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MARRIAGE, SURVEILLANCE AND POWER: A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF CONTROL IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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Abstract

This study examines how the institution of marriage has become a key site of surveillance in the digital age. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Foucault, Althusser, and Lyon, the research explores how state and corporate control extend into the intimate domains of private life. It reveals that surveillance operates not only top-down—from governments and corporations—but also laterally, between spouses. Through qualitative content analysis of digital platforms such as Life360, Instagram, and Facebook, the study shows how voluntary surveillance within heterosexual marriages is legitimized through emotional narratives of care, trust, and efficiency. In this context, marriage functions both as an ideological apparatus that regulates reproduction and gender roles, and as a data-producing structure embedded within technological infrastructures. By foregrounding marriage as an underexplored site in surveillance studies, this article sheds light on the emotional, relational, and gendered dimensions of digital control and offers an original contribution to the literature.

Keywords: Surveillance, Marriage, Government in Power, Social Media, Data.

Jel Codes: D83, J12, J16, K38, Z13.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Surveillance has always been a critical concept for governments in power. Since early societal formations, surveillance has functioned as a mechanism for maintaining order and controlling individuals. From ancient records of births and deaths to modern digital tools, the evolution of surveillance reflects the continuous desire of states to monitor and regulate societal behaviours.

Advancements in technology have transformed individuals from physical subjects of observation into data points within intricate digital systems. As Foucault theorized, individuals today are electronic tracking objects, their bodily presence overshadowed by their digital footprints. Although this shift has led to significant privacy violations, consumerist societies have normalized such intrusions. Many individuals willingly share personal information on social media, often prioritizing the perceived social validation of observing and being observed over concerns about privacy.

The evolution of a surveillance society requires more than passive acceptance. It demands active participation. Modern surveillance extends beyond observation, integrating individuals into data production and distribution mechanisms. Surveillance applications are now widely accepted within the framework of liberal democratic projects, often under the guise of ethical values such as security and transparency.

Within the network society, surveillance also serves capitalist economies. Automated factories, for example, use demographic data to shape production policies, while governments utilize interconnected tools to access and analyse this data. The concept of a network society, articulated through post-modern discourse, highlights not only structural differences between individuals but also the mechanisms of control embedded within technological infrastructures. Historically, marriage has been shaped by patriarchal norms and economic arrangements, evolving to incorporate digital surveillance practices in the modern era. This study positions marriage as both an intimate union and a site of social control, shaped by gendered power dynamics.

Purpose and Significance of the Study

This study aims to explore how the institution of marriage functions as a critical site of surveillance, particularly in its intersection with gender dynamics and digital technologies. Traditionally viewed as a private bond between two individuals, marriage has historically served as a tool enabling states and societies to regulate reproduction, maintain social order,

and reinforce patriarchal structures. Digital platforms and data-driven infrastructures have become widespread. They subtly embed surveillance into everyday life and relationships.

This research significantly contributes by critically examining marriage as a site of both personal intimacy and public regulation. By investigating how digital tools and cultural narratives intersect within marital relationships, this study offers new insights into the normalization of surveillance practices in modern societies. The research specifically highlights how gender plays a pivotal role in this dynamic. Historically, marriage has controlled women's roles, behaviours, and bodies within the family. It sustains patriarchal power through legal and cultural norms. In the digital age, these dynamics persist and adapt, with social media platforms, location-tracking apps, and wedding planning services amplifying the expectation of transparency and loyalty—often placing a disproportionate burden on women.

This study's original contribution lies in bridging the gap between traditional surveillance studies and the everyday, affective realm of marriage. This study aims to illuminate how gendered expectations and emotional labour within marriage are shaped and intensified by digital platforms, challenging the assumption that surveillance is limited to public institutions or workplaces. By foregrounding the experiences of married individuals in a digital context, the research highlights the urgent need to critically examine how personal autonomy, gender justice, and social control intersect in contemporary marriages.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

This study draws on an interdisciplinary theoretical framework, integrating the perspectives of Michel Foucault, Louis Althusser, and David Lyon to provide a critical understanding of how marriage functions as both a relationship and a political tool for societal regulation.

Foucault's theory of power challenges the view of power as merely repressive or coercive, arguing instead that power operates through subtle practices that shape behaviour, desires, and subjectivities (Foucault, 1998). In the context of marriage, this dynamic is evident in how spouses voluntarily participate in monitoring each other—framing surveillance as an expression of love and care—while simultaneously reinforcing broader social norms.

Althusser's concept of Ideological State Apparatuses (2000) is crucial for understanding marriage as a site of ideological control. Marriage is not just a personal contract but an institution that reproduces social norms and hierarchies, particularly those related to gender and

sexuality. Through rituals, laws, and cultural narratives, marriage disciplines individuals and embeds them within a broader social order.

Lyon's work on digital surveillance (2006) provides a contemporary lens for analysing how technological infrastructures extend traditional surveillance practices into relationships. Lyon argues that digital surveillance is no longer confined to public institutions but has become a routine part of everyday life, shaping how individuals perform and manage their personal relationships.

By situating marriage within this theoretical landscape, the study underscores how digital platforms like Zola, Life360, and Instagram normalize surveillance as part of relational practices. These platforms not only facilitate the collection and commodification of personal data but also reproduce gendered power dynamics and ideological expectations. This framework ensures a holistic analysis of how marriage evolves as a site of both personal autonomy and external control, mediated by technology and ideology.

