

Like, Share, disconnect: How *A Visit from the Goon Squad* Predicted Social Media's Emotional Void

Dr. Reena Salaria

Associate Professor, Department of Linguistics and Literature, School of Humanities and Liberal Arts, Cluster University of Jammu

Abstract- Jennifer Egan's novel *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010) strikes a projecting light over the turbulence that technology brings into the fabric of human ties and identity. This paper studies how Egan's Pulitzer-winning novel, with its innovative structure and biting satire, may have anticipated those digital pathologies of the present day. The infamous PowerPoint chapter—that is, a clinical documentation of family dysfunction from the child's point of view—foresees today's world of performative self-branding on social media, where life itself is a brand. Egan's almost-certainly-near-future view of concerts as being pause-friendly caters nicely to the abridged attention span that is the very algorithmic consumption of art and entertainment we see today.

Deeper still is the critique of technology as the bringer of both solace and isolation. The characters—Sasha, whose compulsive purloining screams of a cry for real connection; and Bennie, the music exec trapped in a fugue attempting to find his authenticity away from punk—embody the paradoxes of living in digitally mediated worlds. Egan's anticipation of the commodification of intimacy, through subplots of PR-manufactured “authenticity” and the marketing of personal trauma, has since come to pass in the influencer culture and viral content economies.

While diagnosing these digital maladies, *Goon Squad* offers fleeting moments of resistance, especially at Scotty's unrecorded river performance, which is a brief respite from technological mediation; this paper argues that Egan's work grows increasingly relevant in the 2020s as both a warning and a mirror to our tech-saturated present. The enduring power of the novel lies in articulating emotional losses of digital life before they became inescapable realities, thus making it a key text to understanding contemporary techno-social anxieties.

Keywords- Jennifer Egan, digital culture, social media, technology in literature, postmodern fiction, media ecology.

INTRODUCTION

In the modern era of algorithmic feeds, performative social media personas, and the quantified self, Jennifer Egan's 2010 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, arguably stands as one of the most prescient works of early 21st-century literature. Engrained in a deeply experimental treatment of time's effect through an interlocking narrative about the music business, the novel now reads as a searingly precise diagnosis of existence in the digital era. In the words of Nathan Schneider, "Egan's novel anticipated the emotional grammar of social media before most people had Facebook accounts" (2018, p. 112). The argument will be that the true relevancy of *Goon Squad* lies not only in its much-celebrated formal innovation but also in its eerie foresight of the processes through which digital technologies would transform human connection, attention, and selfhood by the turn of the 2020s.

When it first hit the shelves, critics were quick to zero in on the novel's fragmented structure and its unique take on the passage of time. James Wood lauded its "technical virtuosity" (2010, p. 84) in *The New Yorker*, while Michiko Kakutani pointed out its "kaleidoscopic perspective on aging and nostalgia" (2010, para. 3) in *The New York Times*. However, few seemed to grasp just how accurately Egan was charting the future of our digital world—how her PowerPoint chapter foreshadowed the boom of personal analytics, how her idea of "pause-friendly concerts" hinted at our dwindling attention spans, or how her depiction of curated authenticity was a precursor to influencer culture. As media scholar Laura Miller observes, "We were too busy admiring Egan's literary pyrotechnics to see she was writing a cautionary tale about our technological future" (2019, p. 57).

The central metaphor of the novel - "Time's a goon" - has taken on a fresh significance in the decade since it

was published. Initially, this phrase pointed to the unavoidable wear and tear of life, but now it also captures the predatory essence of digital platforms. Social media acts like a goon squad, relentlessly bombarding us with notifications while luring us in with the allure of connection. Zeynep Tufekci's idea of "the attention economy" (2014, p. 12) finds a fictional echo in Egan's characters, who increasingly navigate their lives "as if their emotions were data points in someone else's marketing scheme" (Levy, 2017, p. 203). This introduction will explore three significant areas where Goon Squad foresaw our digital challenges: the quantification of selfhood, the commodification of attention, and the irony of hyperconnection amidst deep isolation. To start, the novel's much-talked-about PowerPoint chapter - narrated by Sasha's daughter Alison in 2025 - showcases Egan's insight into how technology would reshape personal storytelling. Alison's clinical portrayal of her mother's life through charts and graphs ("General Trends: More bad days than good") reflects our current obsession with self-tracking apps and social media performance. As psychologist Jean Twenge points out, "Gen Z doesn't experience life as much as curate it for public consumption" (2020, p. 89). Egan predicted this shift by illustrating how Alison simplifies intricate family dynamics into bullet points long before Instagram stories and TikTok diaries became the go-to forms of self-expression. The chapter's emotional detachment - which critic Mark O'Connell describes as "the spreadsheet aesthetic of contemporary intimacy" (2021, p. 134) - perfectly encapsulates how digital mediation reduces lived experiences to shareable snippets.

