

Digital Surveillance and Employee Autonomy in the Context of Gendered Inequalities: A Critical Theory Perspective

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Abstract – This study is a qualitative study examining the effects of digital surveillance technologies on employee autonomy within a gender perspective and critical theory. In today's rapidly expanding digitalization era, artificial intelligence-based recruitment systems, algorithmic management, and remote working software are not only transforming business processes but also reproducing gender-based inequalities. The literature indicates that women are rated lower in algorithmic recruitment systems, that they experience a "double burden" in the home-work balance while working from home during the pandemic, and that women employees in the gig economy face both algorithmic pressure and gender-based risks. Critical theory interprets this process as technology ceasing to be a neutral tool and becoming an ideological mechanism that reproduces relations of domination. Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of "instrumental reason" demonstrates that digital surveillance produces surveillance and control rather than liberating potential, while Habermas's theory of communicative action emphasizes the suppression of employee voices in the workplace and the weakening of democratic functioning. Ultimately, the study demonstrates that ignoring the gender dimension of digital surveillance will lead to an incomplete assessment. Therefore, surveillance should also be considered a gendered form of domination and discussed more in depth. Thus, it seems that understanding surveillance as a gendered form of domination will make a significant contribution to the literature and critical discussions.

Keywords–Gendered Inequalities, Critical Theory, Digital Surveillance, Employee Autonomy, Gender Perspective, Algorithmic Management.

I. INTRODUCTION

As digitalization accelerates, surveillance technologies have become widely used in workplaces. While AI-based recruiting systems, algorithmic management tools, and remote work software increase efficiency in work processes, they also undermine employees' sense of autonomy [Kellogg, Valentine, & Christin, 2020]. However, when these forms of surveillance are examined from a gender perspective, it is seen that they have different effects on different groups. For example, AI-based recruiting algorithms

have been documented to systematically discriminate against female candidates [Raghavan, Barocas, Kleinberg, & Levy, 2020].

When working from home became widespread during the pandemic, it was reported that female employees experienced a “double burden” in their home-work balance and felt more stress and pressure under digital surveillance [Craig & Churchill, 2021]. Similarly, female couriers and drivers operating in the gig economy also face gender-based safety challenges while working under algorithmic supervision [Rosenblat, 2018]. This demonstrates that surveillance is not merely a technical tool but also a gendered form of domination.

Critical theory interprets these developments as technology ceasing to be a neutral tool and becoming an ideological mechanism that reproduces power relations [Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002; Habermas, 1984]. In this context, digital surveillance should be considered not only as a strategy for increasing efficiency but also as a practice of power relations that deepens gender inequalities.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section reviews the theoretical foundations and key scholarly debates linking critical theory and gender. It also explores contemporary themes such as digital surveillance and algorithmic management, the intersection of gender with autonomy and the “double burden,” and the gendered risks embedded in the gig economy.

A. Critical Theory and Gendered Inequalities: Conceptual Foundations

The Frankfurt School is a social and political philosophical movement of thought located in Germany. Key figures including Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, and Herbert Marcuse provided original contributions to a "critical theory of society" during the formative 1930s period. It is the original source of what is known as Critical Theory which was developed a critical perspective on capitalist modernity [Corradetti, 2012]. It is still spoken because it is crucial to understand the problems, ideologies, and systems of the modern world, including capitalism, racism, sexism, and the enduring problems of colonialism [Shuster, 2024]. The positivist understanding of science obscured social inequalities and introduced critical theory as a method for both revealing power relations and exploring the possibilities for social transformation. In this context, they sought the obstacles to individual liberation within cultural, economic, and technological structures [Bronner, 2013]. The approach explores existing conditions to identify how particular perspectives and practices may have irrational, unjust, or alienating consequences [Kemmis et al., 2015]. This methodology has been adapted in contemporary Critical International Relations Theory, advancing beyond the original Frankfurt School program [Brincat, 2012].

Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* [2002] demonstrates how the liberating potential of rational reason has become a tool of control and domination in modern societies. According to them, the culture industry reproduces existing power relations by weakening individuals' capacity for critical thought. From this perspective, digital surveillance technologies not only monitor individual behavior but also oppress women by imposing social norms. Thus, surveillance becomes a practice of power that reproduces gender inequalities [Imam et al., 2025; Horkheimer et al., 2020; Monahan, 2009].