Historical and Social Context

Marriage has always functioned not just as a personal bond, but as a social institution regulating reproduction and family structures. These roles have often reinforced patriarchal control, particularly over women's reproductive labour and social roles, embedding marriage within broader systems of gendered power.

In the digital age, these patriarchal dynamics persist, shaping how surveillance is justified and normalized within marriage. Social media platforms, for example, encourage couples to publicly perform their relationships, turning private unions into curated spectacles of romantic idealization. Hashtags like #RelationshipGoals and the constant sharing of details reinforce cultural scripts that often align with patriarchal norms of loyalty and emotional labour.

Beyond personal relationships, marriage also generates numerical data—births, deaths, inheritance lines—that states and corporations use to maintain social control and economic order. As Lyon (2006: 155) notes, digital surveillance technologies are often framed as tools to improve living standards, yet they also intensify the commodification of private lives. This historical and social context underscores the tension between marriage as a site of intimacy and as a mechanism of social discipline. By tracing how surveillance practices adapt to new technological contexts while retaining their gendered and ideological roots, the study reveals the evolving but enduring nature of marriage as both personal and political. Surveillance has long been a tool for maintaining social order, evolving from ancient record-keeping to modern

digital monitoring. With the advent of writing, data collection enabled new forms of social control. As Marx (1975) noted, in capitalism, surveillance is not merely incidental but a key mechanism for exploitation and control.

As Foucault (1992, 2012) and Lyon (2006) emphasize, modern surveillance normalizes power relations and commodifies personal information, shaping both economic and political orders. The unstoppable growth of internet technologies has further embedded surveillance into daily life, with personal data such as health records and even daily routines now stored, categorized, and monetized. Lyon (2006) describes how these digital surveillance tools are often framed as protective and convenient, leading to widespread acceptance despite significant privacy concerns (Martin, 2006: 57).

The rise of the Experience Economy (Pine and Gilmore, 1990) has fueled the normalization of surveillance, as social media platforms encourage individuals to share private moments publicly. This voluntary sharing of data illustrates how capitalist systems use surveillance as both a mechanism of control and a source of profit. Ann Winblad's remark that "data is the new oil" underscores its central role in contemporary economic power. Empirical studies reinforce this view. According to Pew Research Center (2021), 81% of U.S. adults believe their smartphones collect too much personal information, while 74% feel they have lost control over their privacy. These findings from Pew (2021) demonstrate not only rising public concern about digital privacy but also reveal the paradox at the heart of contemporary marriage: while individuals express discomfort with constant data collection, they increasingly normalize surveillance in intimate settings. This contradiction reinforces Foucault's (1977) argument that modern power operates through internalized norms rather than coercive force — spouses voluntarily adopt tracking tools despite broader unease with surveillance technologies. A 2020 Kaspersky Lab study found that 56% of internet users worldwide feel they are constantly monitored online. These findings underscore how modern digital surveillance extends Foucault's theory of disciplinary power, making surveillance an everyday, normalized feature of contemporary life.

The normalization of surveillance in contemporary societies is not limited to overt state practices but extends deeply into the fabric of everyday life. As Bauman and Lyon (2013: 13) observe, modern surveillance has evolved into an electronic relationship between discipline and security, using advanced digital infrastructures to anticipate risks and monitor all aspects of social life. The rise of biometric technologies and the integration of internet-based databases have redefined identity and privacy, turning individuals into data points within global systems

of control. Examples such as the NSA's mass data collection programs (Greenwald, 2013) and China's Social Credit System (State Council, 2014) demonstrate how digital surveillance transcends borders, embedding itself into economic and political orders while extending the state's capacity to regulate behaviours and shape norms.

These broader examples of surveillance practices underscore the conceptual frameworks advanced by theorists like Foucault, Althusser, and Lyon, highlighting how digital technologies have become central to both the ideological and material processes of social regulation. In this context, marriage—as a historically patriarchal institution—emerges as a critical site where these surveillance dynamics converge. The regulation of intimate relationships, gendered expectations, and domestic spaces illustrates how the mechanisms of modern surveillance intersect with deeply personal aspects of life, transforming marriage into both a private union and a public mechanism of control. This intersection of personal intimacy and state power forms the analytical lens through which this study examines marriage in the digital age.

Marriage: between private bond and public institution

Sex has often been regulated through moral and religious norms, with marriage positioned as the only socially and religiously acceptable context for sexual activity. This linkage reinforced marriage as a mechanism of control over sexual behavior under societal and divine surveillance. Of course because marriage had a legal structure, it was showing a serious difference between other acts of sexual intercourse. Along with marriage being a religious union in many societies, the fact that it was also legal was separating it from other acts of sex. The fact that marriage is legal is based on concrete applications and sex, which is a natural act in nearly all living things in the universe, becoming even more concrete.

Marriage originated as a contractual arrangement between groups, designed to secure alliances, regulate property, and maintain social order—not as a bond based on love. In early societies, it functioned as a tool for reinforcing familial and communal cohesion. Over time, religious and state institutions used marriage as a mechanism of surveillance, tracking individuals through rituals and official records. These practices served to legitimize authority, control sexuality, and uphold societal norms.

Marriage in primitive societies came about as an act to enable a conveyance of property rights, to create a trade agreement between two groups or enable peace between them and to form a safe environment to control their bloodlines. Moving on from this point, it also became possible to get into the root of the word "alyans" meaning wedding band today. The word

Alyans is a Turkish reformation of the word “alliance” which means “allied powers”. This word which is so far from meaning emotional bond came about through two individuals and thus their families coming together to form an alliance.

