

Soft Surveillance and Self-Governing Femininity in Gendered Controlled Digital Media

Ipsita Sachdev*, Mehak Bansal

MA Public Policy IILM University, Greater Noida

ARTICLE INFO

*Correspondence:

ipsita.sachdev.
gnmapp2027@iilm.edu
MA Public Policy IILM
University, Greater
Noida

Dates:

Received: 12-05-2026
Accepted: 22-05-2026
Published: 30-06-2026

Keywords:

Gendered digital media,
Gender hierarchies, Self-
governing Femininity,
Self-optimisation, and
Soft Surveillance.

How to Cite:

Sachdev, I., Bansal, M.
(2026) Soft Surveillance
and Self-Governing
Femininity in Gendered
Controlled Digital
Media. *MediaSpace:*
DME Journal of
Communication, 7(1),
64-73.
doi: 10.53361/dmejc.
v7i01.06

Abstract

While the media is often critiqued for misrepresentation, its more insidious role lies in shaping how women learn to monitor and regulate themselves. This paper examines how contemporary Indian digital media, particularly Instagram reels, influencer content, and beauty/ lifestyle advertising, function as a system of soft surveillance that normalises gendered self-discipline. Rather than overtly imposing stereotypes, these platforms circulate aspirational visual cultures that subtly prescribe how women should look, behave, and present themselves in public and private spaces. Focusing on curated content around “ideal” femininity, productivity routines, beauty standards, relationship advice, and “trad wife” aesthetics, the study conducts a qualitative visual and discourse analysis of high-engagement posts to identify recurring patterns of self-optimization, emotional restraint, and aesthetic conformity. It argues that such content shifts the locus of control from external societal enforcement to internalised self-surveillance, in which women actively reproduce restrictive norms under the guise of empowerment and choice. The research uses qualitative visual and discourse analysis of selected Instagram posts with high user engagement. It examines patterns in imagery, captions, and narratives to understand how gender norms are subtly reinforced. The paper situates these dynamics within the Indian socio-cultural context, showing how digital media repackages traditional patriarchal expectations - such as modesty, desirability, and familial responsibility - into modern, algorithm-friendly formats. This creates a hybrid model of control that is less visible yet more pervasive, operating through aspiration rather than coercion. By reframing media as a mechanism that produces self-governing gendered subjects, this study challenges conventional narratives of representation. It highlights the need to critically interrogate the politics of “empowerment” in digital culture. It ultimately argues that without addressing these subtle modes of normalisation, media risks reinforcing gender hierarchies in more deeply embedded and less contestable ways.

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary digital societies, media is no longer a distant institution that merely reflects social realities; it has become deeply embedded in the textures of everyday life, shaping how individuals perceive themselves and others. The rise of social media platforms, particularly visually driven ones such as Instagram, has intensified this shift by transforming identity into a continuous project of curation, performance, and evaluation. Within this landscape,

MediaSpace:

DME Journal of Communication

e-ISSN: 2583-035X

© Delhi Metropolitan Education, 2026. **Open Access** This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>.

gendered identities, especially femininity, are not only represented but also actively produced, circulated, and normalised through algorithmically curated content. While earlier feminist critiques of media largely focused on the misrepresentation or underrepresentation of women, the current digital environment demands a more nuanced analytical lens. The issue is no longer simply what media shows, but how it subtly structures what women learn to desire, aspire to, and ultimately become. This paper argues that contemporary digital media operates as a system of *soft surveillance* that encourages women to internalise and reproduce gendered norms through practices of self-monitoring and self-regulation. Drawing on Michel Foucault's (1977) concept of disciplinary power, surveillance is traditionally understood as an external mechanism through which institutions regulate bodies and behaviours. However, in digital contexts, surveillance has taken on more diffuse and less visible forms. Rather than being imposed through overt authority, it operates through aspirational content, peer comparison, and the promise of social validation. As scholars have noted, social media platforms blur the boundaries between visibility and control, encouraging individuals to willingly participate in their own surveillance by curating their lives for public consumption (Abidin, 2016; Gill, 2007). The concept of *soft surveillance* captures this shift from coercive oversight to voluntary self-regulation. It refers to subtle, often pleasurable forms of monitoring that are embedded within everyday practices of media engagement. On platforms like Instagram, users are not forced to conform to specific norms; instead, they are continuously exposed to highly curated images and narratives that establish benchmarks of desirability, success, and femininity. These benchmarks are reinforced through metrics such as likes, shares, and comments, which function as forms of social approval and discipline. Over time, this creates a feedback loop in which individuals adjust their behaviour and self-presentation to align with dominant aesthetic and behavioural standards (Banet-Weiser, 2018).

