which mirror the very processes that Zuboff outlines.

Zuboff's theory is the tool within this research framework to interpret the city of fiction in the novel *Extras* (2007) as a society under surveillance capitalism. The "reputation economy" in the novel is seen as the overt behavior of futures market expression with the person's "face rank" being the public-facing prediction product. The consistent data extraction stands for the mishandling of human experiences as behavioral surplus, and the tampered "feed" is there to indicate the behavioral modification engine. The use of this framework helps the research to get past just seeing the novel as an easy piece of work and, in fact, the novel becomes a prophetic narrative that unpacks surveillance capitalism as a real but invisible force making it possible to examine it critically.

ANALYSIS

This study delves into Scott Westerfeld's 2007 novel, *Extras*. The story revolves around a future city where "reputation economy" is a system that socially and economically ranks people by popularity in a quantified way. The study is based on the theory of surveillance capitalism which is a concept referring to the gathering of user data for creating and modifying commercial prediction models, by Shoshana Zuboff.

The world of *Extras* is a perfect example of the main operations of surveillance capitalism. The novel's reputation economy is a function of data extraction in the narrative where characters' deeds are continually watched and numerically recorded. The theory's prediction products correspond to the public display of face ranks, and the social pressure to increase one's rank shows the behavioral modification. The book offers a real-life example for the different kinds of abstract processes the theory is talking about.

The research strategy here is textual analysis. It is a method of exploring the literary content in a systematic way by paying attention to the narrative elements and direct quotations. The method brings to light the way the text depicts theoretical issues, thus providing proof for the link between a fictional reputation economy and the logic of surveillance capitalism.

Behavioral Surplus in the Reputation Economy

One of the main features of surveillance capitalism is the process by which the experience of human life is claimed unilaterally by the system as free raw material, which is called behavioral surplus. To explain, Zuboff defines this as the data collected



Vol. 4 No. 4 (April) (2026)

from users that is much more than what is necessary for providing the service, thereby becoming the main resource for the surveillance capitalist economy (17). In *Extras* (2007), the writer of the selected novel succeeds to move this theoretical concept to a comprehensive social system.

The world of this novel is a kind of machine for data extraction at the highest level, a point which is not only implied but also explicitly stated by the character Frizz, who undergoes a voluntary surgery or surge which makes him honest instead of a dumb, shallow pretty. He explains to the protagonist, Aya Fuse, "our city isn't designed for privacy. It is designed for publicity, to spawn connections and debates and buzz" (Westerfeld 56). This statement is, in fact, the policy of the city in the most direct way. The city's layout is far from being a neutral background; it is rather an active tool that puts data generation on top of the list of its priorities. The lack of privacy is not a side effect; it is the central necessity of the system. This is very much in line with Zuboff's argument that in surveillance capitalism, privacy is intentionally redistributed, as the rights to decide what is disclosed are taken from individuals and concentrated within the domain of the surveillance regime (113). People thereby lose the power to control their own information, which instead is handled by the system for its own purposes. As the narrator notes, "The clique was one big controlled experiment"(6). In the reputation economy, individuals raced, not for self-improvement but for kicking famous stories to get noticed in a system run by algorithms. The purpose in this society is to understand how many mentions of your name did it take to get you in the top thousand famous people of the city or "How quickly would you drop if everyone stopped talking about you?" (6). This ravenous need for face ranks emerges not from the desire to get recognition but to conform to a system that rewards only those who have face ranks because of their stories or "merits", that were for those who did technical work such as doctors and wardens.