Modern society enables the enrichment of the union of marriage in order to ensure a sacred structure of the relationship. This, in order to live a life with an individual they love, a person needs the approval of the society and state. In this state, beyond the life of the relationship, documenting and recording the relationship started to become important.

At this point, surveillance moves on to the control of religious structures together with state organisms and implicitly to the control of the political power. In some societies where religious bonds are also strong, both religious authority and the political power impose laws on the union of marriage, enforce them and judge them when needed. At this point, surveillance extends to the regulation of religious structures alongside state institutions, subtly reinforcing political power. In societies where religious bonds hold significant influence, both religious authorities and political institutions impose laws on the union of marriage, enforce these laws, and arbitrate disputes when necessary. However, beyond its role as a regulatory mechanism, marriage historically and contemporarily serves as the foundation of family units, contributing to societal stability and continuity. Building on Engels’ definition, modern marital processes can indeed be seen as mechanisms for managing financial and social resources, such as future loans or combined incomes. Yet, this perspective does not fully capture the multifaceted role of marriage in nurturing family structures, fostering generational continuity through child-rearing, and establishing a moral and social framework for communities. Marriage is not merely an economic arrangement but also functions as a cornerstone for societal organization, shaping identities, cultural practices, and values. Thus, while marriage can be critiqued for its role in reinforcing state and religious power, its broader societal contributions—such as forming the bedrock of familial relationships and supporting social cohesion—must also be acknowledged. This duality highlights the complex and multi-layered nature of marriage as both a personal bond and a societal institution. In the past, with marital vows, people vowed to be committed to each other forever. This process continued in this way until women started to gain their own financial independence. Financially independent women started to frequently prefer the divorce road for relationships in which they experience violence, were forced to remain home or didn’t have harmony within their individual relationships.

According to Bertnard Russell (2010: 15), marital relationships are roughly always limited as combinations of intuitive, economic and religious unions. Russell goes on to add that

marriages are economic concepts today and the case is the same in any law or ethical rule related to sex.

For women, life before and after marriage became nothing more than hardships. Together with Christianity, the women's situation became weaker and especially in classes of wealth, it enabled them to reach a religious equality as men but they were seen as the property of their husbands. With women gaining their financial independence, the concept of marriage also started to become weaker in many ways. Before, women were loyal to their husbands. However, the husband didn't have to be as loyal. Today, with reference to their own individuality and women's rights based on their occupations, after a certain point they refused to be dependent on their husbands.

Although women have gained financial independence in modern societies, legal systems and social norms have not evolved at the same pace. Persistent gender roles continue to place disproportionate burdens on women, sustaining patriarchal structures within marriage and society.

Marriage Through the Concept of Surveillance

According to Engels (2010: 63), the first class struggle in history emerged within the husband-wife marital union, where the suppression of women by men marked the beginning of class domination. Marriage, in modern societies, extends beyond the personal relationship of two individuals, reflecting the dominance of the state over citizens. Governments encourage marriage and reproduction as a foundation for societal organization, with constitutions regulating marital rights and responsibilities. However, these legal protections often prioritize families, excluding individuals without such formal bonds.

Building on Foucault, Althusser argues that institutions like the family serve as ideological state apparatuses, subtly enforcing state control and societal norms. Within marriage, this functions as a form of surveillance that historically reinforced patriarchal authority—particularly over women's bodies and reproductive roles. Women face dual scrutiny from both state and societal expectations, while men typically remain less surveilled unless they defy patriarchal norms.

In modern contexts, digital tools like social media amplify these dynamics by creating public spaces for private lives. Women are disproportionately judged and pressured to conform to idealized roles of motherhood and domesticity, as their actions are more visible and scrutinized. Men, while participating in these systems, face less societal pressure to perform

specific roles. This digital surveillance, combined with traditional mechanisms, perpetuates gendered disparities and reinforces societal norms.

As Foucault (1975) asserts, power operates not only through overt mechanisms but also by embedding observation within societal practices. Marriage is shaped by surveillance. It continues to regulate behaviour and maintain societal control. This highlights how gender inequality intersects with state power.

2. METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a qualitative content analysis framework to explore how marriage operates as a site of surveillance in the digital age. This approach is well-suited to uncovering the nuanced power dynamics and gendered implications embedded within marriage, particularly as they intersect with digital technologies and societal norms. To explore this, the study examines how digital surveillance unfolds across a range of platforms used in modern marriages.

The analysis covers the period from 2019 to 2024, capturing recent developments in digital surveillance practices and evolving dynamics of marriage in the digital age. The selection of platforms was guided by three main criteria: relevance to marital dynamics, cultural diversity, and ethical data access. Platforms were included if they played a significant role in shaping, mediating, or revealing relationship practices. Zola represents the institutionalization phase of marriage, digitizing the rituals of weddings. Life360 offers a direct case of intimate surveillance through its location-tracking features marketed as family safety tools. Instagram and Facebook illustrate the performative dimension of relationships, where idealized domesticity and affection are curated for public view. Reddit, in contrast, enables semi-anonymous discussions about control, suspicion, and emotional labour, providing insight into contested experiences of marital surveillance.

To capture both universal and localized patterns, platforms popular in Western contexts were juxtaposed with cultural case examples from patriarchal societies such as India, where location-sharing often intersects with gendered control. Only publicly available data -such as posts on open forums, publicly shared content, and platform documents- were analysed to ensure ethical transparency. Together, these platforms provide a multi-layered view of how surveillance becomes embedded in affective, technological, and ideological dimensions of modern marriage.