A key site where this dynamic unfolds is influencer culture, which has emerged as a powerful force in shaping contemporary ideals of femininity.

Influencers occupy a unique position as both relatable peers and aspirational figures, making their content particularly effective in normalising specific lifestyles and identities. Their posts often centre around themes such as beauty routines, fitness regimes, productivity habits, relationship advice, and domestic life. While such content is frequently framed as empowering, encouraging women to invest in themselves and take control of their lives, it simultaneously reinforces narrow definitions of what it means to be successful, desirable, and fulfilled. As Rosalind Gill (2007) argues, postfeminist media culture often repackages traditional gender norms in the language of choice and empowerment, making them more difficult to critique.

One of the most striking manifestations of this phenomenon is the resurgence of the "trad wife" aesthetic in digital spaces. Short for "traditional wife," the "trad wife" trend promotes a romanticised vision of domestic femininity centred on homemaking, caregiving, and submission to heteronormative family structures. On platforms like Instagram, this aesthetic is often presented through visually appealing content featuring home-cooked meals, meticulously organised households, and serene domestic routines. While it appears to celebrate simplicity and intentional living, it also reintroduces deeply gendered expectations about women's roles within the private sphere. Importantly, this revival does not occur as a direct imposition of conservative values; rather, it is mediated through aesthetic appeal and lifestyle branding, making it appear as a personal choice rather than a social expectation.

The Indian digital context adds another layer of complexity to these dynamics. India's socio-cultural landscape is deeply shaped by intersecting norms related to gender, caste, religion, and family structures. Traditional expectations surrounding modesty, marriage, and familial responsibility continue to exert significant influence over women's lives, even in urban and ostensibly progressive settings. Digital media does not displace these norms; instead, it repackages them in contemporary, algorithm-friendly formats. For instance, content emphasising "ideal" femininity often blends global beauty standards with culturally specific expectations, such as fair skin, modest dressing,

and deference to family values. Similarly, relationship advice and lifestyle content frequently reinforce the importance of emotional restraint, caregiving, and self-sacrifice, albeit framed as markers of maturity and empowerment. In this context, the distinction between external control and internalised discipline becomes particularly significant. Unlike overt forms of patriarchal control- such as restrictions on mobility or explicit moral policing- soft surveillance operates through aspiration rather than coercion. Women are not explicitly told how to behave; instead, they are subtly guided toward certain norms through repeated exposure to curated content that defines what is desirable and acceptable. This creates a form of self-governing femininity in which individuals actively participate in maintaining and reproducing gender hierarchies. As Foucault (1977) suggests, the most effective forms of power are those that are internalised, making individuals complicit in their own regulation.

Another important dimension of this phenomenon is the role of digital media in shaping public discourse around women and gender-related issues. News events, social debates, and even instances of gender-based violence are increasingly mediated through social media platforms, where they are often reframed in ways that reinforce existing stereotypes. For example, discussions around women's safety may shift focus from structural issues to individual behaviour, implicitly placing responsibility on women to regulate their own actions. Similarly, narratives of success and empowerment often emphasise personal transformation and self-improvement, sidelining broader questions about inequality and systemic constraints. In this way, the media not only reflect societal attitudes but also actively shape them.

