## Sociology of Digital Control: Datafication, Online Surveillance, and Gendered Norms in Everyday Life in Higher Education in Pakistan

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**Abstract**
This qualitative study examines the sociology of digital control by exploring how datafication, online surveillance, and gendered norms shape everyday life, particularly within higher education contexts. Using thematic content analysis, secondary literature was systematically reviewed from multiple databases including Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science, and institutional repositories. Purposive sampling was employed to select studies related to AI applications in higher education, such as learning analytics, automated assessment, and surveillance, alongside themes of digital inequality, and governance, with emphasis on Pakistan and comparable Global South settings. Through inductive-deductive analysis, nine major themes emerged, highlighting the mechanisms of digital control, gendered experiences of surveillance, and the role of digital platforms in reinforcing social norms. The findings indicate that digital technologies function as instruments of both governance and inequality, where data-driven systems intensify visibility, normalize monitoring, and reproduce gendered expectations. The study concludes that whereas digital control is pervasive, individuals and communities exhibit forms of resistance and agency, underscoring the need for ethical governance and gender-sensitive digital policies to ensure equitable participation in digital spaces.

**Keywords:** Digital Control, Datafication, Online Surveillance, Gendered Norms, Higher Education, Digital Inequality, Digital Resistance

**Introduction**
The rapid expansion of digital technologies has reconfigured the ways in which social life is organized, experienced, and regulated (Foucault, 1977). In contemporary

societies, digital platforms and infrastructures do not merely mediate communication and interaction; they also generate extensive records of individual behaviour, preferences, and social relations (Goffman, 1959). This process of datafication the transformation of everyday activities into quantifiable data has enabled a new form of social governance that operates through digital systems rather than traditional institutions (Deleuze, 1992). As a result, everyday life is increasingly shaped by algorithms, surveillance practices, and the commodification of personal information, raising significant sociological questions about power, control, and inequality (Bourdieu, 1986). A central feature of this digital transformation is online surveillance, which encompasses both state-led monitoring and corporate tracking through platforms, applications, and devices (Davis, 2003). Surveillance is no longer limited to specific public spaces; it has become embedded in daily routines, from mobile phone usage and social media engagement to smart home devices and workplace monitoring. These practices create what Foucault (1977) described as a "disciplinary society," where individuals internalize norms and modify their behaviour due to the awareness of being observed. However, in the digital era, surveillance is not only visible through physical institutions but also through invisible algorithms that monitor, predict, and influence behaviour in real time (Haggerty & Ericson, 2000).

Importantly, digital control is not experienced uniformly across society. Gender plays a critical role in shaping how individuals are monitored, judged, and disciplined online (Wilding, Gamage, Worrell, & Baldassar, 2022). The digital sphere often reproduces and intensifies existing gender norms, such as expectations related to modesty, respectability, and appropriate conduct (Menin, 2018). Females and gender minorities are frequently subjected to heightened scrutiny, moral policing, and harassment, which restrict their autonomy and participation in online spaces (Kelalech, 2025). Moreover, algorithms perpetuate gender biases by amplifying stereotypical content, reinforcing discriminatory patterns in targeted advertising, and influencing the visibility of certain voices (Kazemi, 2025). This gendered dimension of digital control highlights how power relations are encoded into digital infrastructures, affecting everyday experiences of privacy, freedom, and self-presentation. This research examines the sociology of digital control by exploring the interplay between datafication, online surveillance, and gendered norms in everyday life. It seeks to understand how digital technologies shape social regulation, how individuals navigate surveillance regimes, and how gendered expectations are reproduced and contested within digital environments. By focusing on the micro-level experiences of individuals as well as the macro-level structures of digital governance, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how power operates in the digital age. Ultimately, it aims to illuminate the social implications of digital control and provide insights into the possibilities for resistance and transformation in an increasingly data-driven world.

