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THE DIGITAL PANOPTICON: AI SURVEILLANCE IN EGGER'S THE CIRCLE

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ABSTRACT
This research explores the rise of AI surveillance in today's dystopia, where the reimagined digital panopticon breaks human identities down, leading to self-destruction as captured in Eggers' novel, The Circle. Artificial Intelligence (Imitation of human intelligence by machines, particularly in decision making) shapes the patterns in behaviour and surveillance through technology. The Circle is a representation of this in Mae's work. Holland, whose addition to the tech firm values transparency over privacy, was the first of two people to be fired. The first of two people fired was from Holland, who joined the tech firm with a stated emphasis on transparency, not privacy, which leads to the destruction of a true self. Using the qualitative method, the study displays the phenomenon of a digital panopticon, exploring how AI surveillance impacts the lives of individuals. The author uses the metaphor of a digital panopticon to discuss the effects of AI surveillance on people's lives as it influences the protagonist. The results indicate that Mae gives way to self-regulation, which results in fragmentation of identities and, therefore, psychological and social implications. The effects of AI surveillance and its impact on individuality. It recommends the ethical advancements in technology, along with checks and balances of tech companies, and the priority of real human connections for individuality and privacy.

KEYWORDS
Digital Panopticon, The Circle, AI Surveillance, Dystopian Fiction, Display.

Introduction
The title of the book is Digital Panopticon, and it's about the theme of the bizarre surveillance society. The Circle, by author Dave Eggers, is contemporary 21st-century fiction that exposes the widespread adoption of artificial intelligence surveillance in people's routine activities. As pointed out by Zeb et al (2023), dystopian fiction is a cultural product that serves to mirror and reflect… and a prism – "reflecting society's deepest fears and needs" (p. 78). The dystopian literary genre that has captivated readers has changed greatly as it has evolved. From political chaos to quick changes in the world, the twenty-first century presents a range of challenges that are difficult to cope with without technological advancement (Mahnaz & Akram, 2026; Abdelrady et al., 2025, 2026), and ecological crises are more interlinked than ever. Kumar (2023) says, "Eggers stipulates a dystopian future etched by widespread surveillance, in a place where "everyone is pursued, and there is no escape" (p. 37). Eggers's The Circle follows a young lady, Mae Holland, who is hired as a customer experience representative at an influential tech company that speaks for transparency and connectivity. The Circle shows intelligence in identifying and monitoring illegal activities, which develops innovative technology solutions like surveillance systems powered by Artificial Intelligence to detect and track illegal activity. Intelligence to monitor individuals across the globe. As Mae progresses in the company, as she gets more and more involved, she must give up her privacy and peculiarity. It is fair to give credit to the people who are transparent," as Ekler (2023) states, "You can't deny it. He only mentions the artistic aspect of the novel when it comes to the dystopia of the eponymous company and its intentions" (p. 69).

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The plot is about the consequences of a hyperconnected world: where boundaries are constantly monitored and eroded by technology, and identity is split and broken sense of self. The protagonist is transformed from an optimistic into a pessimistic character. The employee who stands out from the crowd is an activist in Circle's repressive activities. Power dictatorship serves as a warning to the dangers of uncontrolled technological power. As Paul and Criado (2020) say, "Authors with dystopian themes to their plots have made this a recurring phrase for me." Their fictional narratives have been shaped by their visions as "the concern" of today's environmental dilemma, economic injustice, and the moral consequences of the technological progress of this period. The research states that The Circle by Dave Eggers is an example of a dystopia in which the following is shown: the term 'digital panopticon', coined by Foucault's successor 'panopticon', which relies on AI systems, is an extension of the concept of surveillance that takes away individuality and human identity, leading to the broken self and identity fragmentation. The research major focus is on the transformation of the protagonist Mae Holland from a lady who is idealistic, without any ambition, and proud, to one who is agreeable. Circle's ideology of full transparency involves the participant. It offers a visualisation of the workings of AI-enabled Self-regulation is enforced by monitoring systems which result in fragmentation of identity. Circle's dogma of utmost openness and connectivity in the guise of progression forms an embedded oppressive system that shapes actions and diminishes identity. It examines how Mae changes the social systems in the fictional context. The paper discusses the psychological and social impacts of living in a state of war and constant surveillance.