Habermas [1984], however, examines the rationalization of social life from a different perspective. The path to liberation lies in strengthening a democratic public sphere dominated by communicative reason. Yet, digital surveillance disrupts the public sphere by limiting individuals' opportunities for free communication. For example, online surveillance mechanisms can restrict women's participation in public debates, women face systematic exclusion from digital spaces through "invisible firewalls"- socio-technical and algorithmic barriers that reinforce offline inequalities, thus undermining the principle of equal citizenship [Imam et al., 2025; Singh Isser et al., 2024].

The Frankfurt School's critical theory demonstrates that technology is not always neutral; it operates as an extension of power relations. In this framework, digital surveillance is not merely a tool for security or data management, but also a form of domination that deepens gender-based inequalities. [Fitzpatrick, 2002]. The fact that women are subject to increased harassment, control, or algorithmic bias in the digital environment demonstrates the intersection of surveillance technologies with patriarchal structures. This

aligns with broader critiques of surveillance capitalism, which highlight how digital infrastructures enable pervasive control and manipulation [Landwehr et al., 2021]. Therefore, critical theory allows us to understand digital surveillance not only as a technical issue but also as a matter of social justice.

B. Digital Surveillance and Algorithmic Management

In recent years, digital surveillance has become a common practice in many areas of organizations, from performance measurement to recruitment. While algorithms standardize work processes and seemingly offer objective decisions, they actually intensify control and limit employee autonomy [Kellogg, Valentine, & Christin, 2020]. Continuous evaluation of employees with metrics aligns with Habermas's [1984] notion of the dominance of "strategic action" over "communicative action." Surveillance technologies can also be interpreted as a contemporary manifestation of instrumental reason [Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002]. Remote working software, which has become particularly widespread with the pandemic, has provided employers with detailed control capabilities such as screen recording, mouse movement, and online time tracking, increasing stress and privacy concerns among employees [Mateescu & Nguyen, 2021]. This shows that surveillance is a mechanism used not only for efficiency but also for the reproduction of power relations.

C. Gender, Autonomy, and the "Double Burden"

Literature reveals that digital surveillance practices create gender-based differences. Research conducted during the pandemic period shows that female employees face a "double burden" in their home-work balance [Craig & Churchill, 2021]. Performance monitoring software used in remote work has made it more difficult for women to simultaneously undertake care work and professional responsibilities. Furthermore, algorithmic hiring systems reproduce historical biases, disadvantaging women and minorities in the labor market [Raghavan, Barocas, Kleinberg, & Levy, 2020]. This picture is consistent with Acker's [1990] thesis of "gendered organizations": organizational norms, while seemingly neutral, actually centralize male experience. Critical theory interprets these processes as suggesting that technology is not neutral but rather becomes an ideological tool that reinforces existing inequalities. In this respect, digital surveillance should be considered not only a technical but also a gendered form of domination.

D. Gig Economy and Gendered Risks

The gig economy stands out as a new employment model shaped by short-term, platform-based jobs. Despite the appearance of flexible work, gig workers on platforms like Uber, Lyft, Getir, and Yemeksepeti are heavily monitored by algorithms [Lee, Kusbit, Metsky, & Dabbish, 2021]. Women drivers and couriers face gender-based safety threats, along with income uncertainty and performance rating pressure [Rosenblat, 2018]. The protests initiated by Yemeksepeti couriers in Türkiye in 2022 against low wages and routing algorithms are a concrete demonstration of how algorithmic management limits employee autonomy [Daily Sabah, 2022]. In the context of critical theory, this situation can be evaluated as the reduction of labor power by instrumental reason to metrics, that is, the reduction of labor power by digital surveillance systems to numerical criteria and the subjection of living spaces to system logic. The rise of the gig economy demonstrates that digital surveillance makes gender inequalities more visible, with women employees in particular being subjected to both algorithmic and cultural forms of domination.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study was designed as a qualitative research that aims to examine the relationship between digital surveillance, employee autonomy, and gender from a critical theory perspective. The study conducted a literature review and systematically analyzed secondary data using content analysis. Academic articles and current field research published after 2020 were examined. The main reason for this is that remote working has become rapidly widespread with the COVID-19 pandemic, algorithmic management and the gig economy have become more visible in working life, and new gender discussions have come to the

fore in this context. Thus, the study aims to offer a more meaningful and contemporary perspective by capturing current discussions in the literature. In addition, it is aimed for the study to contribute to the field by supporting the findings with case studies from the world and Türkiye.