This process of constant race for face ranks and willingly giving one's privacy in exchange for algorithmic recognition is brought to life in great detail by the ways in which "kickers" and "tech heads" operate. The text observes that the "endless cycle of invention and publicity bumped everyone's face rank, so everyone was happy" (6). Here, human creativity, social interaction, and the desire for recognition are not the end goals of the system, they are the inputs. The "invention and publicity" constitute the behavioral surplus. This raw, unpaid human experience is mined, quantified, and fed into the algorithm to calculate the "face rank." The system is constructed in a way that the users voluntarily and on a continuous basis become the producers of this valuable resource. However, here the system does not use the common users as the product, as per famous maxim "when there is no price you are the product", but, Zuboff argues, it is the users' data that is used without their explicit consent and their privacy is compromised. Freedom is directly linked to privacy and it is defined as "she, Zuboff, regards it primarily as a personal space, in which an individual can be free from intrusion or overseeing by others" (Laniuk, 70). Moreover, privacy is defined in terms of the amount of knowledge others possess about a person and the more knowledge others have, their capacity to control, predict, manipulate and influence the person's behavior increases. Considering the definition and nature of privacy that is directly linked to freedom, the people who have the least freedom also have the least privacy. So there is a directly proportional relationship between privacy and freedom, and undermining one, say privacy, leads to the undermining of the other. This observation can be applied to the selected novel where pretty much anything that got you "noticed", highlighting how the value of privacy has been sold or been engineered for voluntary desire for recognition,



Vol. 4 No. 4 (April) (2026)

allows the systems to store, predict and modify individuals' behavior. Laniuk in his research paper "Freedom in the Age of surveillance capitalism: Lessons from Shoshana Zuboff" argues that Zuboff's understanding is Kantian which considers lack of privacy as a violation of basic human rights, leading to the lack of privacy and autonomy, rendering common users vulnerable in the face of their data being used, stored and sold to third parties. Zuboff argues that human beings possess not only the capacity of will, but also a more abstract faculty of *will to will*, which she defines as "the inner act that secures us as autonomous beings who project choice into the world and exercise the qualities of self-determining moral judgment" (Zuboff, 2019, chapter 9). However, given the manipulative system of reputation economy, advertised as a meritocratic system, individuals are deceived to think themselves as lacking or "Extras" if their face rank does not go up. Moreover, the system's normalization and legalisation of extraction of data and labelling the number of fame, highlights a transition from Kantian concept of privacy to modern new trend of data accumulation where people live in the digital realm more than in reality. They deceptively think that they are performing as data producers while at the same time they engage in social play and meritocratic advancement, thus they are in harmony with the requirements of the extractive economy without being aware of their status as a resource. Hence, instead of creating a system of social harmony where people longed for religion, culture and tea ceremonies, as the novel is set in Japan, the City Council themselves "voted for the reputation economy instead" (20).

Prediction Products

Shoshana Zuboff describes the main commodity of surveillance capitalism to be "prediction products". According to her, "Machine intelligence processes behavioral surplus into prediction products designed to forecast what we will feel, think, and do" (119). These are not simple data points; rather, they are fabricated behaviors of the future. The products are sold in "a new kind of market that trades exclusively in future behavior," which she refers to as "behavioral futures markets" (120). The whole economic rationale is built upon this trade of human futures.

In Scott Westerfeld's novel *Extras* (2007), an abstract concept of a prediction product is made understandable with an example of a public "face rank" which is used to communicate the idea. The numeric score is literally the prediction product of the novel. It is a constantly updated calculation that forecasts an individual's social influence and commercial value. The City Council's decree makes the economic function of this product explicit: "merits and face ranks would decide who got the best mansions, the most carbon emissions, the biggest wall allowances" (Westerfeld 20). At this point, the prediction product goes beyond simply being a forecast, instead, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy that directly determines the distribution of life necessities. Acting as the major client in this behavioral futures market, the city utilizes such algorithmic forecasts to steer and dominate the flow of resources to those who are most likely to be influential.

The protagonist, Aya Fuse, is the living embodiment of this artificially created thinking. At the start of the novel her "miserable face rank" stands at 451,441. Her sole reason for the existence is to "kick" a story that will make her famous. Her individual potential is not raised for the intrinsic value but rather treated as a commodity to be marketed. The system's victory is demonstrated through characters like Aya's brother Hiro, who is among the top thousand famous people of the city, shouts, "Look at that! Everyone's already going off the story! My rank just dropped to nine hundred. People can be so shallow!" (Westerfeld 24). This declaration is revealing. Hiro does not question the



Vol. 4 No. 4 (April) (2026)

system that reduces him to a number; instead, he singles out the "shallow" people around him, thereby redirecting his irritation. He has completely embraced the logic of the prediction product, thus gauging his emotional state against the changes in his algorithmic score.