Literature Review

One of the most discussed themes in contemporary literature and theory is the intermingling of identity, technology, and surveillance (Ramzan & Khan, 2019, 2024). The idea of the 'body' is a concept developed by Michel Foucault. The concept of 'panopticon' is a basic theory to understand contemporary surveillance. According to Foucault (1977), a panopticon is a system of power that regulates itself. Through ubiquitous visibility, people make themselves the object of the observer's gaze. Through the idea of panopticon, Foucault investigated the structural relationship between the power and institution, Foucault investigated the panopticon concept. The power-knowledge concept and social control, people in a disciplinary situation. Once knowledge has been applied to control others, as Foucault (1977) states, it becomes an object of inquiry, as once knowledge is applied to control the conduct of others. It implies "restriction, rule and control of practice" (p. 27). Foucault believed that individuals are not oppressed in a random manner by society, but rather by how the societal system develops and constructs their identities, as power slowly impacts and shapes their behavior. David Lyon (2006) continues this discussion. The panopticon in the digital age argues that recent surveillance technologies make for the 'digital panopticon', which intrudes upon daily life. Lyon (2006) offers an extensive research work on the dynamics driving current trends, as well as the processes and results involved in the collection, organization, and treatment of personal information, and manipulation and commercialization (p. 47).

The digital world presents surveillance that is ongoing, automatic, and omnipresent (Ramzan et al., 2023, 2025). There are a number of scholars who have engaged with dystopian fiction as a medium for challenging society and technologies (Akram & Abdelrady, 2023, 2025). Works of literature like George Orwell's 1984 and Brave New World, by Aldous Huxley, have examined the dangers of totalitarian control and the annihilation of identity. Both works of literature, as pointed out by Fatubun (2023), "vigorously condemn totalitarianism that restricts people in society through strict monitoring" (p. 147). The Circle follows in this tradition by depicting a dystopian future in which the concept of openness and surveillance threatens to eliminate individuality and autonomy. Students can learn from Bueno (2018), who

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is a scholar who studies The Circle with a concentration on the intersection of trans-humanism, human advancements in technologies, and their application to human beings' societal ramifications. Eggers' The Circle explores the existing and future possibilities, providing a relatively realistic glimpse of the impact of technological advances on our society in the near future (Bueno, 2018, p. 169). Surveillance & social media platforms have been heavily criticised in terms of their dehumanising effect, as mentioned by Keen (2012) says that "social media has been blamed for the deterioration of human relations and other negative implications" (p. 66-7). In this way, Bueno (2018) asserts that Eggers is against the dehumanizing elements of human enhancement technologies, in particular social media, monitoring gadgets, and tools (p. 185). Eggers' fictional story emphasizes the importance of embracing the reality of physical humanity. Disconnect is the new norm in a world increasingly dominated by the fantasies of disintegration and digital existence.

Research objectives

- To discuss how AI-driven surveillance is depicted as a type of "digital panopticon" in The Circle by Dave Eggers
- To examine how the individual identity of the characters is constructed and broken apart through the perspective of AI surveillance in the novel
- To examine the critique that The Circle provides of the loss of privacy and personal autonomy in the era of Artificial Intelligence
- To examine the connection between power, selfhood, and digital surveillance of The Circle

Research Questions

1- What does Dave Eggers say about surveillance being a modern form of panopticon in The Circle?

2- How does AI surveillance help to dehumanize the characters' individual identities and selfhoods in the novel?

3- How are the implications of the continuous monitoring of digital data for privacy, autonomy, and personal freedom shown in the case of The Circle?

4- How does the novel critique the power structures that can be generated by AI surveillance and the effects of these on human behavior and identity?

Material and Methods

The research uses a qualitative research method in which the texts used are a mixed method. The novel critique on the analysis using theoretical and critical frameworks about the technological supremacy and its impact on individuality. The study is qualitative in nature and of a literary type. The Circle by Dave Eggers as a main text in an analysis of his portrayal of AI surveillance, the digital panopticon, and fragmentation as a result of identity. The study is descriptive and interpretive in nature, aiming to reveal the psychological and social implications of technological advances shown in the novel. Secondary sources also have been employed, including scholarly articles, books, electronic sources, and critical and theoretical views to aid in the analysis of texts. While this research on The Circle receives much attention, it is an extremely limited analysis of the text. The outcome of the experiments is unique to Eggers' novel and might not be found in other dystopian books in literature. As a literary analysis, this study does not include any human beings or sensitive data. All sources are cited to avoid plagiarism and adhere to academic honesty and integrity. The study is conducted and written in compliance with the ethical guidelines of research and writing.

