

Research Paper

From Algorithm to Sanskar: Theorizing Digital Surveillance and Internalised Discipline among Young Urban Indian Women

Apreet Buttar^{1*}, Neha Sharma²

ABSTRACT

The rapid proliferation of digital technologies has transformed social media platforms into spaces of constant visibility, algorithmic regulation, and collective social surveillance. While existing scholarship extensively explores digital surveillance, online self-presentation, and cyber-harassment, limited attention has been paid to how Western models of surveillance intersect with culturally embedded, localized patriarchy. This conceptual framework paper addresses this gap by theorizing how algorithmic architectures, peer visibility, and the traditional Indian socio-cultural expectation of *sanskar* (cultural respectability and modesty) collectively function as an interconnected mechanism of gendered discipline. Drawing upon Michel Foucault's concept of the Panopticon and Shoshana Zuboff's theory of surveillance capitalism, this paper examines how young urban Indian women experience a dual gaze: external technological, societal monitoring and an internalized cultural regulation. This intersection produces a distinct form of digital respectability and self-censorship, where these young women voluntarily manage, curate, or restrict their online visibility in anticipation of moral policing and familial judgment. Ultimately, this paper does not present new empirical data, but instead provides a new theoretical vocabulary and conceptual map to help future researchers navigate and analyse how digital landscapes uniquely discipline and structure the subjectivities of contemporary Indian women.

Keywords: *Digital surveillance, Panopticon, Gendered self-surveillance, Sanskar, Social media, Internalized Discipline*

The rapid expansion of digital technologies and social media platforms has transformed contemporary everyday life into a space of continuous visibility, interaction, and surveillance. Smartphones, social networking applications, and algorithm-driven platforms have become deeply embedded within modern social existence; they shape not only everyday communication practices, but also individual subjectivities, identity formation, and the highly calculated dynamics of self-presentation under the pressure of social cues (Baumeister, 1987; Schlenker, 1980). In contemporary society, digital participation is no longer optional; rather, it has become an integral aspect of social, educational, and cultural life. As Nishnianidze (2023) observes, electronic devices have

¹Ph.D. Research scholar, Department of Human Development, Panjab University, Chandigarh

²School Counsellor

*Corresponding Author

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From Algorithm to Sanskar: Theorizing Digital Surveillance and Internalised Discipline among Young Urban Indian Women

become inseparable from everyday human existence, leaving billions of individuals constantly connected through digital networks.

However, the increasing integration of digital tools into everyday life has intensified new forms of surveillance and behavioural regulation. Social media platforms today do not merely function as spaces of communication, but act as automated mechanisms of observation, public visibility, and algorithmic monitoring (Gupta & Prasad, 2026). Individuals must continuously negotiate their online presence under the gaze of peers, institutions, families, and digital audiences, frequently internalizing these external expectations regarding acceptable behaviour and presentation.

While every demographic is affected by this persistent digital gaze, the online visibility of urban Indian women is further structured by deeply entrenched, culturally embedded notions of femininity, respectability, and *sanskar*. This online self-expression is mediated by localized anxieties regarding personal morality, family reputation, modesty, and social judgment. Young women are thus compelled to strategically manage their impressions (Goffman, 1959) to project a culturally sanctioned, hyper-feminine digital persona—a complex process that reflects broader psychological patterns of gendered regulation and emotional labor (Walkerdine, 1989). As a result, digital surveillance extends far beyond simple technological monitoring and becomes fully internalized as psychological self-regulation and self-censorship.

Drawing upon Michel Foucault's concept of the Panopticon, this paper theorizes how algorithmic surveillance, peer observation, and cultural expectations collectively function as an interconnected mechanism of gendered discipline among urban Indian urban girls. The paper argues that the intersection of digital visibility and culturally internalized codes of *sanskar* produces a distinct form of self-surveillance, forcing young women to regulate their behavior, appearance, and online identities in anticipation of social scrutiny. Existing studies on women's experiences in Indian digital spaces indicate that online harassment and public scrutiny heavily contribute to this heightened self-monitoring and restricted online participation (Sankhwar & Chaturvedi, 2018). Consequently, surveillance operates as an invisible, decentralized psychological constraint.