During the data collection process, searches were conducted in Web of Science, Scopus and Google Scholar databases using the keywords “digital surveillance”, “algorithmic management”, “gender inequality”, “gig economy” and “critical theory”. The articles obtained were evaluated as secondary data, systematically examined using content analysis, and classified under three main themes: (1) digital surveillance and algorithmic governance, (2) gender and autonomy, (3) gig economy and gendered risks. The coding process considered both a priori concepts (instrumental reason, communicative action, gendered organizations) and emerging themes derived from the data.

This methodology is in line with the aim of “making power relations visible” emphasized by critical theory. Furthermore, by relying on contemporary sources, it enables discussion of how digital surveillance and gender inequalities are reproduced in modern business life.

IV. ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

In accordance with the framework explained in the methodology section, the articles to be included in the research were determined and their classification is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Selected articles on digital surveillance, employee autonomy and gendered inequalities

Author / Year	Topic / Focus	Key Findings	Connection to Gender and Critical Theory
Kellogg, Valentine & Christin [2020]	Algorithmic management and control	Algorithms limit employee autonomy by standardizing work processes.	Reducing everything to measurable outputs aligns with the critique of instrumental reason.
Raghavan et al. [2020]	Algorithmic recruiting systems	AI recruiting tools generate gender and ethnic biases.	Technology is not neutral; it can place women at a disadvantage, reproducing existing social inequalities.
Craig & Churchill [2021]	Pandemic: home-work balance and the double burden	Women experience “double shifts” when working from home, increasing stress and burnout.	Gender roles are reproduced through surveillance; living spaces are governed by system logic.
Lee et al. [2021]	Gig economy algorithms	Gig workers are ostensibly flexible, but constrained by algorithmic control.	Women couriers/drivers are at the focus of additional safety risks; gendered inequality emerges.
Ajunwa [2022]	Digital surveillance and workplace democracy	The constant collection of employee data undermines workplace democracy.	Surveillance capitalism renders gendered work experiences invisible.
Albrechtslund & Ryberg [2023]	Surveillance culture in education and the workplace	Surveillance has become normalized in both education and work.	The discourse of ‘inevitability’ prevents questioning of inequalities.
Stark, Stanhaus & Anthony [2020]	Facial recognition surveillance and gender differences	Women are 49% less likely than men to accept being monitored by a facial recognition system.	Women's rejection of surveillance is important in terms of their right to privacy and political awareness.
Liu et al. [2024]	The impact of algorithmic management on gig workers	Algorithms, in creating self-management tools, may simultaneously enable and limit autonomy.	Although gender is not considered, it offers critical analysis of the mechanisms of autonomy.
Vitak & Zimmer [2023]	Post-pandemic surveillance perception and gender gap	New monitoring tools emerged during the pandemic, but women reported their effects more negatively.	Women’s sensitivity to surveillance points to a lack of communicative justice.
Hertel-Fernandez [2024]	The prevalence of automated control technologies	It was found that automated surveillance systems are widespread in the U.S. workforce and may negatively affect employee well-being.	The proliferation of surveillance can reinforce gender inequalities.

Source: Compiled by the author

The post-2020 literature demonstrates that digital surveillance and algorithmic management are not only technical efficiency tools but also ideological mechanisms that reproduce gender inequalities. Kellogg, Valentine ve Christin [2020] demonstrated that algorithmic management constrains employee autonomy through the standardization of work processes. This finding was corroborated by the protests at Amazon warehouses in 2021, where employees reported that the algorithmic performance pressures were inhuman and that even bathroom breaks were restricted [The Guardian, 2021]. Similarly, in 2023, Coupang warehouse employees in South Korea protested algorithmic performance pressures [Nikkei Asia, 2023]. In Türkiye, in 2022, Trendyol Express couriers went on strike, highlighting the injustice of algorithmic compensation systems [BBC Turkish, 2022].

The algorithmic hiring biases highlighted by Raghavan et al. [2020] indicate that women and minorities are disadvantaged. The most well-known example is Amazon's hiring algorithm systematically scoring female candidates lower [Reuters, 2018]. Similarly, in 2021, it was reported that the algorithm used by the UK NHS to evaluate healthcare workers exacerbated ethnic disparities [The Guardian, 2021]. In Türkiye, women's organizations have also raised concerns that certain private-sector HR software puts female candidates at a disadvantage during filtering processes [DW Turkish, 2021].