Despite the growing body of research on gender and media, much of the existing literature continues to focus on representation- examining how women are depicted in various forms of media. While this remains an important area of inquiry, it does not fully capture the complexities of digital culture, where users are not passive consumers but active participants in the production and circulation of content. There is a need to move beyond questions of visibility and representation to examine how

media environments shape subjectivities, desires, and practices. This paper seeks to address this gap by focusing on the mechanisms through which digital media fosters self-surveillance and self-regulation among women.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Theoretical Framework

Gender studies show that the meanings of femininity have been socially constructed and controlled through institutional frameworks such as the family, religion, and the community. In his analysis of social control, Foucault (1977) sees control as diffuse, with the power to shape through everyday bodily regulations and behavioural norms. Feminist scholars have extended the field to examine women's bodies as the historical sites of such control, where moral and cultural governance undertook their most vicious forms.

For Judith Butler (1990), this vicious control is enacted through norms that are socially approved, resulting in the performance of femininity, which is constructed as an essence of womanhood. Likewise, Bartky (1990) sees modern patriarchal control as operating through such vicious, self-imposed, and internalised discipline wherein women are said to control and discipline themselves by regulating their looks and behaviour.

In the Indian context, scholars like Uma Chakravarti (2003) show how the intersection of caste, family, and patriarchy controls women's sexuality, movement, and work. Such historical frameworks are the building blocks that remain the same for the new digital norms.

The control of femininity has decisively remained within social, cultural, and institutional frameworks. With respect to power, control is not a function of degree; rather, it is a function of the subtle, and often, the socially accepted. Rather than working through force, power works distributively and transforms the controlled into the controller. Regarding this, Bartky (1993) states that the practice of observing and regulating oneself and one's body results in the construction of femininity. This is a construction that emerges as a result of passively complying with

socially inscribed and normative expectations.

In the Indian case, Chakravarti (2003) shows how, through the intersection of patriarchy and the caste system, the mobility and roles of women, as well as the regulation of their sexuality, were made to appear as though these forms of social control were a part of the familial-social system. This literature is relevant in the sense that it shows how self-regulation that is socially inscribed, to some extent, is a product of sophisticated and subtle systems of control, and how some of these works define control as a function of the physical world. This is where many of these works fail to account for the digital landscape. In fact, their consideration of the digital landscape often ignores the fact that control can be inscribed and transformed through one's digital praxis and that with one's digital praxis, there can be a form of surveillance that is voluntarily inscribed. The present study builds on these foundations by examining how such disciplinary mechanisms are reconfigured within contemporary digital platforms as forms of soft surveillance.

Soft surveillance prevailing in institutions

A substantial body of scholarship has examined how media institutions function not only as sites of representation but also as mechanisms of gendered regulation. Within journalism, norms of professionalism, credibility, and visibility are not gender-neutral; rather, they are embedded within institutional cultures that shape how femininity is performed, evaluated, and disciplined. In this sense, media organisations operate as spaces where gendered expectations are both enforced and internalised. Scholars have highlighted how structural inequalities within media institutions contribute to this process. Karen Ross (2014) demonstrates that the underrepresentation of women in decision-making positions reinforces masculine norms of authority, which in turn shape editorial priorities and professional standards. Similarly, Carter et al. (2019) show that newsroom practices, ranging from story framing to workplace interactions, reproduce gendered hierarchies, often subtly embedding expectations about appropriate conduct, appearance, and voice.

In the Indian context, Ammu Joseph (2015) illustrates how women journalists are subject to continuous scrutiny that extends beyond their professional output to include their physical presentation, comportment, and adherence to normative femininity. Such scrutiny operates not solely through formal institutional rules, but through informal expectations and peer evaluation, making regulation both pervasive and difficult to contest. These dynamics can be understood through a Foucauldian lens as forms of *soft surveillance*, where control is exercised not through explicit coercion but through continuous observation, evaluation, and normalisation. Within journalistic spaces, women are not only monitored by institutional structures but also come to anticipate and internalise these standards, engaging in self-regulation to align with professional and gendered expectations. In this way, the locus of control shifts from external enforcement to internalised discipline, producing self-governing subjects. While this provides critical insights into how institutional media environments regulate femininity, it remains largely confined to formal organisational contexts. It does not fully account for how these mechanisms of observation, evaluation, and self-regulation are transformed in the shift toward digital and platform-based media systems.