**Study Context**

In the contemporary digital era, everyday life is increasingly mediated by digital technologies that record, analyze, and predict human behaviour (Gammon & Phan,

2025). The process of datafication has transformed ordinary activities such as communication, shopping, education, and social interaction into quantifiable data, which is then used for surveillance, decision-making, and control (Faith, 2022). However, digital technologies offer convenience and connectivity, they also create new mechanisms of power and regulation that are embedded in everyday practices (Berg, 2020). Despite the widespread adoption of digital platforms, there is limited sociological understanding of how digital control operates through datafication and surveillance, especially in relation to gendered norms. Furthermore, online surveillance has expanded beyond traditional state monitoring to include corporate tracking, algorithmic profiling, and peer surveillance, making individuals continuously visible and accountable in digital spaces (Wilding et al., 2022). This pervasive monitoring affects individuals' autonomy, privacy, and self-presentation, often producing self-regulation and conformity to dominant social expectations (Menin, 2018). Importantly, these processes are not neutral; they intersect with gender norms and inequalities (Kelalech, 2025). Females and gender minorities frequently face heightened surveillance, moral policing, and digital harassment, which limits their freedom of expression and participation in online spaces (Kazemi, 2025). Algorithms and digital platforms also reinforce gender stereotypes through biased content recommendations, targeted advertising, and unequal visibility, thereby reproducing structural inequalities (Gammon & Phan, 2025).

The problem is further complicated by the lack of empirical research that integrates datafication, online surveillance, and gendered norms into a comprehensive sociological analysis of everyday life (Faith, 2022). Existing studies often address these issues separately, without examining how they mutually reinforce each other to shape social behaviour, identity formation, and power relations (Berg, 2020). Therefore, there is a critical need to explore how digital control mechanisms operate in everyday life, how they are experienced differently by gender groups, and how individuals negotiate, resist, or comply with these norms (Kelalech, 2025). This study aims to address this gap by examining the dynamics of digital control in everyday life, focusing on the interplay between datafication, online surveillance, and gendered norms. It seeks to understand how digital technologies shape social regulation, how gendered expectations are reinforced or challenged in digital environments, and what implications these processes have for autonomy, privacy, and social inequality.

## The Data and Methods

This study employs a qualitative research design using thematic content analysis of secondary data to explore the sociology of digital control, focusing on datafication, online surveillance, and gendered norms in everyday life. Relevant literature was sourced from multiple databases, including Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and institutional repositories, using targeted keywords related to digital control and gendered experiences in higher education. Purposive sampling was applied to select studies addressing AI applications in higher education (such as learning analytics, automated assessment, and surveillance), digital divide, and AI governance, with emphasis on Pakistan and comparable Global South contexts. The selected

documents were systematically reviewed, and key information was extracted through a structured matrix before being coded and analyzed using an inductive–deductive thematic approach. This process yielded nine major themes, which were interpreted within the context of higher educational institutions. Trustworthiness was ensured through triangulation across multiple sources, maintenance of an audit trail, peer review, and reflexivity, whereas ethical integrity was upheld through accurate citation and transparent reporting, given the study's reliance on secondary data.

## Results and Discussion

### Theme 1: Datafication of Everyday Life

Datafication refers to the process through which everyday activities and social interactions are converted into quantifiable data. With the widespread use of smartphones, social media, and digital platforms, routine actions such as messaging, browsing, shopping, and location tracking are recorded and transformed into measurable units (Menin, 2018). These data points are not only stored but also analyzed to generate insights about individuals' preferences, behaviours, and social relations (Kazemi, 2025). Consequently, ordinary life becomes a continuous stream of information that monitored, compared, and monetized by digital systems (Gammon & Phan, 2025).

The continuous generation of data has significant implications for social control and governance (Faith, 2022). Datafication normalizes the presence of surveillance by making monitoring a routine part of daily life. Individuals often accept data collection as a necessary trade-off for convenience, connectivity, and access to services (Berg, 2020). However, this acceptance also increases the power of corporations and state institutions that control digital infrastructures, as they use data to influence behaviour, predict actions, and shape decision-making. The quantification of social life thus becomes a mechanism through which control is exercised without direct physical intervention (Menin, 2018).