Existing scholarship has extensively explored digital surveillance, online self-presentation, cyber-harassment, and gendered experiences within social media environments. Feminist studies have further examined how online spaces reproduce universal expectations surrounding femininity, bodily visibility, and respectability. However, limited scholarly attention has been paid to how culturally embedded notions of *sanskar* uniquely intersect with algorithmic surveillance and peer visibility to produce internalized self-discipline among urban Indian women. Furthermore, the Foucauldian concept of the Panopticon remains underexplored within the specific context of Indian digital culture and gendered self-surveillance.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Panopticon, Disciplinary Power, and the Spatialized Gaze

The theoretical foundation for analysing digital discipline originates in Jeremy Bentham's architectural model of the Panopticon, later adapted by Michel Foucault (1977) as a metaphor for modern institutional power. The Panopticon relies on an asymmetric, visible yet unverifiable architecture of surveillance: a central watchtower positions the observer to

From Algorithm to Sanskar: Theorizing Digital Surveillance and Internalised Discipline among Young Urban Indian Women

monitor inmates who can never verify when they are actively being watched. Consequently, the constant possibility of surveillance compels the subjects to internalize the gaze, transforming them into the active agents of their own socialization and behavioural regulation (Verry, Matthieu, 2021). Foucault extended this mechanism beyond prison walls, arguing that modern disciplinary power operates through decentralized networks of normalization, where individuals continuously monitor, measure, and correct their conduct against socially constructed ideals of normalcy. Within this framework, power ceases to be an external force applied via direct coercion; rather, it functions as an omnipresent psychological constraint that manufactures self-regulating subjectivities. (Stein, 2016)

Surveillance Capitalism and Algorithmic Sorting

While Foucault's model accounts for the spatialized internalization of the gaze, contemporary digital landscapes require integration with Shoshana Zuboff's (2019) theory of surveillance capitalism. Zuboff conceptualizes this economic mutation as an architecture that processes human experience into behavioural data, which is then extracted, analysed, and monetized to predict and modify future behaviour. Unlike the classical Foucauldian Panopticon, which relies on the subject's conscious awareness of the watchtower, algorithmic surveillance often operates through an invisible architecture. Social media platforms employ predictive algorithms that sort, prioritize, and amplify specific content based on metrics of commercial engagement. Within digital environments, these automated curation engines do not merely observe behaviour; they actively structure the boundaries of online visibility, standardizing highly localized and commercialized metrics of beauty, popularity, success, and social validation.

Gendered Self-Surveillance and Metricized Legitimacy

When mapped onto feminist media critique, the synthesis of Foucauldian discipline and algorithmic modification manifests as highly gendered self-surveillance. Gendered self-surveillance is the psychological process through which women internalize patriarchal and commercial gazes, evaluating their physical and digital presentation as objects of constant public scrutiny (Regueira et al., 2026). Social media platforms weaponize this internalization by translating psychological desires for social validation into quantifiable metrics: likes, comments, shares, and follower counts. Consequently, the contemporary digital platform forces a metricization of feminine legitimacy. To maximize visibility and optimize algorithmic reach, users engage in intensive aesthetic labour employing digital filters, altering bodily presentation, and curating highly sanitized online personas. This connects with the analysis by Arnesson and Carlsson (2023) on gynaeopticism, which refers to how digital platforms enhance gendered self-surveillance via influencer marketing and curated aesthetics.

When digital content fails to achieve arbitrary benchmarks of metricized validation, individuals frequently delete posts, a defensive practice of self-censorship driven by the anticipation of peer rejection and social invalidation (Choudaraju, Neelima, 2020).

Sanskar and the De-Centering of Western Surveillance Models

A critical limitation of universalized Western surveillance theories (such as Foucault's and Zuboff's) is their failure to account for localized, post-colonial patriarchal codes within the Global South. Within the Indian socio-cultural landscape, gendered visibility is explicitly governed by the ancient yet highly adaptable framework of *sanskar* (cultural respectability, modesty, and filial piety). Under this localized patriarchal structure, the woman's body and

From Algorithm to Sanskar: Theorizing Digital Surveillance and Internalised Discipline among Young Urban Indian Women

public conduct are positioned as the symbolic repository of familial honour (*izzat*) and community reputation. As Khushboo (2025) demonstrates in her analysis of the Hindi Belt, this structural policing relies heavily on institutional and societal actors to penalize deviations from prescribed modesty, a dynamic that has transitioned seamlessly into contemporary digital architectures. "Historically enforced through localized kinship networks and overt moral policing, the preservation of *sanskar* has transitioned seamlessly into contemporary digital architectures. For the urban Indian woman, digital participation does not occur in a vacuum of Western individualism; rather, her online visibility remains continuously anchored to her family's social standing. Digital respectability emerges as a localized disciplinary mechanism, forcing women to negotiate their online self-expression against deep-seated cultural anxieties surrounding modesty, marital eligibility, and communal judgment.