Traditional Media Shaping Gender Spaces

Academic studies on traditional media have historically documented its function in constructing gendered social realities through the processes of representation and symbolic construction. Gaye Tuchman (1978) views the media as a location of "symbolic annihilation" that either underrepresents women or traps them in a limited number of stereotypical positions. These representations do not just mirror preexisting inequalities. They contribute to the normalisation of these inequalities by narrowing the scope of identities for women. Media, therefore, functions as a socio-cultural system that defines what is visible and socially acceptable. Similarly, Laura Mulvey (1975) posits that the 'male gaze' theory shows how visual media organises women as objects of visual pleasure and how women are subordinated to a context of passive



viewers. This affects not only representation, but also how women learn, perceive, and show themselves. Collectively, the frameworks illustrate that femininity is constructed through reiterative visual and narrative patterns that consolidate hierarchical relations among genders.

This literature is relevant to the present study as it establishes that gendered norms are produced and stabilised through mediated representation. It helps to explain how social constructs solidify ideals regarding beauty, passivity, and desirability. The major critique is that it treats representation as a one-way process, with audiences seen mainly as passive receivers. It does not sufficiently address how these norms are internalised, reproduced, and enacted in everyday practices.

Gendered Self-Regulation in Social Media

The emergence of social media platforms has fundamentally transformed the production, circulation, and regulation of gendered norms. Unlike traditional media, where content flows through institutional hierarchies, platforms such as Instagram, X, and Facebook operate through participatory architectures in which users simultaneously act as producers, performers, and audiences. This shift does not displace normative control but reconfigures it into more dispersed and internalised forms. Scholars have conceptualised these environments as attention economies, where visibility functions as a key form of social and cultural capital. Alice Marwick (2015) argues that users are incentivised to curate and perform their identities in ways that maximise engagement, thereby aligning self-presentation with platform logics of visibility and approval. Building on this, Crystal Abidin (2016) demonstrates how influencers occupy a central role in shaping aspirational norms by presenting curated lifestyles that are simultaneously idealised and relatable. This dual positioning renders normative expectations more accessible and desirable, encouraging users to model themselves accordingly.

However, the apparent language of empowerment within such content often coexists with the reinforcement of restrictive gender norms. Sarah Banet-Weiser (2018) conceptualises this tension

through the coexistence of “popular feminism” and “popular misogyny,” where narratives of choice and empowerment obscure the persistence of deeply embedded inequalities. In this context, self-improvement, aesthetic labour, and emotional regulation are reframed as individual choices rather than socially conditioned expectations. These processes are further normalised through meme culture, which operates as a powerful vehicle for the informal circulation of gendered meanings. Limor Shifman (2014) describes memes as iterative, participatory forms of cultural expression that gain traction through repetition and relatability. Content such as “wife jokes” or humour centred on domestic roles often appears trivial or comedic, yet it plays a significant role in reinforcing gender hierarchies by embedding them within everyday digital interactions. The humour and informality of such content obscure its regulatory function, making these norms more difficult to identify and contest.

While existing literature provides valuable insights into identity construction, influencer economies, and participatory culture, it has not sufficiently theorised these dynamics as systems of surveillance. The role of visibility, aesthetics, and engagement metrics in producing continuous self-monitoring remains underexplored, particularly in relation to gendered self-discipline. Moreover, there is a limited focus on how these processes unfold within the Indian socio-cultural context, where digital practices intersect with deeply rooted norms around femininity, respectability, and family roles.