Datafication also has gendered consequences, as digital systems often capture and interpret gendered patterns of behaviour (Gammon & Phan, 2025). Females and gender minorities more visible and vulnerable to monitoring due to their online activities, social roles, and the types of content they produce (Faith, 2022). Gendered data profiles reinforce stereotypes and lead to targeted surveillance, moral policing, and unequal treatment in digital spaces (Berg, 2020). Therefore, datafication does not operate as a neutral technological process; it reflects and reproduces existing gender norms and inequalities in everyday life, shaping how individuals are perceived, judged, and controlled in the digital era (Menin, 2018).

### Theme 2: Mechanisms of Online Surveillance

Online surveillance operates through a range of digital mechanisms that monitor and record individuals' actions, interactions, and movements (Ping Yu, 2021). These mechanisms include tracking tools such as cookies, web beacons, and device fingerprinting, which collect information about browsing patterns, app usage, and digital preferences (Maineri, Achterberg, & Luijkx, 2022). Social media platforms

and search engines also monitor user activity to build detailed profiles that used for targeted advertising, content personalization, and behavioural prediction (Jacob, 2016). Furthermore, surveillance extends to public and private spaces through technologies such as CCTV, facial recognition, and location-based services, which continuously capture data and map individuals' movements in real time (Campbell & Carlson, 2002).

The expansion of online surveillance is driven by both corporate interests and state objectives. Corporations use surveillance mechanisms to maximize profit by collecting data for marketing, product development, and user engagement strategies (Borges Monroy, 2025). In parallel, states and law enforcement agencies deploy surveillance technologies for security, control, and public order. This dual surveillance system creates a comprehensive monitoring environment where individuals are subjected to constant visibility (Maineri et al., 2022). The presence of surveillance systems shapes behaviour, as people become aware that their online and offline actions tracked, recorded, and evaluated, leading to self-censorship and compliance with dominant norms (Ping Yu, 2021).

Importantly, the mechanisms of online surveillance are not neutral; they are embedded within power structures and social inequalities (Maineri et al., 2022). Surveillance tools disproportionately target certain groups based on gender, class, ethnicity, or political affiliation (Jacob, 2016). For example, females and gender minorities often face intensified monitoring, moral policing, and harassment online, which restricts their autonomy and freedom of expression (Borges Monroy, 2025). Algorithms also amplify surveillance by flagging content or behaviour that deviates from normative standards, reinforcing gendered expectations and social control (Jacob, 2016). Therefore, understanding the mechanisms of online surveillance is crucial to analyzing how digital control operates and how individuals negotiate and resist surveillance in everyday life.

**Theme 3: Algorithmic Control and Predictive Analytics**

Algorithmic control refers to the ways in which digital algorithms govern access to information, shape user experiences, and influence decision-making processes (Williamson, 2016). Platforms such as social media, search engines, and e-commerce sites use complex algorithms to filter content, rank information, and personalize user feeds based on patterns of behaviour (Smithers, 2023). These algorithms operate continuously, learning from user interactions to optimize engagement and retention (Muhlhoff & Ruschemeier, 2024). As a result, individuals are guided by algorithmic logic that determines what they see, what they engage with, and how they interpret the world, often without explicit awareness of the underlying mechanisms (Krouglov, 2024).

Predictive analytics is a key component of algorithmic control, as it uses historical data to forecast future behaviour and preferences (Fehrenbacher, Ghio, & Weisner, 2023). By analyzing past actions, algorithms predict what users are likely to click, purchase, or share, enabling platforms to deliver targeted content and advertisements (Bennett Moses & Chan, 2018). Predictive analytics is also used in areas such as

employment, education, and law enforcement, where algorithmic tools assess individuals' risk profiles and make decisions about opportunities, access, or monitoring (Williamson, 2016). This data-driven prediction creates a form of digital governance in which individuals are pre-judged based on their digital footprints, leading to new forms of inequality and control (Smithers, 2023).