Synthesizing the Axis: The Dual-Gaze Architecture Framework

Consequently, this paper synthesizes these intersecting dynamics into a new conceptual model: the **Dual-Gaze Architecture**. The contemporary urban Indian woman does not navigate a singular watchtower; instead, her digital subjectivity is structured by two distinct, interlocking axes of observation:



The Dual-Gaze Architecture Model by Author

- **The Conscious/Asymmetric Social Gaze (Foucauldian-Sanskar Axis):** This axis comprises the highly visible, localized threat of observation by family members, relatives, and immediate peer networks. The user is acutely aware of this watchtower, which enforces compliance with the traditional codes of *sanskar*. The psychological response to this gaze is deliberate, strategic self-censorship, such as utilizing block lists, operating secondary private accounts ("finstas"), and restricting controversial personal or political expressions to avoid familial conflict.

From Algorithm to Sanskar: Theorizing Digital Surveillance and Internalised Discipline among Young Urban Indian Women

- **The Unconscious/Automated Algorithmic Gaze (Zuboffian-Commercial Axis):** Operating simultaneously is the invisible, predictive surveillance engine of the platform backend. The user cannot see this watchtower, which harvests her behavioral data, anxieties, and aesthetic vulnerabilities to serve her content designed to maximize platform capitalization. This axis enforces a consumerist, globally standardized performance of idealized femininity, driving intense body dissatisfaction and an unceasing pursuit of metric validation.

The ultimate precarity of the digital landscape for Indian Urban women lies within the friction of this Dual-Gaze Architecture. While young women exhaust significant cognitive and emotional energy actively defending their profiles against the conscious, moralizing gaze of localized patriarchy, they are simultaneously being systematically manipulated by the unconscious, predatory gaze of global surveillance capitalism.

THE MECHANISMS OF THE ALGORITHMIC-CULTURAL PANOPTICON

The Conscious Axis: Digital Respectability and Strategic Self-Censorship

The analytical execution of the conscious or asymmetric social gaze manifests through the active negotiation of what this paper defines as "digital respectability." Within contemporary urban Indian settings, digital visibility is fundamentally non-optional for young women navigating educational and social institutions. However, this visibility is perpetually scrutinized by an omnipresent kinship watchtower. Unlike Western digital contexts where peer surveillance is the primary driver of online conformity, the urban Indian woman undergoes closer scrutiny regarding her clothing choices, language, social interactions, and physical presentation by immediate family and extended relatives.

Under this axis, the patriarchal expectation of sanskar operates as a highly localized disciplinary code. Because a woman's digitized bodily presentation is treated as a symbolic metric of collective family honour (izzat), the anticipation of moral policing forces a strategic, calculated management of impressions (Goffman, 1959). This does not merely result in passive conformity, but produces highly complex, defensive practices of digital compartmentalization. Young women actively manipulate platform architectures to survive this social gaze employing strict block lists, curating secondary private profiles ("finstas") hidden from relatives, restricting location-sharing data, and aggressively filtering political or personal expressions. (Dewar *et al.*, 2019)

Furthermore, this anxiety surrounding digital respectability has been hyper-charged by modern technological weaponization, such as deepfakes, unauthorized image manipulation, and non-consensual media circulation. The threat of technological exploitation functions as an external vector of terror that reinforces internal discipline; the user self-censors not because she lacks agency, but because she recognizes that any deviation from the sanitized "good girl" archetype can be algorithmically weaponized to dismantle her material reputation and familial standing.

The Unconscious Axis: Metricized Validation and the Extraction of Aesthetic Labour

Simultaneously, the user is subject to the unconscious/automated algorithmic gaze of surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2019). While the conscious social axis demands modesty and containment (sanskar), the platform's economic architecture demands unceasing engagement, visibility, and data generation. This optimization engine operates invisibly,

From Algorithm to Sanskar: Theorizing Digital Surveillance and Internalised Discipline among Young Urban Indian Women