Digital Intimacy and Gender Norms

Contemporary digital cultures have reconfigured the ways in which desirability, relationships, and self-presentation are constructed and evaluated. Intimate life is increasingly shaped by logics of visibility, comparison, and optimisation, where individuals are required to curate and assess their own desirability continuously. Eva Illouz (2007) argues that modern romantic interactions are structured by market logics, in which individuals present themselves as both products and consumers within competitive fields of selection. This framing situates intimacy within regimes of evaluation, in which desirability becomes a measurable, performative attribute.

Feminist critiques further illuminate how these pressures are gendered. Naomi Wolf (1991) conceptualises the “beauty myth” as a disciplinary system that compels women to engage in continuous self-improvement in pursuit of unattainable standards. In digital environments, these dynamics are intensified through platform architectures that reward visibility and aesthetic conformity. Practices of self-optimisation, ranging from body image management to lifestyle curation, are not only encouraged but normalised as essential components of social participation. Empirical research on dating platforms reinforces these insights by demonstrating how digital infrastructures amplify self-surveillance. Hobbs et al. (2017) show that metrics such as matches, likes, and swipes introduce quantifiable measures of desirability, fostering constant peer comparison and evaluative self-monitoring. In such contexts, individuals internalise external judgments, recalibrating their self-presentation in response to algorithmically mediated feedback. Self-worth becomes increasingly tied to numerical validation, further embedding surveillance within everyday interaction.

However, much of this literature remains confined to dating-specific platforms or offline analyses of intimacy, overlooking how similar logics permeate broader social media ecosystems. The pressures of desirability and self-optimisation are not limited to dating apps; they are reproduced across lifestyle content, productivity narratives, and emerging aesthetics such as the “trad wife,” where ideals of femininity are subtly rearticulated through aspirational imagery and routine digital practices. Meme cultures around dating, relationships, and gender roles further normalise these expectations by embedding them within humour, relatability, and peer-driven circulation. This gap points to the need for a more integrated framework that captures how surveillance operates across multiple layers of digital life. Existing scholarship has yet to fully synthesise insights from disciplinary theory, feminist media analysis, and platform studies to explain how gendered norms are internalised through everyday engagement with digital media. Moreover, there is limited attention to how these processes unfold within the Indian context, where

globalised digital cultures intersect with entrenched norms of respectability, family roles, and gendered expectations.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design to examine how gendered social norms are constructed, circulated, and internalised within contemporary digital media ecosystems. Rather than analysing media forms in isolation, the study conceptualises media as an interconnected field in which social media platforms act as mediating spaces that link cinema, journalism, and everyday cultural practices. Within this framework, Instagram is treated as the primary site of analysis due to its visual orientation, algorithmic visibility, and central role in shaping aspirational cultures.

While Instagram remains the focal platform, the inclusion of films and traditional media enables a broader contextual understanding of how digital platforms do not operate in isolation but rather amplify and reconfigure pre-existing cultural narratives. This multi-source approach allows for a more layered interpretation of how norms are sustained and transformed across media forms. The dataset is constructed through purposive sampling, consisting of approximately 25 high-engagement Instagram reels selected based on thematic relevance, visibility, and recurrence of trends. The selected content focuses on themes such as beauty, productivity, relationships, and domesticity, which are central to the construction of normative femininity in digital spaces. Supplementary references from films such as *Chiraiya*, *Mrs.*, *Thappad*, *Article 15*, and *Mardaani 3*, along with news narratives, are incorporated to trace how gendered representations circulate across and are reinterpreted within digital environments.

The analysis employs qualitative visual analysis and critical discourse analysis to examine both imagery and accompanying textual elements, including captions, comments, and narrative framing. Thematic coding is used to identify recurring patterns such as soft surveillance, self-



governance, self-optimisation, and emotional regulation. These analytical categories are informed by Michel Foucault's concept of disciplinary power and feminist media theory, which together provide a framework for understanding how control operates through visibility, aspiration, and participation. Importantly, the study adopts a dual analytical lens, examining social media both as a site of gendered regulation and as a space of potential resistance. While digital platforms facilitate the internalisation of normative expectations through continuous visibility and engagement, they also provide opportunities for users to contest, reinterpret, and subvert these norms. This approach enables a nuanced understanding of digital media as a complex governance space where control and agency coexist.