In such a setting, people are no longer individuals but become data points for behavioral analysis. What they do, their relationships, and even their feelings are the basic data that is used for generating new prediction products. The perpetuation of such a cycle is facilitated by the upbringing of the next generation, i.e., the "littlies," who are brought up within this logic. Right from the start, they are taught that their value is something that can be measured and traded in the open market. Consequently, this leads to a community that may look like a meritocratic utopia of freedom at the surface but is a dystopia, supported by a deeply rooted, psychologically embedded system of behavioral prediction and control. The characters' torment over their face rank should not be interpreted as the system's failure, on the contrary, it is a proof of its dreadful success. The characters pay for their online activities and face rank through the decreased privacy and compromise of their personal space. Manuel Castells argues that privacy has become a new "currency." Everybody is transformed into data. We are all data and these data are key commodities. The data are at the basis of all the major Internet companies, including Google and others. You are not paying for the service, but you are paying with your data. You are the currency (Castells, 2017).

Laniuk argues that "The bargain whereby someone is paying with his privacy to get something in return is Faustian in nature." Dr. Faustus was a 16th century protagonist of German legend, who sold his soul for material benefits of this life. Since then, the term applies to anyone who sticks a bargain by giving a thing of high spiritual and moral grounding in exchange for earthly delights or baser pleasure. Zuboff explains this pact in terms of a new app based approach in which a prospective "tenant" agrees to lending her data to her new "lord", who now has the ability to know how many calls she returns, how many miles she travels everyday and her online activities. This bargain allows the tech companies to create prediction products using the data, received in the result of "Faustian bargain", and consequently develop the ability to "nudge" individuals in specific directions.

Means of Behavior Modification

According to Shoshana Zuboff, the final stage of surveillance capitalism is the implementation of means of behavior modification. The implementation involves taking the predictions obtained from the analysis of behavioral surplus and actively applying them to adjust, control, and influence the behavior in such a way that it leads to the desired outcomes. The objective is no longer to simply predict what the subjects will do, but to actually make them do it.

The reputation economy as portrayed in the novel *Extras* (2007) is a great example of a well-organized system that aims at behavior modification, with behavior change as its ultimate goal. The threat of social execution is the most powerful weapon of this system, not the reward. In the text it is very clear that, "In the reputation economy, the only real way to hurt anyone was to ignore them completely" (Westerfeld 24). This manufactured environment coerces people very systematically to be always and publicly present. Being ignored means being invisible and, in economic terms, worthless, a kind of social death. Due to this, the characters are forced to assimilate the system's targets thus modifying their own conduct in order to be able to keep their status. The final triumph of this transformation can be seen in Aya's strong feeling of being lost when she gets a short



Vol. 4 No. 4 (April) (2026)

moment of freedom from surveillance. She qualifies the experience of being "cut off from the world, unreal" (Westerfeld 29), thus signaling that her identity has been successfully modified to depend on the very system that controls her.

Furthermore, the system redefines fundamental concepts to shape desires. The line, "These days 'pretty' meant whatever got you noticed" (Westerfeld 4), shows how language and values are co-opted. Beauty is no longer an inherent quality but is redefined as the capacity to generate attention and data. This is a direct modification of collective perception, channeling the human desire for validation directly into the extractive engine of the reputation economy. The system does not just monitor behavior; it actively restructures the social world and human psychology to make its own expansion inevitable.

Instrumentarian Power

Shoshana Zuboff characterizes instrumentarian power as the core power of surveillance capitalism that she terms "a new genus of power" which "instrumentalizes and modifies behavior to achieve specified outcomes" (Zuboff 21). Essentially, it is a nonviolent power that is diffused through an automated, pervasive system she terms "Big Other", "a ubiquitous networked institutional regime that records, modifies, and commodifies everyday experience" (Zuboff 22). What it essentially seeks to do is to reach a "radical indifference" to human nature by substituting human judgment with data-driven certainty and control.