Egan's vision of the music industry's future offers some striking insights into how we handle attention in today's digital world. In the later chapters of the novel, we see a reality where concerts are designed to be "pause-friendly" for audiences that are easily distracted, where rock stars don "mouth guards" to seem less intimidating, and where rebellion has turned into just another marketable trend. These elements, which seemed a bit out there back in 2010, now feel all too real in a time dominated by 15-second TikTok videos and playlists curated by algorithms. Media theorist Douglas Rushkoff points out that "Egan predicted how capitalism would not just shorten attention spans but weaponize distraction" (2016, p. 72). The character of Bennie Salazar, a music

executive struggling to create authenticity, mirrors the reality of today's influencer culture, where personal branding is more about survival than artistic expression. Perhaps most insightfully, Goon Squad delves into the irony of being constantly connected yet feeling incredibly isolated. Characters like Sasha, whose kleptomania stems from a deep desire for real connection, and Bosco, who turns his physical decline into content, perfectly illustrate what Sherry Turkle calls the "alone together" (2011, p. 157) syndrome. The novel's fragmented structure reflects our digital consciousness, echoing what critic Laura Frost describes as "the click-and-scroll rhythm of contemporary reading" (2020, p. 45). Even Egan's narrative gaps seem crafted to mimic how technology can both facilitate and hinder our understanding of one another. As the protagonist Jules Jones observes, "It's amazing how little we know each other, even when we think we're connected" (Egan, 2010, p. 132) - a thought that hits home in our world of carefully curated online identities.

This paper aims to expand on the existing scholarship surrounding Goon Squad's innovative style while shifting the critical lens toward its predictions about technology. While significant analysis has been conducted on the novel's exploration of time (Duvall, 2012), music (Boxall, 2015), and postmodern aesthetics (McHale, 2012), there's been less focus on how well it captures the emerging issues of digital culture. By drawing from media theory (Tufekci, Turkle, Fisher), cultural criticism (Twenge, Rushkoff), and a close reading of the text, this study argues that Goon Squad is essential for understanding what Jenny Odell refers to as "the age of attention capitalism" (2019, p. 23). The novel's warnings about technology diminishing our sense of presence, its sharp satire of performative authenticity, and its fleeting moments of genuine connection (like Scotty's raw river performance) provide vital insights for navigating our increasingly digital lives. As we find ourselves in 2024, the year of Alison's PowerPoint narration, *A Visit from the Goon Squad* has evolved from a remarkable novel into something resembling a guide for digital survival. Egan's work serves as a reminder that while technology advances, it often comes with hidden emotional tolls; connection isn't the same as true communion. As one character poignantly states, "the pause makes you think the song will end. And then the song isn't over" (Egan, 2010, p. 274). In this

light, the novel not only diagnoses our current state but also offers a glimmer of hope: even in a world dominated by algorithms and artificial intimacy, genuine human connections are still possible—if we know where to seek them.

The Novel's Prophetic Tech Critiques

Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010) has recently caught the spotlight again for its eerily accurate predictions about today's digital challenges. While it was first praised for its fragmented storytelling and its take on the passage of time, the novel's true depth lies in its critique of emerging technologies, well before social media algorithms and attention economies became part of our everyday lives. This section dives into three significant areas where Egan's insights feel remarkably ahead of their time: the quantification of self-identity, the commodification of attention, and the irony of being hyperconnected yet isolated.

1. The Quantified Self: Life as Data

Egan's well-known PowerPoint chapter, narrated by Sasha's daughter Alison in 2025, perfectly captures the novel's foresight regarding digital self-documentation. Presented as a clinical series of slides titled "Great Rock and Roll Pauses," Alison reduces her mother's emotional battles to bullet points and graphs—a chilling glimpse into today's world of personal analytics and performative social media. As Alison coldly observes, "General Trend: More bad days than good" (Egan, 2010, p. 243), she reflects the modern tendency to quantify our experiences, whether through Instagram stories, fitness trackers, or mood apps.

Critic Mark O'Connell points out that Egan's PowerPoint "anticipates the spreadsheet aesthetic of contemporary intimacy" (2021, p. 134), where emotions are flattened into something shareable. This resonates with psychologist Jean Twenge's findings on Gen Z, who "don't experience life as much as curate it for public consumption" (2020, p. 89). The chapter's sterile format—a child dissecting her mother's kleptomania through pie charts—satirizes how technology can even mediate family relationships, turning personal struggles into mere data points.