The gendered implications of algorithmic control are significant, as algorithms often reproduce existing social biases and stereotypes (Mühlhoff & Ruschemeier, 2024). Once algorithms are trained on gendered data, they reinforce normative expectations about behaviour, appearance, and roles (Krouglov, 2024). For instance, female's content categorized and targeted based on stereotypical interests, whereas males receive different types of recommendations (Fehrenbacher et al., 2023). Similarly, predictive tools disproportionately impact females and gender minorities in areas such as hiring, credit scoring, and online moderation, where biased algorithms limit opportunities or amplify scrutiny (Bennett Moses & Chan, 2018). Thus, algorithmic control and predictive analytics not only shape digital experiences but also perpetuate gendered norms and inequalities in everyday life.

**Theme 4: Gendered Surveillance and Moral Policing**
Gendered surveillance refers to the disproportionate monitoring and scrutiny of females and gender minorities in digital spaces, where social norms and expectations about gender behaviour are enforced through observation and judgement (Ahmed, Shoaib, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2026b; Shoaib, Ahmed, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2026b). Digital platforms often become sites of moral policing, where individuals are monitored not only by institutions but also by peers and communities (Ahmed, Shoaib, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2026; Shoaib, Ahmed, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2026c; Shoaib, Waris, Zaman, & Abdullah, 2025b). Female's online presence, expressions, and interactions are frequently evaluated against standards of modesty, respectability, and traditional gender roles (Ahmed, Shoaib, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2026a; Shoaib, Ahmed, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2026a; Shoaib, Waris, Zaman, & Abdullah, 2025a). Consequently, their digital behaviour is subjected to heightened surveillance, leading to self-regulation and constrained freedom of expression (Shoaib, Waris, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025; Waris, Shoaib, Sharif, & Abdullah, 2025a, 2025b, 2025c).

Moral policing in online environments takes various forms, including shaming, trolling, harassment, and public condemnation of behaviour that deviates from gendered norms (Ali, Shoaib, & Ali, 2025; Shoaib & Abdullah, 2025; Shoaib, Ali, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025b; Waris, Shoaib, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025). Social media and messaging platforms provide tools for rapid dissemination of moral judgments, enabling communities to collectively enforce conformity (Ali, Shoaib, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025a, 2025b; Iqbal, Shoaib, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025; Shoaib, Ali, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025c). Females and gender minorities often face accusations related to "improper" conduct, appearance, or relationships, which result in reputational harm and psychological distress (Shoaib, Ali, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025a, 2025b, 2025c). This form of surveillance is not merely interpersonal; it is embedded in broader cultural and social systems that value patriarchal control and uphold gendered

expectations (Ali, Shoaib, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025a, 2025b; Shoaib, Rasool, & Iqbal, 2025a, 2025b). The digital sphere, therefore, becomes a space where traditional moral codes are reproduced and intensified (Shoaib, Iqbal, Rasool, & Abdullah, 2025; Shoaib, Rasool, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025a, 2025b; Shoaib, Zaman, & Abdullah, 2025). The consequences of gendered surveillance and moral policing extend beyond online interactions, influencing female's everyday lives and social mobility (Shoaib, Rasool, & Zaman, 2025a, 2025b, 2025c; Shoaib, Rasool, Zaman, & Abdullah, 2025). Fear of judgement and harassment limit female's participation in digital spaces, restrict their social networks, and discourage them from expressing opinions or engaging in public discourse (Shoaib, Ahmed, & Iqbal, 2025; Shoaib, Batool, Kausar, & Abdullah, 2025; Shoaib, Rasool, & Iqbal, 2025c; Shoaib & Ullah, 2025). Moreover, algorithms and platform policies inadvertently support moral policing by promoting content that aligns with dominant norms whereas suppressing dissenting voices. As a result, digital control becomes gendered, reinforcing existing inequalities and restricting autonomy (Shoaib, Ahmed, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025; Shoaib, Ahmed, & Usmani, 2025b; Shoaib, Rasool, Zaman, & Ahmed, 2025). Understanding this theme is crucial for analyzing how digital surveillance intersects with gender norms and how individuals negotiate or resist such control in everyday life (Ahmed, Shoaib, & Zaman, 2025; Shoaib, Ahmed, & Usmani, 2025a; Shoaib, Ahmed, Zaman, & Abdullah, 2025).