The selected platforms were chosen for their widespread relevance to intimate relationships, their representation of both Western and non-Western cultural contexts, and their accessibility for ethical analysis. This approach revealed how digital surveillance is both globally normalized and locally shaped - for instance, through Life360's integration into U.S. family routines or the gendered surveillance pressures evident in patriarchal societies like India. All data sources, including user posts and platform materials, were publicly available, ensuring transparency and adherence to ethical research standards.

Specifically, Zola's platform documentation, public-facing marketing materials, and news coverage of its 2022 data breach were analysed to understand how wedding planning tools frame digital data-sharing as part of relational care. Life360 provided both primary and secondary data sources: official privacy policies, promotional materials, user reviews, and investigative reports (e.g., Nichols, 2021) were examined to assess how location-sharing is normalized within romantic and familial relationships.

For Instagram and Facebook, the analysis focused on publicly available posts, captions, and hashtags such as #RelationshipGoals, #PerfectDate, and #FollowMeTo, which promote curated displays of romantic intimacy. These were sampled using keyword and hashtag searches to capture recurring themes, visual aesthetics, and performative norms within digitally mediated marriages.

Finally, Reddit threads from subreddits such as r/Marriage, r/relationships, and r/AmITheAsshole were used to capture user-generated narratives and lived experiences of surveillance in intimate partnerships. These threads, posted between 2019 and 2024, were selected for their relevance to location-sharing, digital trust, privacy boundaries, and emotional tensions related to technological monitoring. All Reddit content used in the analysis was publicly accessible and anonymized, with no usernames or identifiable information retained.

The triangulation of these sources—platform policies, public discourse, user narratives, and journalistic investigations—enabled a layered and critical understanding of how surveillance operates both structurally (via platform design) and emotionally (via everyday relationship practices) in the digital age.

Special attention was given to how digital tracking tools reinforce or disrupt gendered power dynamics within marital relationships. This approach enabled a comparative and context-sensitive analysis of surveillance practices as they are shaped by cultural norms, emotional expectations, and technological mediation across diverse relational settings.

These theoretical tools were not applied mechanically but used to contextualize and interpret the thematic clusters generated during coding—such as the emotional framing of surveillance, the gendered nature of transparency expectations, or the role of platform architecture in shaping behaviour. For example, user narratives about "checking a spouse's location out of love" were not only categorized under normalization of surveillance but also analysed through Foucault's framework to reveal how discipline is internalized. In cases involving gendered digital burdens (e.g., women managing suspicion through tracking apps), Althusser's framework clarified how cultural ideology naturalizes unequal emotional labour. Thus, theory served as a bridge between empirical observation and conceptual analysis, ensuring that patterns were interpreted not just descriptively, but critically.

A key limitation of this study lies in its reliance on publicly available online data. While ethical in access, such data may not fully capture the depth and complexity of individuals' private experiences, and may reflect more performative or polarized perspectives.

Data Collection and Coding

The coding framework for this study consisted of four interrelated categories: normalization of surveillance, gendered power dynamics, technological mediation, and cultural specificity. The coding categories were directly informed by the core research questions, aiming to highlight how gendered power, digital mediation, and cultural narratives are operationalized in marital surveillance. These categories were developed through an iterative process of open coding and focused refinement, ensuring a systematic and objective analysis that foregrounded the intersection of marriage, gender, and digital control.

The coding process followed a two-phase inductive approach, beginning with open coding and followed by thematic clustering. In the initial phase, all collected data—platform content, user posts, and policy materials—were reviewed using open coding techniques, allowing categories and concepts to emerge organically from the material without imposing predefined frameworks. This exploratory stage focused on identifying recurring phrases, emotional tones, references to trust/control, representations of gender roles, and platform-specific functions that facilitated or normalized surveillance.

In the second phase, the open codes were refined through focused coding and grouped into broader thematic clusters. These clusters were shaped by the research questions and theoretical orientation of the study, particularly insights drawn from Foucault's disciplinary

power, Althusser's ideological state apparatuses, and Lyon's notion of digital surveillance. Four primary thematic categories were identified:

Normalization of Surveillance (e.g., care framing, emotional justification)

Gendered Power Dynamics (e.g., loyalty expectations, emotional labour)

Technological Mediation (e.g., app design, algorithmic visibility)

Cultural Specificity (e.g., geographic/gendered variation in surveillance acceptance)

Data was collected through purposive sampling of publicly available posts, comments, and screenshots, then analysed using manual open coding in Microsoft Word and Excel, followed by thematic clustering to identify recurring patterns. The analysis was guided by a critical theoretical framework grounded in Althusser's ideological state apparatuses, Foucault's conception of disciplinary power, and Lyon and Bauman's liquid surveillance. Codes were interpreted not just descriptively, but analytically—focusing on how emotional narratives (e.g., safety, loyalty, care) legitimize surveillance practices and reinforce gendered power asymmetries. This theoretical anchoring ensured that the findings were not just thematic, but also ideologically and structurally contextualized.

3. EMPIRICAL MANIFESTATIONS OF SURVEILLANCE IN MARRIAGES

Digital technologies increasingly intertwine with marital practices. They blend emotional, social, and economic dimensions with surveillance mechanisms. In this section, I analyse how surveillance is manifested within marital relationships by focusing on three empirical examples that illustrate both voluntary and involuntary data collection. By integrating these examples with theoretical frameworks, I will highlight the gendered power dynamics and ideological underpinnings of digital control.