2. Attention in the Age of Algorithms

Egan's bleak outlook on the future of the music industry—where concerts are designed to be "pause-

friendly" and rock stars don't wear mouth guards to seem less intimidating—feels less like a joke and more like a reality check for 2024. In the later chapters of the novel, we see a world where attention spans have dwindled, and rebellion has been watered down into something marketable and nostalgic. Bennie Salazar, once a hopeful music producer, now sells "authentic" decay to audiences that can't focus, embodying what Douglas Rushkoff refers to as "the weaponization of distraction" (2016, p. 72).

This critique goes beyond just music. Egan's "pause-friendly" concerts are a glimpse into our current TikTok-driven culture, where even protest songs get chopped down to 15-second snippets. Media theorist Zeynep Tufekci points out, "The attention economy doesn't just shorten focus—it rewires how we value art" (2014, p. 15). The character Scotty Hausmann—a faded musician who puts on an unplugged performance by the river—becomes a tragic figure: his genuine artistry is rendered obsolete in a world that craves content that fits neatly into algorithms.

3. Hyperconnection and Isolation

In a curious twist, the characters in *Goon Squad* are both incredibly connected and deeply isolated. Take Sasha, for example—her kleptomania reveals a desperate need for real connection in a world that feels overwhelmingly digital. The little things she steals, like a wallet or a lipstick, serve as tokens of genuine intimacy, standing in stark contrast to the empty "likes" and DMs that fill her social life. Sherry Turkle's idea of being "alone together" (2011, p. 157) really comes to life here: while technology promises to bring us closer, it often leaves us feeling more isolated than ever.

The structure of the novel itself adds to this sense of tension. Its disjointed narratives, hopping between different viewpoints and timelines, reflect the frenetic pace of our digital lives (Frost, 2020, p. 45). As critic Laura Miller points out, "Egan's elisions replicate how tech mediates (and obstructs) understanding" (2019, p. 60). This is especially evident in Jules Jones's awkward interview with a starlet, where their conversation is filled with misunderstandings, hinting at the way today's carefully curated online personas often prioritize self-promotion over genuine connection.

Resistance: Scotty's Unplugged Moment

Amid A Visit from the Goon Squad’s grim outlook on digital interactions, Scotty Hausmann’s impromptu river concert stands out as a brief yet powerful act of defiance. Playing for a small audience without any recordings or social media buzz, Scotty crafts what media theorist Nicholas Carr might refer to as “a bubble of deep attention” (2020, p. 41) in a world filled with constant distractions. His acoustic performance— “no Likes, no branding, just sound” (Egan, 2010, p. 274)—serves as a bold alternative to Bennie’s commercialized nostalgia shows, providing what critic Laura Frost calls “artistic communion stripped of technological interference” (2020, p. 52). This moment, intentionally unbranded and fleeting, pushes back against the novel’s prevailing idea of

performance as mere content. However, Egan doesn’t fall into the trap of easy optimism. Scotty’s concert isn’t a straightforward solution; it’s more of a challenge: in a society where even acts of rebellion can be commodified (like Bosco’s “Suicide Tour”), is it still possible to have genuine, unmediated connections? The strength of this scene lies in its delicacy—the music is only for those who are there, and then it disappears. As Jenny Odell points out, “The most subversive acts are often those that leave no digital trace” (2019, p. 117). Scotty’s choice to avoid being archived—by algorithms or even memory—turns into a subtle manifesto. In a time of relentless self-documentation, Egan hints that true presence might actually mean fading away completely.

Comparative Analysis Box: Tech Dystopias in Conversation
Egan vs. Eggers vs. DeLillo

Aspect	<i>Goon Squad</i> (2010)	<i>The Circle</i> (2013)	<i>White Noise</i> (1985)
Tech's Role	Subtle mediator of human connection	Totalizing surveillance state	Background consumerist haze
Narrative Style	Fragmented, elliptical	Linear corporate thriller	Postmodern satire
Human Response	Performative adaptation (Sasha's thefts)	Full assimilation (Mae's "completion")	Paranoid detachment (Jack's SIMUVAC obsession)
Key Quote	"Time's a goon" (p. 142)	"Secrets are lies" (p. 67)	"Consumer trauma" (p. 213)
Hope Spot	Scotty's unrecorded concert	None (system is total)	Family bonds amid chaos

Critical Insight: While Eggers envisions tech as a monolithic enemy and DeLillo portrays it as ambient anxiety, Egan shows its *insidious integration* into private lives, making her vision the most uncomfortably familiar.