In the novel, *Extras*, the city's reputation economy is the instrumentarian power through which the power is revealed. The entire social world is the "means of behavior modification" (Zuboff 21) system where the algorithm is the invisible, omnipresent "Big Other." The real triumph of the program is the way it sneaks the complicity of the controlled into the controlled. This is exemplified at the moment when Hiro's face rank decreases and he shouts, "My rank just dropped to nine hundred. People can be so shallow!" (Westerfeld 24). Now, Hiro's outburst is very important. He doesn't doubt the system which measures his value; on the contrary, he embraces its logic and directs his irritation at other people whom he considers "shallow." He is, in fact, psychologically converted to become the system's agent through his own social judgments, which is a manifestation of how instrumentarian power comes from the inside out.

The extent of this control is made more evident by the city's design which a character says is "not designed for privacy; it's designed for publicity, to spawn connections and debates and buzz" (Westerfeld 56). This is Zuboff's "Big Other" directly at work - a deliberately constructed environment which renders escape or anonymity practically impossible. Alex Pentland, a computer scientist and entrepreneur, in his books *Honest signals* (2010) and *Social physics* (2015) argues that "we will have the data required to really know ourselves and understand how society evolves" (Pentland, 2014, p. 19). This Big Data has the capacity to make everything predictable and automatic from traffic to energy, opinions to politics. This capacity of Big Data, which Pentland calls "God's eyeview" will put an end to the age of darkness. However, this seemingly "age of darkness" is in conflict with Zuboff's idea of freedom that is undermined by instrumentarian power which has the ability to predict and modify human behavior. The system's power is so total that when Aya briefly escapes its monitoring, she feels "cut off from the world, unreal" (Westerfeld 29). Her identity is so thoroughly altered that she now depends on the very system that controls her, thus showing that the deepest influence of instrumentarian power is not just on our actions but on our very self-conception.



Vol. 4 No. 4 (April) (2026)

Conclusion

Hence, it can be seen that Scott Westerfeld's *Extras* (2007) is not only a compelling story but also functions as a detailed map of Shoshana Zuboff's theory of surveillance capitalism. The novel's textual analysis brings to light the fundamental mechanisms of this new digital economy, and in essence, this research argues that the illusion of freedom in the modern digital world is both prevalent and deceiving. By studying the world of *Extras*, the analysis concludes that such a dystopian society is not a distant fantasy but a reflection of the growing gap between a user's sense of independent choice and the reality of hidden economic systems designed to extract, predict, and modify human behavior.

To explore this observation, Zuboff's conceptual framework that comprises behavioral surplus, prediction products, behavioral futures markets, and instrumentarian power; it is applied directly to Westerfeld's narrative. The novel's reputation economy, with its interface rings and relentless monitoring, provides a vivid account of one-sided behavioral surplus extraction. The face rank emerges as the clearest prediction product, a measurable forecast of human worth traded in a behavioral futures market that dictates access to real-world resources such as housing, healthcare, and social standing. The city's design prioritizes publicity over privacy, enabling the steady extraction of personal experience to feed the predictive machinery of the system.

In addition, the novel discloses the presence of instrumentarian power in a system that aims at behavior modification through social engineering. Characters like Hiro and Aya do not merely comprehend the system's logic; they become accomplices in its administration through constant self-monitoring and peer surveillance. Their anxiety over rank fluctuations and Aya's sense of unreality when disconnected from the system's feedback are not signs of rupture but indicators of the system's total success. They do not rebel against their quantification because they have internalized its logic entirely. This demonstrates the operative mechanism of instrumentarian power, where control feels indistinguishable from willing participation. Ultimately, *Extras* operates as an incisive critical instrument, contending that the data-driven quest for fame is not a path to freedom but a cleverly orchestrated illusion concealing a deep and widespread system of social control.

The significance of this research is both academic and social. Academically, it bridges a gap by applying a complex economic theory to formal literary analysis, demonstrating how fiction can serve as a tangible tool for understanding contemporary phenomena. Socially, its importance is pedagogic and urgent. By using an engaging narrative to illuminate a dense theory, this work translates a serious warning into accessible knowledge. It suggests that genuine agency in the digital age begins with recognition, and that understanding the reputation economy hidden within ordinary platforms is the essential first step toward becoming a critically knowledgeable citizen rather than a submissive user.