Analysis and Interpretation

The analysis builds upon a purposive sample of highly engaging digital material, especially Instagram reels, augmented by meme culture, news stories, and specific cinematic allusions. This material was explored to understand how gendered norms are represented, circulated, internalised, and normalised in today's digital media contexts. The findings show that social media doesn't work as a standalone platform. Instead, it provides an intermediary space for social media to connect and amplify stories from film, journalism, and everyday talk. In doing so, it produces a continuous flow of gendered expectations that shape how femininity is performed and regulated.

One consistent feature of the dataset is the emergence of standardised forms of femininity that are visually curated, algorithmically boosted, and circulated repeatedly. The forms presented here are not imposed through direct instruction; instead, they are embedded within motivating stories that prompt imitation. This represents a change from externally imposed control to self-imposed regulation, in which people consciously work to position themselves in relation to prevailing standards. In this way, digital media acts as a system

of soft surveillance, with visibility, validation, and repetition serving as forms of control.

Instagram as a site of aspirational self-regulation

The analysis of selected Instagram reels reveals that the platform operates as a key site for the production and internalisation of gendered norms through what this study conceptualises as *soft surveillance*. Across content centred on beauty, productivity, relationships, and domesticity, a recurring pattern emerges in which femininity is framed as a continuous project of self-optimisation. Visual aesthetics, carefully curated appearances, routine-based productivity, and emotionally composed behaviour are presented not as obligations but as aspirational choices.

High-engagement reels consistently deploy a language of relatability ("real life," "that girl routines," "soft life"), which masks the prescriptive nature of these norms. The pressure to conform is not explicitly enforced; rather, it is embedded within visibility structures that reward certain performances over others. Users are incentivised to align with these expectations through likes, shares, and algorithmic amplification, thereby internalising normative standards as personal goals.

In this sense, surveillance operates not through external monitoring but through self-regulation driven by aspiration and comparison. The subject becomes both the observer and the observed, continuously calibrating her behaviour in response to perceived audience expectations.

Meme Culture and the Normalisation of Gender Hierarchies

A significant portion of the analysed content, particularly meme-based reels, contributes to the normalisation of gendered expectations through humour and repetition. Themes such as "wife jokes," emotional labour, and domestic responsibilities are frequently framed as lighthearted or universally relatable experiences. However, this framing obscures the underlying reinforcement of traditional gender roles.

The repetitive circulation of such content transforms these ideas into cultural common sense.

Because memes operate through humour and peer participation, they reduce the likelihood of critical engagement. Instead of appearing as regulatory discourse, they function as informal, socially accepted narratives that subtly discipline behaviour.

This form of regulation is particularly effective because it is perceived as voluntary and participatory. Users not only consume such content but actively reproduce and circulate it, thereby becoming agents in the maintenance of the very norms that govern them.

INSTAGRAM PLATFORM AS MEDIATOR OF NORMS

The analysis further demonstrates that Instagram does not generate norms in isolation but acts as a mediating space that amplifies and reinterprets narratives from traditional media, particularly cinema and news. Films such as *Chirya*, *Mardaani 3*, and other popular narratives provide thematic material that is recontextualised within short-form digital content.

Complex cinematic portrayals of gender, which may originally carry critical or nuanced perspectives, are often simplified into easily consumable, high-impact visuals on Instagram. These reinterpretations prioritise emotional resonance and shareability over depth, leading to selective amplification of particular themes, such as victimhood, resilience, or idealised femininity.

As a result, Instagram functions as a bridge between traditional media and everyday life, translating narratives into formats that are more immediate, repetitive, and widely circulated. This process not only extends the reach of these narratives but also reshapes their meaning, aligning them with platform logics of engagement and visibility.