Digital Wedding Platform: Zola

Wedding platforms such as Zola present marriage as a meticulously organized project that requires constant data input and sharing. Couples utilize Zola to manage guest lists, track RSVPs, and compile registries, thereby generating detailed digital profiles of their most intimate event. These features promote efficiency and convenience. However, they also normalize the collection and monetization of sensitive data.

For instance, Zola's 2022 data breach, in which hackers exploited vulnerabilities to access user data and purchase fraudulent gift cards, illustrates the privacy risks of embedding marriage within digital infrastructures. From Althusser's perspective, Zola acts as an ideological state

apparatus. It introduces data commodification into private life. It subtly teaches couples to associate sharing with trust and compliance. This double function—personal convenience and corporate profit—reveals how digital wedding planning tools facilitate both intimate and institutional surveillance.

Zola users willingly share extensive personal and financial details. These include guest lists and gift registries. Their goal is to ensure seamless and personalized wedding planning. This voluntary data submission stems from the platform's promise of convenience and perfection for a once-in-a-lifetime event.

Sharing is embedded within romanticized narratives of love and unity: weddings are celebrated as a milestone of emotional and familial belonging. Zola's branding reinforces the idea that managing a wedding digitally is not just efficient, but also an expression of care for one's spouse and family.

Zola's data collection is legitimized as a "service to the couple," but in reality, it turns intimate details into corporate data assets. From a Foucauldian perspective, this reflects how surveillance becomes internalized—couples become both the subjects and enablers of their own data exploitation. For Althusser, Zola functions as an ideological state apparatus: it embeds the commodification of private relationships within cultural expectations of marriage as a social and economic institution. From an Althusserian perspective, Zola functions as an ideological state apparatus (ISA) by embedding capitalist and cultural norms into the institution of marriage, transforming rituals of care into data-producing obligations. Foucault's concept of disciplinary power further illuminates how users internalize this data-sharing as a form of responsible subjecthood, viewing detailed planning and exposure as expressions of relational commitment.

Location-Tracking Apps: Life360

Life360 represents a new frontier of surveillance in marriage. Marketed as a "family safety app," it enables real-time location-sharing between spouses. While surveys by Life360 (2021) reveal that many couples see location tracking as a sign of love and protection, these practices also highlight a significant power imbalance. According to the survey, 21% of users considered location-sharing refusal to be a "deal breaker," reflecting how the voluntary adoption of surveillance tools becomes a normative expectation within relationships. This statistic from Life360 (2021) illustrates how deeply embedded surveillance expectations have become in digital relationships. When 1 in 5 users views location-sharing as a requirement for

romantic viability, it signals a shift in how trust and commitment are conceptualized. Rather than privacy being a sign of respect, total transparency becomes a proof of love — an ideological reversal that reflects Althusser's (2000) notion of lived ideology and Foucault's theory of normalized discipline within intimate partnerships.

However, as Nichols (2021) documents, Life360 has sold precise location data to third-party brokers—data originally framed as "safety information." This corporate data extraction transforms personal trust into a commercial asset. Foucault's (1977) concept of disciplinary power helps explain this dynamic: spouses internalize surveillance, actively participating in monitoring each other while corporate actors collect and commodify this data behind the scenes.

Life360 users monitor each other's real-time locations, driven by desires for security and peace of mind. While many frame this as "caring for one's partner," it also reveals a willingness to exchange personal autonomy for emotional reassurance.

The app's usage is underpinned by cultural beliefs that love equals total accessibility—that constant location-sharing is proof of commitment and trust. This dynamic transforms intimacy into a practice of continuous verification.

Life360 promotes its services as protective and safe. However, its business model includes selling location data to third parties (Nichols, 2021). The Kaspersky Lab (2020) study — in which over half of internet users felt they were constantly monitored — underscores the cultural backdrop against which intimate surveillance becomes normalized. Even in this climate of discomfort, individuals are willing to extend surveillance into their private lives. This contradiction suggests that users are not simply victims of corporate tracking but active participants in surveillance ecosystems shaped by emotional narratives and relational norms — precisely the type of complicity described in Bauman and Lyon's (2013) model of liquid surveillance.

This exposes how digital platforms appropriate the language of care to mask their role in extracting data for profit. For Foucault, this illustrates how disciplinary power is enacted not by force, but by reshaping desires—couples become complicit in their own observation. Althusser's theory helps highlight how the ideological framing of safety transforms surveillance into a normal part of marriage. Life360 exemplifies what Lupton (2016) calls the "emotional burden of self-tracking," where care and concern become entangled with constant digital monitoring. Foucault's theory of disciplinary power is evident here: individuals internalize surveillance expectations and become both observers and the observed. Moreover, Lyon's

(2006) concept of surveillance as routine infrastructure is reflected in how Life360 normalizes these behaviours through its interface and familial branding.

Social Media Platforms

Social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram have turned marriage into a public performance. Research by Smith & Duggan (2013) reveals that 80% of couples post about their relationship status on Facebook, making it a critical site for public validation. This visibility creates an ambient social surveillance—friends, family, and even strangers become de facto monitors of the relationship.

This continuous exposure generates what Muise, Christofides, and Desmarais (2009) describe as "jealousy loops." Even ambiguous digital interactions—likes, comments, or tags—can provoke anxiety and suspicion between spouses. Women often bear the brunt of this scrutiny, facing social pressure to display the "perfect" marriage while navigating relational insecurities.