**Theme 5: Privacy, Self-Disclosure, and Digital Identity**
Privacy in the digital age has become increasingly complex, as individuals constantly negotiate what information to share, with whom, and under what conditions (Shoaib, Kausar, Ali, & Abdullah, 2025; Shoaib, Rasool, Kalsoom, & Ali, 2025; Shoaib, Waris, & Iqbal, 2025a). Digital platforms require users to disclose personal details to access services, connect with others, or participate in online communities (Ali, Shoaib, & Kausar, 2025; Shoaib, Ali, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025a). However, this process of self-disclosure is often asymmetrical, as users have not fully understand how their information is collected, stored, and used (Shoaib, Ali, & Kausar, 2025; Shoaib, Waris, & Iqbal, 2025c). The resulting digital traces create permanent records that accessed by corporations, governments, and other users, thereby blurring the boundaries between private and public life (Shoaib, Waris, & Iqbal, 2025b; Shoaib, Waris, & Iqbal, 2025a, 2025b).
Self-disclosure online is not only about sharing information but also about constructing and managing digital identity (Shoaib, 2025a, 2025b; Shoaib & Bashir, 2025; Shoaib, Shamsher, & Iqbal, 2025). Individuals curate their online profiles through selective sharing of photos, opinions, and personal experiences to create desired impressions (Shoaib, Iqbal, & Iftikhar, 2025; Shoaib, Tariq, & Iqbal, 2025a, 2025b; Shoaib, Tariq, Rasool, & Iqbal, 2025). This curated identity is shaped by platform norms, audience expectations, and surveillance pressures, leading to strategic self-presentation (Shoaib, 2024e; Shoaib, Shamsher, & Iqbal, 2025; Shoaib & Zaman, 2025). The awareness of being monitored influences the way people present themselves, often leading to self-censorship or the adoption of socially acceptable behaviours to avoid negative judgment (Shoaib, 2024b, 2024c, 2024d). In this sense,

digital identity becomes a product of both personal agency and structural constraints imposed by digital surveillance (Shoaib, 2023, 2024a).

Gender plays a critical role in shaping privacy practices and self-disclosure patterns (Shoaib, 2021). Females and gender minorities often face higher risks of online harassment, stalking, and moral policing, which affects their decisions about what to reveal online (Shoaib, Mustafa, & Hussain, 2022, 2023). As a result, they limit their digital presence, use pseudonyms, or restrict access to their profiles to protect themselves (Shoaib, 2024b, 2024c, 2024d). These privacy strategies, although protective, also reduce visibility and participation in public discourse, thereby reinforcing gendered inequalities in digital spaces (Shoaib & Ullah, 2021). Thus, privacy and digital identity are not neutral concepts but are deeply embedded in power relations and gender norms, influencing how individuals experience control and autonomy in everyday digital life (Jacob, 2016; Mühlhoff & Ruschemeier, 2024).

**Theme 6: Digital Inequality and Power Relations**
Digital inequality refers to the unequal access to digital technologies, internet connectivity, and digital literacy, which creates significant disparities in participation and representation in online spaces (Fehrenbacher et al., 2023; Menin, 2018). Access to devices, stable internet, and digital skills is often determined by socio-economic status, geographical location, education, and gender. In many contexts, females and marginalized groups have limited access to technology due to cultural norms, financial constraints, and lower levels of digital literacy (Borges Monroy, 2025; Campbell & Carlson, 2002). These inequalities shape who participate in digital platforms, whose voices are heard, and who benefit from digital opportunities such as education, employment, and social networking (Jacob, 2016; Smithers, 2023).