Opinion Formation, Virality, and the Regulation of Thought

Beyond representation, Instagram plays a significant role in shaping public opinion and influencing cognitive frameworks. The rapid circulation of short-form content encourages immediate emotional responses rather than critical reflection. As users are

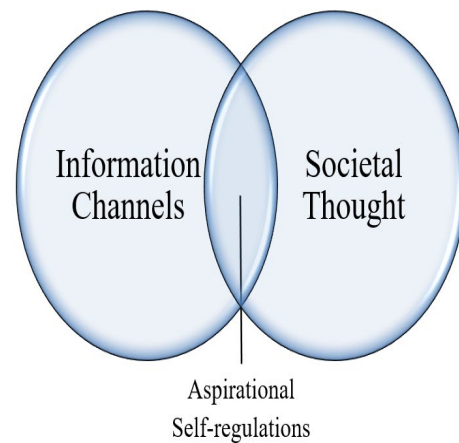


Fig.1: Social media as a mediating bridge between information channels and societal thought

exposed to repeated, visually compelling narratives, these begin to structure their perceptions of gender roles, relationships, and social expectations.

The algorithmic prioritisation of engaging content creates an environment in which certain viewpoints gain disproportionate visibility, while alternative perspectives remain marginal. This results in a form of *cognitive soft surveillance*, where individuals not only regulate their behaviour but also their beliefs and thought processes in alignment with dominant narratives.

In this context, the platform's influence extends beyond behaviour into the realm of perception itself. The continuous exposure to curated and repetitive content narrows the scope of critical engagement, making normative expectations appear natural, desirable, and inevitable.

The above-illustrated Venn diagram (Figure 1) demonstrates how contemporary digital media operates as an interconnected system linking information channels (cinema, journalism, and traditional media) with societal thought through the mediating role of social media. At this intersection, platforms like Instagram are more than just communication channels; they weave stories into the fabric of daily life. The key mechanism through

which this process occurs is central overlap, which is defined as aspirational self-regulation. Stories from traditional media are transformed on social media into visually attractive and relatable formats.

Imagine being told you were wrong, and being told an alternate perspective so often that you began to think that alternate perspective was actually correct. Through repetition, algorithmic amplification, and social validation, these self-regulatory narratives are internalised, and individuals learn to self-regulate to conform to the dominant norms. This indicates a change from external control to a more self-directed approach, where people participate in the maintenance of self-imposed gender expectations. At the same time, social media remains a dynamic space that allows for negotiation and selective resistance, even as it reinforces conformity. Thus, social media acts as a vital cord that links and changes the dynamic of media stories and societal views, creating an all-encompassing and introductory system of soft surveillance.

CONCLUSION

This study has argued that contemporary digital media platforms, particularly Instagram, function not merely as sites of representation but as mechanisms of *soft surveillance* that produce self-governing gendered subjects. Through the circulation of aspirational content, meme cultures, and the reinterpretation of traditional media narratives, gender norms are subtly normalised and internalised within everyday digital practices. By extending Foucauldian notions of disciplinary power into the digital realm, the paper demonstrates that control in platform societies operates less through coercion and more through visibility, participation, and aspiration. Users are not passive recipients but active participants in the reproduction of normative expectations, blurring the boundaries between agency and regulation.

The findings of the paper suggest that social media platforms must be understood as informal governance spaces, where algorithmic visibility, engagement metrics, and content cultures shape not only behaviour but also perception and social expectations. This has significant implications

for public policy, particularly in the domains of digital governance, platform accountability, and media literacy. Adding to that, it is noticeable how social media platforms don't just function as a space of sharing pictures and updates but also opinions and knowledge. Through the role of informal journalistic media, these platforms create trends, reinforce patriarchal norms, and often circulate misinformation. Rather than relying solely on regulatory interventions, there is a need to recognise and address the subtle ways in which digital environments structure normative behaviour. Strengthening critical digital literacy, encouraging diverse representations, and interrogating platform-driven visibility hierarchies become essential in mitigating the internalisation of restrictive gender norms. It is not only the need of the hour but with new generations coming as a part of pre-existing media culture, it is essential to regulate these platforms. Ultimately, the study highlights that without critically engaging with these dispersed and normalised forms of control, digital media risks reinforcing gender hierarchies in ways that are less visible, more pervasive, and increasingly difficult to contest.