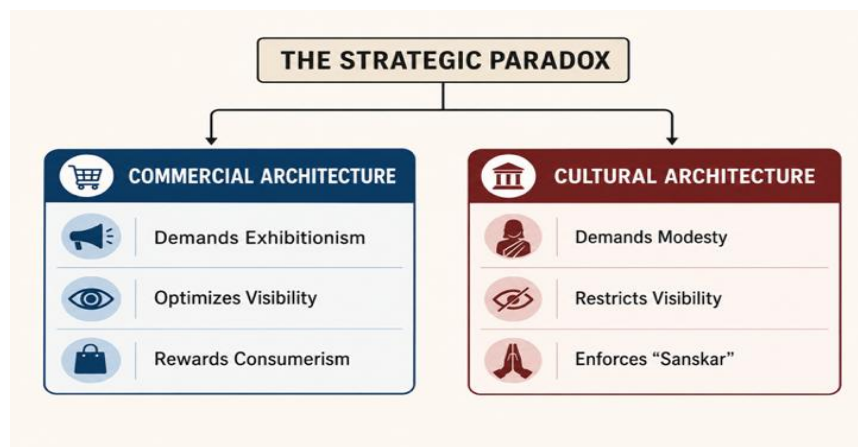
deploying predictive algorithms that capitalize on the psychological vulnerabilities of identity formation (Baumeister, 1987; Schlenker, 1980). Platforms systematically reward highly specific, globally commercialized Western beauty standards, consumerist lifestyles, and hyper-feminine aesthetics by selectively amplifying their algorithmic visibility.

Consequently, validation culture shifts from an internal process of self-worth to a metricized, external architecture of social approval. Young women are trapped in an unceasing cycle of aesthetic labour: utilizing facial alterations, digital filters, and curated consumerist consumption to align with algorithmically valorised standards of desirability. This interface creates a profound psychological feedback loop. The corporate platform translates the user's desire for peer validation into quantifiable metrics—likes, views, comments, and follower counts.

When a post or short-form video ("reel") fails to meet these metricized benchmarks of algorithmic legitimacy, users engage in a secondary form of self-surveillance: deleting the content entirely. This act of deletion is a profound manifestation of internalized discipline. The subject evaluates her own image through the predatory eye of the platform's algorithm, self-correcting her digital subjectivity to eliminate data that fails to generate capital or validation.

The Friction of the Dual Gaze: Fragmented Subjectivities

The core theoretical problem illuminated by this framework is the intense friction produced at the intersection of these two axes. The urban Indian woman is caught in a structural paradox: the unconscious algorithmic gaze demands exhibitionism, consumerism, and bodily visibility to achieve platform relevance, while the conscious social gaze demands modesty, containment, and domestic respectability to preserve sanskar.



The strategic paradox model by author

This structural collision forces a permanent fragmentation of the self. The individual must continuously perform emotional labour (Walkerdine, 1989), split-testing her identity across different accounts, software interfaces, and digital audiences. Surveillance, therefore, ceases to be an external threat enforced by a localized authority or a digital interface; it is fully internalized. The subject acts as both the prisoner and the guard within an automated, culturally localized panopticon exhausting her psychological energy trying to defend her autonomy against immediate social judgment while being systematically harvested by the invisible engines of global surveillance capitalism.

CONCLUSION

This paper has theorized the overlapping, highly disciplinary architectures that structure the digital subjectivities of contemporary urban Indian women. By mapping Michel Foucault's classical concept of the Panopticon and Shoshana Zuboff's framework of surveillance capitalism onto the Indian cultural landscape, this study argues that online observation is neither an exclusively algorithmic phenomenon nor a purely socio-familial one. Instead, it functions as an omnipresent, decentralized "algorithmic-cultural panopticon." Within this ecosystem, traditional patriarchal gazes are digitized, and the ancient code of *sanskar* is seamlessly coded into the everyday functionalities of social media participation.

The conceptualization of the Dual-Gaze Architecture demonstrates that contemporary urban Indian women operate under a crushing asymmetrical burden. They must actively navigate a conscious social gaze driven by kinship networks and localized moral policing to protect family honour, while simultaneously being subjected to an unconscious algorithmic gaze designed to exploit their anxieties for data monetization. The tragedy of this contemporary digital landscape is that while young women exhaust their cognitive and emotional resources actively defending their boundaries against visible cultural oversight, they are seamlessly manipulated by the invisible, predatory frameworks of technological commercialism.

As a purely conceptual framework, a limitation of this paper rests in the absence of localized empirical field data capable of mapping the subtle variations of this discipline across different socioeconomic strata within urban spaces. However, the unique value of this intervention lies in providing an original theoretical vocabulary. Concepts such as "digital respectability," "metricized validation," and the "Dual-Gaze Architecture" provide future researchers with the analytical tools necessary to move beyond universalized, Eurocentric technology studies. By demonstrating how digital landscapes uniquely structure and discipline the subjectivities of Indian women, future empirical scholarship can better critique, challenge, and ultimately dismantle the invisible architectures that constrain authentic female self-expression in India.

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From Algorithm to Sanskar: Theorizing Digital Surveillance and Internalised Discipline among Young Urban Indian Women

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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