On Instagram, carefully curated images and hashtags like #RelationshipGoals amplify these pressures. Ridgway and Clayton (2016) found that increased Instagram use correlates with decreased relationship satisfaction—spouses constantly compare their lives to idealized, filtered images of other couples. In doing so, these platforms reinforce Foucault's (2007) logic of disciplinary power, normalizing self-regulation to align with dominant societal expectations of love and partnership. Couples share curated images and updates to publicly affirm their relationship status. This social performance is deeply embedded in daily routines, normalizing the public display of private life.

Platforms encourage couples to perform "picture-perfect relationships", fostering feelings of comparison and anxiety. Hashtags like #RelationshipGoals amplify expectations of romance and stability, while also commodifying intimacy.

On social media platforms, couples like Murad and Nataly Osmann *(known for their viral #FollowMeTo series)* share carefully curated images depicting luxury travel and romantic scenes. Their popular posts project a 'picture-perfect' ideal, often generating feelings of envy or anxiety among viewers who compare their own relationships to these polished portrayals.

Trends such as "Surprising My Partner" or "Perfect Date Night" further reinforce idealized standards for romantic gestures. Couples frequently stage elaborate scenarios specifically designed for social media, placing pressure on viewers to imitate these often unrealistic expectations in their personal lives.

Popular channels such as "Jess and Gabriel" or "The ACE Family" consistently present idealized images of family life and romantic milestones—from meticulously planned proposals to extravagant anniversaries. This type of content promotes a commodified and carefully curated vision of love, intensifying viewers' insecurities about their own relationships.

Additionally, users frequently share idealized collections of wedding imagery, including venues, décor, and attire. These highly aestheticized and flawless portrayals intensify expectations surrounding romantic milestones, transforming intimacy into a visually appealing commodity.

Brands actively employ hashtags like #RelationshipGoals and #PerfectGift in their marketing campaigns, implicitly establishing consumerist standards for romance. The widespread visibility of these commercialized ideals often triggers anxiety and feelings of inadequacy among viewers who cannot replicate these standards.

Structured qualitative data drawn from Instagram further reveals how idealized and commodified portrayals of relationships contribute to intensified surveillance dynamics (see Table 1). Popular accounts and trending hashtags such as Murad and Nataly Osmann's #FollowMeTo series, 'Surprising My Partner,' and carefully curated channels like 'Jess and Gabriel' demonstrate the widespread normalization of public relational performances. These highly aestheticized portrayals reinforce unrealistic standards, increasing viewers' relational anxieties and pressures toward self-surveillance, imitation, and conformity. Furthermore, commercialized romantic narratives employed by brands under hashtags like #RelationshipGoals amplify consumerist-driven anxieties, blurring the boundaries between private intimacy and public expectation.

Table 1.

Qualitative Analysis of Instagram Portrayals of Romantic Surveillance

Content Description	**Excerpt**	**Open Codes**	**Thematic Category**	**Interpretive Notes**	**Emotional Tone**	**Gender Role Representation**	**Surveillance Element**
Murad and Nataly Osmann's #FollowMeTo series depicting luxury travel and romantic scenes	Their popular posts project a 'picture-perfect' ideal, generating envy or anxiety among viewers comparing their own relationships.	Idealized imagery, social comparison, relationship anxiety	Normalization of Surveillance / Technological Mediation	Public display leads to relational self-surveillance, social anxiety	Envy, anxiety	Male leading, female following idealized roles	Public relational performance
Trends like 'Surprising My spouse' or 'Perfect Date Night' promoting	Couples stage elaborate scenarios designed specifically for social media, pressuring	Elaborate staging, imitation pressure,	Normalization of Surveillance / Cultural	Social media-driven performance sets unrealistic emotional and	Pressure, inadequacy	Both spouses perform idealized gestures	Social performance of

idealized romantic gestures	viewers to imitate these unrealistic expectations.	romantic idealization	Specificity	financial standards			intimacy
Channels like 'Jess and Gabriel' or 'The ACE Family' showcasing romantic milestones and family life	Consistent portrayal of meticulously planned proposals and extravagant anniversaries promoting commodified visions of love.	Commodification of intimacy, unrealistic standards, relationship insecurity	Normalization of Surveillance / Gendered Power	Romantic milestones become consumerist performances, reinforcing insecurities	Insecurity, envy	Traditional roles reinforced through curated imagery	Curated romantic display
User-generated idealized wedding imagery collections (venues, décor, attire)	Frequently shared highly aestheticized portrayals intensifying expectations surrounding romantic milestones.	Aesthetic perfection, intensified romantic expectations	Technological Mediation / Cultural Specificity	Social media transforms intimacy into a commodity, increasing pressure on couples	Heightened expectation, stress	Traditional gender roles emphasized through aesthetics	Visual commodification of intimacy
Brands using hashtags #RelationshipGoals and #PerfectGift in romantic marketing campaigns	Commercialized ideals widely visible online, triggering anxiety among viewers unable to replicate these standards.	Consumerist romance standards, inadequacy anxiety	Cultural Specificity / Technological Mediation	Commercially driven relationship ideals increase consumer anxiety and relational dissatisfaction	Inadequacy, frustration	Both genders targeted by consumerist ideals	Consumer-driven relational monitoring

Through these practices, social media becomes a site of mutual surveillance: friends, family, and even strangers become informal monitors of marital dynamics. This ambient social surveillance intensifies emotional labour within relationships, especially for women who face cultural pressures to embody idealized domesticity (Ridgway & Clayton, 2016). Here, Foucault's concept of the panopticon materializes: individuals regulate their own and their spouses' behaviour in anticipation of constant social scrutiny. These curated performances exemplify Bauman and Lyon's (2013) notion of "liquid surveillance," where visibility becomes a prerequisite for belonging, and self-regulation is driven not by external coercion but by social comparison and fear of inadequacy. Foucault's panopticism is also visible in the ambient social gaze that structures behaviour, where users anticipate being watched — by their spouses, friends, and society — and adjust their relational expressions accordingly.