REFERENCES

- Abidin, C. (2016). "Aren't these just young, rich women doing vain things online?" Influencer selfies as subversive frivolity. *Social Media + Society*, 2(2), 1–17.
- Banet-Weiser, S. (2018). *Empowered: Popular feminism and popular misogyny*. Duke University Press.
- Bartky, S. L. (1990). *Femininity and domination: Studies in the phenomenology of oppression*. Routledge.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge.
- Carter, C., Steiner, L., & McLaughlin, L. (Eds.). (2019). *The Routledge companion to media and gender*. Routledge.
- Chakravarti, U. (2003). *Gendering caste: Through a feminist lens*. Stree.
- Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*. Pantheon Books.
- Giddens, A. (1991). *Modernity and self-identity: Self and society in the late modern age*. Stanford University Press.
- Gill, R. (2007). *Gender and the media*. Polity Press.
- Gill, R. (2016). Post-postfeminism?: New feminist visibilities in postfeminist times. *Feminist Media Studies*, 16(4), 610–630.
- Hobbs, M., Owen, S., & Gerber, L. (2017). Liquid love? Dating

- apps, sex, relationships and the digital transformation of intimacy. *Journal of Sociology*, 53(2), 271–284.
- Illouz, E. (2007). *Consuming the romantic utopia: Love and the cultural contradictions of capitalism*. University of California Press.
- Joseph, A. (2015). *Whose news? The media and women's issues in India*. Sage Publications.
- Lupton, D. (2016). *The quantified self*. Polity Press.
- Marwick, A. (2015). Instafame: Luxury selfies in the attention economy. *Public Culture*, 27(1), 137–160.
- Mulvey, L. (1975). Visual pleasure and narrative cinema. *Screen*, 16(3), 6–18.
- Ross, K. (2014). *Women in media industries in Europe: What's wrong with this picture?* European Institute for Gender Equality.
- Shifman, L. (2014). *Memes in digital culture*. MIT Press.
- Tuchman, G. (1978). *Hearth and home: Images of women in the mass media*. Oxford University Press.
- Turkle, S. (2011). *Alone together: Why we expect more from technology and less from each other*. Basic Books.
- Wolf, N. (1991). *The beauty myth: How images of beauty are used against women*. HarperCollins.
- Some examples of reels that were used as a data set for analysis:
- <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DLNeKgNtPEN/?igsh=Y-2F1bjM3dm5oem1l>
- <https://www.instagram.com/reel/Cu1pC3zpLX-H/?igsh=Mm9sdm12cjN1dmg2>
- <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DS4uD06j4IH/?igsh=MXg-0bW41anpneXU1YQ==>
- <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DRRwuwMCZHJ/?igsh=M-TRidWlkMTNvaXFrYQ==>
- <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DQJI3ajDE1z/?igsh=bX-Zqa2tvZXE5d3Nh>
- <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DCI0AgoJm1V/?igsh=b-3dhaHB0ZzJ5NGNq>
- <https://www.instagram.com/reel/CzIIeh4SqIt/?igsh=OW-c0anRvbJ1ZTdi>
- <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DCeckWPRH-Q5/?igsh=OWhzOXNnOHlxY3B2>
- <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DFFSqYnvjQy/?igsh=MX-VxZGQ0amlzODc2cw==>
- https://www.instagram.com/reel/C_noi2Zt3ox/?igsh=MWN-peHBiZG1qN215eQ==
- <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DLkiFYQIn8e/?igsh=MX-JIMGE2MWNkeWY5ZA==>
- https://www.instagram.com/reel/DTX_zz6juB6/?igsh=Y-WU4bzhvejY2MWJu