Power relations in the digital age are also shaped by the control exerted by corporations and state institutions over digital infrastructures and data (Campbell & Carlson, 2002; Wilding et al., 2022). Digital platforms have become powerful intermediaries that influence what information is accessible, how content is moderated, and which voices are amplified (Jacob, 2016). The ownership of data and algorithms enables these actors to exercise significant control over users, often without transparency or accountability (Krouglov, 2024). As a result, users are placed in subordinate positions where their behaviour is monitored, their choices are guided, and their digital footprints are commodified for profit (Smithers, 2023). This dynamic reproduces structural inequalities, as those who control digital systems shape social norms and influence public discourse (Ping Yu, 2021).

Gendered power relations are particularly evident in digital environments, where females and gender minorities face systemic barriers and unequal treatment (Menin, 2018). Digital inequality manifests not only in access but also in representation and safety. Females are often underrepresented in digital leadership roles and technology development, which reinforces male-dominated digital cultures and biases in technology design. Moreover, gender-based harassment and surveillance restrict female's online participation and freedom of expression (Berg, 2020). Consequently, digital spaces replicate and intensify existing gender hierarchies, limiting female's

agency and reinforcing patriarchal control. Understanding digital inequality and power relations is therefore essential for analyzing how digital control operates and how gendered norms are maintained in everyday life (Shoaib, Waris, Zaman, et al., 2025b).

## Theme 7: Resistance, Agency, and Counter-Surveillance

Resistance in digital spaces refers to the strategies individuals and groups use to challenge or undermine mechanisms of surveillance and control (Waris, Shoaib, et al., 2025c). Despite pervasive monitoring, users often demonstrate agency by adopting practices that protect their privacy and disrupt digital tracking (Waris, Shoaib, Iqbal, et al., 2025). These strategies include using encryption tools, anonymous browsing, VPNs, and privacy-focused platforms to limit data collection. Additionally, individuals intentionally modify their online behaviour to avoid surveillance, such as reducing self-disclosure, curating content, or using pseudonyms (Shoaib, Waris, Zaman, et al., 2025a). Such practices demonstrate that users are not passive subjects of digital control but actively negotiate and resist surveillance in their everyday lives (Shoaib & Abdullah, 2025).

Collective resistance is also evident through activism, advocacy, and community-based efforts that challenge surveillance systems and demand digital rights (Ali et al., 2025). Social movements, civil society organizations, and digital rights groups mobilize against intrusive data practices, algorithmic bias, and state surveillance (Shoaib, Waris, Iqbal, et al., 2025). They use campaigns, public awareness initiatives, and policy advocacy to push for transparency, accountability, and stronger privacy protections. In addition, digital communities often create counter-narratives that challenge dominant norms and provide support to those targeted by moral policing and gendered surveillance (Shoaib & Abdullah, 2025). These collective actions highlight how digital spaces also be sites of empowerment and transformation.

Counter-surveillance practices are particularly significant in the context of gendered norms and moral policing (Jacob, 2016). Females and gender minorities employ specific tactics to navigate online risks, such as limiting visibility, controlling audience access, or using alternative platforms that offer greater safety. Some engage in collective counter-surveillance by documenting harassment, reporting abuse, or mobilizing online support networks (Fehrenbacher et al., 2023). However, these strategies reflect agency, they also reveal the uneven burden placed on marginalized groups to protect themselves (Kelalech, 2025). Understanding resistance and counter-surveillance is crucial for analyzing how individuals negotiate digital control, and it highlights the potential for digital spaces to foster both domination and emancipation (Gammon & Phan, 2025).

## Theme 8: Social Norms and Everyday Compliance

Social norms in digital environments refer to the shared expectations and unwritten rules that guide behaviour within online communities (Shoaib, Waris, Zaman, et al., 2025a). These norms shape how individuals communicate, present themselves, and interact on digital platforms. In many contexts, digital spaces mirror offline social

expectations, reinforcing traditional standards of respectability, morality, and gender roles (Waris, Shoaib, et al., 2025b). Users learn and internalize these norms through repeated exposure to online content, feedback mechanisms, and community reactions (Waris, Shoaib, Iqbal, et al., 2025). As a result, digital platforms become sites where normative behaviour is continually reproduced and reinforced (Shoaib & Abdullah, 2025).