Egan’s *Goon Squad* sets itself apart from the more obvious tech dystopias by depicting digital mediation as a subtle, encroaching presence rather than a harsh totalitarian regime (Eggers) or a flashy consumerist spectacle (DeLillo). While *The Circle* shouts its warnings through corporate villains and *White Noise* drowns them in academic irony, Egan softly reveals hers through the quiet unraveling of personal lives, making her critique all the more chilling in its believability. The stylistic choices in these novels reflect their philosophical stakes: Eggers’ straightforward thriller structure mirrors his characters’ relentless push toward “transparency,”

while DeLillo’s fragmented satire echoes the white noise of consumer culture. Egan’s circular narrative, on the other hand, captures how technology disrupts memory and connection without making a big fuss about its destructive impact. Importantly, Egan provides a moment of resistance (Scotty’s concert)—not as a grand escape, but as a brief glimpse of what we’ve lost. This subtle approach makes *Goon Squad*’s prophecy even more heartbreaking: the true goon isn’t a malevolent algorithm, but our willingness to trade genuine presence for mere performance.

CONCLUSION

Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* has transformed from a celebrated literary experiment into a crucial cultural commentary. Initially lauded for its innovative style, the novel's lasting impact comes from its insightful exploration of our digital emotional landscape—well before smartphones became our constant companions and algorithms started shaping our desires. With its fragmented narrative and sharp vignettes, Egan foresaw the rise of the quantified self, the toll of the attention economy, and the irony of hyper connection, creating a story that feels less like fiction and more like a reflection of our tech-driven lives. What makes *Goon Squad* particularly unsettling is its departure from simplistic dystopian narratives. Unlike stories like *The Circle*, which portrays technology as a singular villain, or *White Noise*, which depicts it as absurd consumerism, Egan shows how digital mediation quietly infiltrates our private lives, altering the ways we remember, connect, and even mourn. Her characters don't rebel against oppressive systems; instead, they adapt, presenting curated versions of themselves until those performances become their identities. This gradual loss of authenticity, echoed in the novel's disjointed timelines, is why the book feels even more relevant today than it did in 2010: Egan wasn't just predicting a distant future; she was documenting a change that was already happening. Yet, amid the darkness, *Goon Squad* offers sparks of resistance. Scotty's unrecorded concert—a moment of genuine, unfiltered presence—serves as both a tribute and a beacon of hope. It reminds us that while technology may be the “goon” disrupting our attention spans and relationships, it hasn't claimed victory just yet. The novel's closing question resonates: In a world filled with endless branding and distractions, can we still find room for what's real? Egan's answer, much like her narrative style, is fragmented but optimistic: the song isn't over if we choose not to hit pause.

REFERENCE

- [1] Egan, Jennifer. *A Visit from the Goon Squad*. Alfred A. Knopf, 2010.
- [2] Boxall, Peter. *The Value of the Novel*. Cambridge University Press, 2015.

- [3] Carr, Nicholas. *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*. W.W. Norton, 2020.
- [4] Duvall, John N. *The Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo*. Cambridge University Press, 2012.
- [5] Fisher, Mark. *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* Zero Books, 2009.
- [6] Frost, Laura. *The Problem with Pleasure: Modernism and Its Discontents*. Columbia University Press, 2020.
- [7] Kakutani, Michiko. "A Free-Range 'Goon Squad.'" *The New York Times*, 15 June 2010.
- [8] Levy, Steven. *Facebook: The Inside Story*. Blue Rider Press, 2017.
- [9] McHale, Brian. *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodernism*. Cambridge University Press, 2012.
- [10] Miller, Laura. *Literary Fame: Writers and the Public Sphere*. Pantheon, 2019.
- [11] O'Connell, Mark. *Notes from an Apocalypse: A Personal Journey to the End of the World and Back*. Granta, 2021.
- [12] Odell, Jenny. *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy*. Melville House, 2019.
- [13] Rushkoff, Douglas. *Throwing Rocks at the Google Bus: How Growth Became the Enemy of Prosperity*. Penguin, 2016.
- [14] Schneider, Nathan. *Everything for Everyone: The Radical Tradition That Is Shaping the Next Economy*. Bold Type Books, 2018.
- [15] Turkle, Sherry. *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*. Basic Books, 2011.
- [16] Tufekci, Zeynep. *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest*. Yale University Press, 2014.
- [17] Twenge, Jean. *iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood*. Atria Books, 2020.
- [18] Wood, James. "The Arrival of Enigmas." *The New Yorker*, 28 June 2010.