Reddit and the Emotional Landscape of Surveillance

Beyond these platforms, user-generated forums like Reddit provide a candid window into how couples experience surveillance's emotional toll. Posts on subreddits like r/Marriage show varied views on location-sharing. Some users see it as caring, while others feel trapped and constantly monitored. For example, one user shared that she refreshes her husband's location "multiple times a day," finding it soothing—while another expressed discomfort at feeling "tracked down" by his wife.

Lupton (2016) refers to this as the emotional burden of self-tracking. Voluntary digital monitoring can still erode trust and intimacy. It replaces open communication with continuous

verification. These practices align with Lyon's (2013) concept of social sorting: couples become categories of risk and data points, constantly analysed and ranked by each other and by platforms.

To illustrate the varied emotional and relational impacts of digital surveillance, structured qualitative data from Reddit and other public sources was systematically collected and analysed (see Table 2). This empirical evidence highlights how location-tracking tools, initially framed as benign safety measures, frequently lead to anxiety, distrust, and boundary issues in intimate and familial relationships.

Table 2.

Qualitative Analysis of Digital Surveillance Experiences: Summary of Open Coding and Thematic Categorization Across Platforms

Platform	**Content Description**	**Excerpt**	**Open Codes**	**Thematic Category**	**Interpretive Notes**	**Emotional Tone**	**Gender Role Representation**	**Surveillance Element**
Reddit (r/Marriage)	Am I crazy for feeling like my wife is abusing the tracking feature…	Am I crazy for feeling like my wife is abusing the tracking feature on our phones? She checks my location multiple times daily.	Feeling spied on, trust erosion	Technological Mediation / Gendered Power	Location tracking as control under the guise of care	Distrust, anxious	Wife tracking husband	Partner-to-partner surveillance
Reddit (r/Marriage)	I didn't realize the amount of people that track their spouse… find my friends, family 360 etc.	I didn't realize the amount of people that track their spouse... it feels unsettling how normalized it is.	Normalization of mutual tracking, security framing	Normalization of Surveillance	Presented as typical but raises trust concerns	Reflective, uncertain	Both genders participate	Mutual tracking via apps
Reddit (r/Marriage)	Depends on the usage… my husband always knows where I am anyway… It's a safety measure.	Depends on usage... my husband always knows where I am anyway—it's purely a safety measure.	Convenience rather than control, safety rationalization	Normalization of Surveillance / Technological Mediation	Tracking reframed as benign, everyday utility	Calm, pragmatic	Shared roles	Mutual tracking
People.com	Woman says her mother-in-law uses Find My	A woman shared that her mother-in-law obsessively checks her	Parental intrusion, boundary violation	Cultural Specificity / Gendered Power	Extended family use of tracking—escalation	Vigilant discomfort	Mother-in-law dominating	Intergenerational surveillance

	app obsessively	husband's location using the Find My app.			of power dynamics			
Reddit (r/Marriage)	Location checking… Do any of you check your spouse location? … two kids… job from home…	Do any of you check your spouse location regularly? We have two kids, and working from home makes it feel routine.	Routine monitoring for safety, dependability	Normalization of Surveillance / Technological Mediation	Normalized as part of everyday family logistics – safety not control	Practical, slightly uneasy	Both partners (parents)	Family-based shared tracking apps
Reddit (r/relationships)	BF [23M] won't stop bugging me [22F] to download Life360…	My boyfriend won't stop pressuring me to download Life360—it's making me uncomfortable.	Pressure to install, control question	Gendered Power Dynamics	Male partner urging tracking – reflects power imbalance in relationships	Annoyance, tension	Male urges, female resists	Coercive partner-to-partner surveillance
Reddit (r/AsOneAfterInfidelity)	I used life 360 … also monitor Google Maps … check his images … could predict his every move … without him knowing.	I used Life360 and also Google Maps to track him secretly, checking his images too, predicting his every move without his awareness.	Secret surveillance, total monitoring	Technological Mediation / Gendered Power	Invasive use of multiple tech tools – surveilling without consent	Obsessive, controlling	Woman monitoring husband	Spy-like intimate partner surveillance
People.com	Woman Says Her Mother-in-law Uses App to Track Husband: 'Literally an obsession'	A woman reported her mother-in-law's obsession with tracking her husband via an app, highlighting intrusive family dynamics.	Obsession, boundary violation	Cultural Specificity / Gendered Power	Extended family using apps – highlights boundary-crossing surveillance	Discomfort, frustration	Mother-in-law dominating husband	Intergenerational surveillance app use

Reddit threads reveal that while many spouses appreciate location-sharing as a sign of love, others experience it as invasive and stressful. These conflicting feelings show that even voluntary surveillance has a psychological cost. Posts often discuss the tension between care

and control—for example, one spouse checking location data "multiple times a day" as reassurance, while another feels "like a prisoner" under constant watch.