Everyday compliance refers to the ways individuals adjust their behaviour to conform to these digital norms, often through self-regulation (Waris, Shoaib, et al., 2025b). The awareness of being monitored or judged in online spaces encourages users to modify their actions to avoid criticism, harassment, or social exclusion (Shoaib, Ali, Iqbal, et al., 2025a). This compliance takes the form of self-censorship, selective self-presentation, or adherence to dominant moral codes. Over time, such practices become habitual, leading individuals to internalize surveillance and control as a normal aspect of digital life (Shoaib, Ali, Iqbal, et al., 2025b). In this way, compliance is not only externally imposed but also internally produced through the constant presence of digital scrutiny.

The gendered dimension of social norms and compliance is particularly significant, as females and gender minorities often face stricter expectations and higher consequences for deviating from acceptable behaviour (Shoaib & Abdullah, 2025). Gendered norms dictate what is considered appropriate in terms of appearance, speech, and social conduct, and digital platforms amplify these expectations through public judgment and moral policing (Iqbal et al., 2025). Females avoid certain topics, restrict their online presence, or alter their behaviour to maintain social approval and safety. This gendered compliance reinforces existing power structures and limits the potential for digital spaces to serve as sites of equal participation (Waris, Shoaib, et al., 2025c). Understanding how social norms shape everyday compliance is essential for analyzing the mechanisms of digital control and the reproduction of gendered inequalities in everyday life.

**Theme 9: Ethics, Regulation, and Governance of Digital Platforms**

The governance of digital platforms involves the rules, policies, and practices that shape how digital spaces operate and how user data is managed (Ping Yu, 2021). In the digital economy, platforms such as social media, search engines, and e-commerce sites hold substantial power over information flows, user interaction, and data control (Jacob, 2016). This power raises ethical concerns regarding transparency, accountability, and fairness. Many platforms collect vast amounts of personal data, often without explicit user awareness, and use it for targeted advertising, behavioural profiling, and content moderation (Fehrenbacher et al., 2023). Such practices highlight ethical dilemmas related to consent, privacy, and the commodification of personal information (Williamson, 2016).

Regulation of digital platforms remains a complex and contested issue, as governments attempt to balance innovation, economic growth, and individual rights (Ping Yu, 2021). Existing legal frameworks often lag behind rapid technological developments, leading to gaps in privacy protection and data governance. Regulatory

efforts include data protection laws, content moderation policies, and cybersecurity measures (Campbell & Carlson, 2002). However, enforcement challenges, jurisdictional limitations, and political interests often weaken regulatory effectiveness. In many contexts, digital governance is shaped by a combination of state policies, corporate self-regulation, and international standards, creating a fragmented regulatory environment that exploited by powerful actors (Menin, 2018).

Gendered implications of ethics and governance are critical, as digital policies and practices reinforce or challenge gender norms and inequalities (Jacob, 2016). Platform algorithms and content moderation systems reflect gender bias, resulting in unequal visibility, harassment, or censorship of females and gender minorities. Moreover, weak regulation allows gender-based abuse and surveillance to persist, undermining digital safety and freedom of expression (Mühlhoff & Ruschemeier, 2024). Ethical governance should therefore consider gender-sensitive approaches to data protection, platform accountability, and digital rights (Gammon & Phan, 2025). Understanding the ethical and regulatory dimensions of digital platforms is essential for analyzing how digital control is institutionalized and how it impacts gendered experiences in everyday life.