The effects of surveillance have become most visible during the pandemic. Craig and Churchill [2021] emphasize that female employees face a "double burden" when balancing work and home. Female academics working via Zoom in the US reported experiencing burnout due to the pressure of being constantly online [Inside Higher Ed, 2020]. In Türkiye, it was reported that the screens of employees working from home in the banking sector were being recorded and monitored through daily reports [Sözcü, 2021]. Furthermore, software like Proctorio used in online exams during the pandemic violated students' privacy, and female students found the camera and microphone requirements particularly disturbing [BBC News, 2020].

Gendered risks are also prominent in the gig economy. As Lee et al. [2021] note, while platform employees may appear flexible, they operate under algorithmic control. Uber drivers worldwide went on strike in London and New York in 2022 due to the lack of transparency surrounding the operation of algorithms [The Guardian, 2022]. In Türkiye, Yemeksepeti and Getir couriers held mass demonstrations in 2022 against low wages, harsh working conditions, and route algorithms [Daily Sabah, 2022]. During this period, female couriers faced not only economic pressures but also the risks of gender-based violence and harassment while working on the streets. [Bianet, 2022].

While Ajunwa [2022] states that continuous data collection undermines workplace democracy, Albrechtslund and Ryberg [2023] emphasize that surveillance culture has become normalized in education and business life. This 'discourse of inevitability' makes surveillance appear unquestionable. The AI Act, approved by the European Union in 2023, aimed to impose restrictions on algorithmic surveillance and recruitment systems, but debates on its implementation continue [European Parliament, 2023]. Türkiye, however, does not yet have comprehensive legislation on this issue.

Recent examples further corroborate the findings presented in Table 1. Vitak and Zimmer [2023] found that post-pandemic surveillance technologies created more negative perceptions on women; Hertel-Fernandez [2024] found that automated surveillance technologies negatively affected employee well-being in the USA. Additionally, a study published in France in 2023 reported that women working from home were 30% more likely to be exposed to surveillance software than men [Le Monde, 2023]. In conclusion, the table strongly demonstrates that digital surveillance and algorithmic management are not merely technical tools but gendered mechanisms of domination. Examples from Türkiye and around the world show that these systems weaken employee autonomy, exacerbate gender inequalities, and operate as modern manifestations of 'instrumental reason' within the framework of critical theory.

V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study examines the impact of digital surveillance technologies on employee autonomy through a gender perspective and critical theory. The findings demonstrate that surveillance and algorithmic management are not only technical tools that regulate work processes but also ideological mechanisms that reproduce gender inequalities. The post-2020 literature demonstrates that surveillance software rapidly became normalized as the pandemic proliferated remote work, algorithmic control intensified with the growth of the gig economy, and AI-based recruitment systems disadvantaged women. In Türkiye, the protests by Trendyol, Yemeksepeti, and Getir couriers against wage and routing algorithms, as well as employees protests at Amazon and Coupang warehouses, are concrete reflections of these findings on the ground. Women employees experiencing a “double burden” in work–home balance during the pandemic, and reporting higher levels of stress and burnout under the pressure of surveillance software, illustrates how gender-based inequalities have deepened in the digitalization process.

When evaluated within the context of critical theory, Adorno and Horkheimer’s critique of instrumental reason explains how technology loses its emancipatory potential and turns into a mechanism of domination. Similarly, Habermas’s theory of communicative action demonstrates that surveillance weakens democratic participation and suppresses employee voice. Within this framework, digital surveillance can be considered not only a technical tool but also a practice capable of political and social impact.

Future research could develop an intersectional perspective by examining how surveillance experiences vary not only by gender but also by class, age, ethnicity, and migration status. Comparative studies of surveillance practices across sectors such as banking, education, healthcare, and logistics could contribute to understanding gender-based effects in different contexts. Given the limited number of field studies in Türkiye on this topic, there is a particular need for qualitative research that explores the experiences of women employees in depth. Additionally, examining the impact of regulations such as the EU AI Act on gender equality could guide similar legal frameworks in Türkiye. It is also essential that the research agenda addresses the gender-based differences generated by digital surveillance not only in workplaces but also among students in universities and schools.

Overall, this study reveals that digital surveillance is more than just a technical efficiency tool, but a form of gendered domination. Building on the findings, future studies should focus on approaches that enhance transparency, algorithmic explainability, and employee participation in decision-making, which would contribute significantly to both academic research and policy development.

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