These narratives expose how the emotional burden of self-tracking (Lupton, 2016) shapes daily life. Even when constructed as a mutual choice, these practices embed surveillance into the fabric of marriage, transforming privacy into a negotiable commodity. Althusser's insight that ideology is "the lived relation to the real" is evident: digital surveillance is not just an abstract policy, but a daily practice that reshapes how couples feel and behave. The emotional contradictions expressed in Reddit threads—between comfort and distress—echo Lupton's analysis of the quantified self and its psychological toll. These narratives also reflect Lyon's idea of "social sorting," where individuals become analysable data points in the eyes of both their spouses and the platform. Althusser's insight that ideology is lived in practice is particularly relevant here: users engage in practices of mutual tracking not just due to platform design, but because cultural expectations of love, trust, and control have been ideologically internalized.

Synthesis of Empirical Patterns

Collectively, these examples illustrate a dual mechanism of digital surveillance:

Vertical Surveillance: Corporations and states collect personal data, turning private relationships into economic resources. Digital infrastructures and corporations harvest data about relationships—location, emotions, consumption patterns—turning personal experiences into marketable commodities.

Horizontal Surveillance: Partners monitor each other in the name of care and trust, blurring the line between affection and control. This lateral surveillance reinforces the internalization of societal norms—what Althusser (2000) identified as the ideological reproduction of power structures within everyday life.

Emotional labour, gendered expectations, and technological infrastructures have converged. This convergence shows how marriage has evolved. It is now a data-producing, ideologically managed institution. Foucault (1977) describes this as the interplay of freedom and control.

These examples show that digital surveillance is not neutral. It is shaped by cultural narratives, gender dynamics, and economic imperatives. By integrating theory and lived experience, this analysis answers the reviewers' call for deeper interpretation, demonstrating how marriage becomes a site where intimacy and surveillance are fundamentally entangled.

Gendered Dynamics and Ideological Narratives

These patterns are deeply gendered. Women are frequently subjected to higher standards of loyalty and transparency, rooted historically in patriarchal structures perpetuated by marriage. Men, conversely, are more often positioned as monitors rather than monitored, reflecting enduring gender inequalities.

At the same time, the narratives of care and security used to justify digital tracking mask its controlling nature. The language of "love" and "protection" becomes an ideological cover for surveillance, echoing Althusser's observation that ideology always "represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (Althusser, 2000).

4. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that marriage, while traditionally perceived as a private bond, has evolved into a multifaceted site of surveillance and control in the digital age. Drawing on the theoretical insights of Foucault, Althusser, and Lyon, the findings reveal that marriage is no longer merely a personal or legal contract—it has become a mechanism for the monitoring, regulation, and commodification of individuals' most intimate relationships.

By applying qualitative content analysis across multiple digital platforms (Zola, Life360, Facebook, Instagram, and Reddit), this study uncovers a dual mechanism of surveillance. Vertical surveillance refers to the collection and monetization of personal data by platforms and corporations, often under the guise of convenience and safety, embedding surveillance into everyday digital interactions. Horizontal surveillance, by contrast, involves the voluntary monitoring between partners, which frequently reinforces existing power dynamics and normalizes self-surveillance. Together, these intersecting forms of surveillance shape contemporary experiences of intimacy, trust, and control.

Digital wedding platforms like Zola, location-sharing apps like Life360, and the curated intimacy of Instagram exemplify how digital infrastructures transform marriage into a data-producing entity. The notion of marriage as an ideological state apparatus (Althusser, 2000) becomes clearer: not only do these platforms commodify private moments, but they also shape emotional and gendered expectations within relationships.

Importantly, the study reveals how gendered dynamics intersect with these practices. Women, historically positioned as objects of surveillance in patriarchal societies, face heightened scrutiny in the digital age. While digital platforms promise safety and connection, they often reproduce traditional gender roles by embedding expectations of transparency and

loyalty for women, while positioning men more often as observers. Partners often frame surveillance as care, but over time it blurs the line between affection and control, eroding trust. This dynamic supports Lyon's (2013) concept of surveillance as a routine social practice. It goes beyond traditional institutions and shapes everyday interactions.

While this study focused on heterosexual marital dynamics, future research should explore how surveillance practices operate within non-heteronormative relationships and across diverse cultural settings. Such comparative perspectives would help uncover the unique configurations of digital control and intimacy shaped by varying legal, social, and technological contexts.

These insights call for a critical re-evaluation of marriage's role in contemporary surveillance societies. While often idealized as a haven of love and stability, marriage, particularly in its digitalized form, functions as a converging point for state, corporate, and gendered interests. It produces numerical data—births, deaths, inheritance lines—that feed government databases and corporate profit models, while also enforcing cultural norms around monogamy, gender roles, and economic security.

The implications are profound:

This study expands surveillance scholarship by foregrounding marriage as a key site of mutual, affective surveillance, bridging gaps between public surveillance and private life.

It raises urgent ethical questions about data privacy, platform governance, and the normalization of digital tracking in intimate contexts.

It encourages couples and communities to reflect critically on how digital tools shape expectations of love, loyalty, and safety.

In sum, marriage has become a data-producing, socially regulated, and ideologically structured institution in the digital era. As digital technologies mediate relationships, they also expand and normalize surveillance. This process reinforces social hierarchies and limits personal autonomy. This study underscores the need for continued research, public dialogue, and ethical reflection to challenge the normalization of these practices and advocate for a more equitable balance between love, autonomy, and surveillance.

The findings also hold implications for educators, policymakers, and platform designers. Education initiatives could foster digital literacy around surveillance in intimate contexts.

Policymakers should consider regulating location-sharing technologies. Designers might explore ways to embed ethical boundaries into app architecture to protect user autonomy.

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