### Theoretical Insights

**Foucault's Theory of Surveillance and Discipline:** Michel Foucault's conceptualization of disciplinary power and surveillance offers a central theoretical lens for understanding digital control. Foucault (1977) argues that modern power operates through subtle mechanisms of observation and normalization, where individuals internalize the sense of being watched and regulate their own behaviour accordingly. In the digital age, surveillance is not confined to institutions such as prisons or schools but is embedded in everyday digital practices through datafication and algorithmic monitoring. The constant visibility created by digital platforms mirrors Foucault's notion of the panopticon, where the possibility of being observed generates self-discipline and conformity (Foucault, 1977). This theoretical perspective helps explain how digital control functions through both external monitoring and internalized compliance.

**Goffman's Theory of Self-Presentation and Impression Management:** Erving Goffman's dramaturgical approach emphasizes that individuals manage their identities through performance in social interactions. Goffman (1959) argues that people present themselves differently in various social settings, using "front-stage" behaviour to conform to audience expectations. Digital platforms create new stages for self-presentation, where users curate profiles, posts, and interactions to shape their online identity. The awareness of being watched and judged online influences how individuals disclose personal information and manage their digital persona. Goffman's framework is particularly relevant for understanding how gendered norms shape self-presentation, as females and gender minorities perform respectability and compliance to avoid moral policing and harassment.

**Deleuze's Control Society:** Gilles Deleuze's concept of the control society extends Foucault's ideas by emphasizing how power in contemporary society operates through continuous modulation rather than fixed institutions. Deleuze (1992) suggests that control is exercised through networks and flows, where individuals are constantly monitored and directed through digital systems. In the context of datafication and predictive analytics, digital platforms use algorithms to modulate behaviour by shaping what users see, what they consume, and how they interact. This constant modulation aligns with Deleuze's argument that power is diffuse and continuous, rather than centralized. Thus, the digital environment functions as a control society where surveillance and regulation are embedded in everyday life.

**Bourdieu's Theory of Social Capital and Symbolic Power:** Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of social capital and symbolic power provide a useful lens for understanding how digital control is linked to inequality. Bourdieu (1986) argues that social relations are shaped by unequal access to resources, including cultural and symbolic capital. In digital spaces, access to technology, digital literacy, and visibility functions as forms of capital that influence social status and opportunities. Datafication and platform algorithms reinforce symbolic power by privileging certain voices and marginalizing others. Gendered norms shape who gains visibility and who is subjected to surveillance, leading to unequal distribution of digital capital and reinforcing structural inequalities.

**Feminist Theories of Gender and Surveillance:** Feminist scholarship highlights that surveillance and control are gendered processes that reinforce patriarchal norms. Feminist theorists argue that female's bodies and behaviours are historically regulated through moral codes and social expectations (Bartky, 1990). Digital surveillance continues this regulation by extending moral policing into online spaces, where females and gender minorities are scrutinized for their appearance, speech, and behaviour. Gendered surveillance also intersects with digital harassment, victim-blaming, and online violence, which restrict female's autonomy and participation. Feminist perspectives emphasize that digital control is not neutral but reflects broader power structures that reproduce gender inequality (Davis, 2003; Haggerty & Ericson, 2000).

## Conclusion

The study concludes that digital control in contemporary society is deeply rooted in the processes of datafication, online surveillance, and algorithmic governance, which together reshape everyday life by making individuals increasingly visible and governable through digital systems. Datafication converts routine social interactions into quantifiable data, enabling platforms and institutions to monitor, predict, and influence behaviour. Online surveillance, driven by both corporate and state interests, operates through diverse mechanisms that normalize constant observation and encourage self-regulation. Algorithmic control further intensifies this dynamic by shaping access to information, filtering content, and reinforcing gendered norms

through biased predictive analytics. The research also highlights that digital control is not experienced uniformly; females and gender minorities are subject to heightened scrutiny, moral policing, and harassment, which constrains their autonomy and participation in digital spaces. Despite these constraints, individuals and communities demonstrate agency through resistance and counter-surveillance strategies, yet such efforts often require significant effort and not fully dismantle structural inequalities. Overall, the study underscores that digital control is a complex socio-technical phenomenon that reproduces existing power relations and gendered inequalities, necessitating stronger ethical governance, policy interventions, and gender-sensitive digital rights to ensure equitable participation in digital life.

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