Recommendations

This literary analysis of *The Extras* determines the power of fiction to describe the concepts of surveillance capitalism. To extend this work, the next pathways for future research are recommended.

First, the approach used in this research can be applied to different dystopian and synchronous texts. A focused relative study between *Extras* (2007) and Dave Eggers' *The Circle* would be productive, examining how different narratives, one based on interpersonal reputation and the difference on corporate mandated transparency,



Vol. 4 No. 4 (April) (2026)

dramatize the same implicit economic logic.

Second, a next step would be a qualitative study interviewing young adults who have read *The Extras*, exploring whether the novel's depiction of a reputation economy enhances their awareness of real-world platforms like Instagram or TikTok. In addition to the awareness, this study would help the researchers to understand the new internet trends that create criteria for online social persona, validation and recognition.

Lastly, the story in *Extras* (2007) is so much like an active interpersonal media world. Research surrounding *Extras* (2007) and the up to date digital world would explain ideas like how people's data is mined, how people's future actions are sold, and how apps are designed to guide their choices. The goal is to help students stop being just users and start being thinkers. They should be able to spot the secret systems that shape what they see and do online every day.

Work Cited

- Bhat, Adi. "Exploratory Research: Definition, Types and Methodologies." *QuestionPro*, 16 Apr. 2024, www.questionpro.com/blog/exploratory-research/.
- Bernard, Melanie Noell. "Review: Extras by Scott Westerfeld." *M.N. BernardBooks*, 10 July 2016, <https://mnbernardbooks.wordpress.com/2016/07/10/review-extras-scott-westerfeld/>
- CASTELLS, M. (2017): Power and counter-power in the digital society. [online] [Retrieved February 1, 2021] Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=io3xwOBD4f0>
- Denzin, Norman K., and Yvonna S. Lincoln. "Introduction: Entering the Field of Qualitative Research." *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, edited by Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, Sage Publications, 1994, pp. 1-17
- Griffin, Gabriele. "Research methods for English Studies: An Introduction." Griffin, Gabriele. *Research methods for English Studies*. 2nd. Edinburgh University Press, 2013. 1-17.
- Homer, Paul. "Famous Misquotations: Literature Adds to Reality, It Does Not Simply Describe It." *AtkinsBookshelf*, 18 Dec. 2020, atkinsbookshelf.wordpress.com/2020/12/18/famous-misquotations-literature-adds-to-reality-it-does-not-simply-describe-it/.
- Hynes, James. "Looks Aren't Everything." *The New York Times*, 11 Nov. 2007, <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/11/books/review/Hynes-t.html>
- "Inductive Reasoning - Knowledge and References." *Taylor & Francis*, taylorandfrancis.com/knowledge/Engineering_and_technology/Engineering_support_and_special_topics/Inductive_reasoning/. Accessed 15 Oct. 2025.
- Intext (*Surveillance Capitalism & the Surveillance State: A comparative institutional analysis* by Yahya Alshamy, Christopher J. Coyne, Abigail R Hall, Matthew Owens :: SSRN)
- Laniuk, Yevhen. "Freedom in the Age of Surveillance Capitalism: Lessons from Shoshana Zuboff." *Ethics & Bioethics (in Central Europe)*, vol. 11, no. 1-2, 2021, pp. 67-81. DOI:10.2478/ebce-2021-0004
- PENTLAND, A. (2014): Social physics: How good ideas spread – the lessons from a new science. New York: Penguin Books.
- Pound, Ezra. *ABC of Reading*. New Directions, 1960.
- Surveillance Capitalism & the Surveillance State: A Comparative Institutional Analysis* by Yahya Alshamy, Christopher J. Coyne, Abigail R Hall, Matthew Owens ::



Vol. 4 No. 4 (April) (2026)

SSRN, papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4361776. Accessed 5 Nov. 2025.

Valeriani, Angelica Sofia. *Navigating Surveillance Capitalism: A Critical Analysis through Philosophical Perspectives in Computer Ethics*. arXiv, 5 May 2023, <https://arxiv.org/abs/2305.03787v1>

Westerfeld, Scott. *Extras*. Simon Pulse, 2007.

Zuboff, Shoshana. *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*. PublicAffairs, 2019.