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Textual Analysis and Findings

Panopticon architecture is omnipresent and insidious in contemporary society, as it is no longer just within the prison walls, but has become part and parcel of society. Panopticism in the current digital world is different - people are forced to adhere to the social norms and perform competently all the time, without being aware of its effects. Lyon (2006) Today's surveillance is not simply at the Panopticon; it is a digital surveillance. A system of constant monitoring "infrastructure". The watchtower is gone, and omnipresence has taken its place and is developing a culture of surveillance and self-regulation. Eggers (2013) depicts this digital panopticon by means of cameras called "See Change" (p. 41) that allow for the monitoring of people in real-time in different geographical areas around the world. The Circle's ideology and its motto, "ALL THAT HAPPENS MUST BE KNOWN" (p. 40), represent it. The company's wish and commitment to complete transparency are illustrated with the presentation under the guise of cultivating a safer and more democratic society. The Circle executives Eamon Openess leads to less corruption, accountability, and more competition, write Bailey and Tom Stenton, and builds rapport between people and institutions. Who would…?" is a rhetorical question, says Bailey. Can tyrants no… know a crime committed, and they may be observed anytime, anywhere? They are no longer hidden" (p. 40). While risks need to be identified and avoided as Bostrom has pointed out, (2005): "human enhancement technologies have enormous potential for meaningful and the best use for these is to "improve human lives in a meaningful way" (p. 56). However, The Circle's principle and spirit of ultimate transparency are potentially open to the mis-use of power. By means of digital control. "All seeing, all knowing, all doing" is a quote from Bailey's. all-knowing" (p. 42) illustrates the knowledge-power dynamics of The Circle as Foucault In (1977) it is argued that the process of observation makes power more efficient and knowledge comes after. One of the Circle's founders, Kalden exclaims, "Once it is required to be registered and all government services going through it. You will have "helped create the world's first tyrannical monopoly" that is The Circle which have potential risks of information monopoly by companies and how through that monopoly, information is used. "Global technological tyranny" is one of the possible dangers of which digital panopticon can be a cause,

Digital panopticon, along with power dynamics, actively transforms individuals' behavior, resulting in a shattered self and fragmentation of identity, which is evident in the novel's character change of Mae Holland. Her metamorphosis is an illustration of how Imagine a space like through which, AI surveillance can change personal identity, as her original idealism, "Mae thought. Who else could replace "utopia" (Eggers, 2013, p. 21) with? 'SECRETS ARE LIES / SHARING IS' is the company's motto, and they are truly committed to it. "CARING / PRIVACY IS THEFT" (p. 168). At the beginning of the novel, Mae is portrayed as a highly motivated and committed staff member who seeks to be involved in the Circle. This is her vision of the pinnacle of innovation and advancements. Her initial admiration of the technology is clearly seen in her mind: "The best people had made the best systems," and in the best systems had gained funds that made this possible, unlimited funds, a place to work" (p. 21). Eggers portrays the utopian perception of individuals about Technological development, Mae's inner thoughts as she believes in the Utopian vision of connectivity, openness. The word Utopia and dystopia are two sides of the same coin, as Bueno (2018) notes: "Critics and reviewers have classified Eggers's The Circle as what he calls dystopian and satirical utopia for our time (p. 174) is even more striking. She is encouraged by her enthusiasm... prime the pump for new investments in analytics and data, are empowered by the company's promises of inclusivity, efficiency, and data democratization, which are consistent with her aspiration to be a part of something transformative. But as Mae becomes more and more involved in the scenario of the company, her identity slips into a state of self-disruption

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as she is constantly supervised and forced to keep up appearances. Takes a step towards self-disintegration as she's constantly watched and expected to keep it together. The presence of a person on social media sites that use The Circle technology. The social media presence of a person using social media that is Circle-powered.

There are implications for the consequences of the digital panopticon, as Lyon (2018) argues, “go beyond surveillance as it transforms our sense of self and identity”. Gina sets up a “Zing Account” (Eggers, 2013, p. 56), which Mae considers ‘extracurricular’. Mae is immediately corrected: “I don't have to tell you that this- the social media you think of as ' extra-curricular '- is the reason the company exists (p. 55). She is encouraged and compelled to better herself; she never leaves the Zing without engaging in constant efforts. This means a lot of changes in her day-to-day life. The man's disciplinary manipulation of the Circle. Mae's confession of kayaking – methods, as seen, are examples of psychological control. The digital panopticon's intrinsic. When Denise and Josiah aren't pleased with her “No, I am not looking for you, Mae. I am looking at your profile. I am finding nothing about you and kayaking. No Smiles, No Ratings, No Posts, Nothing” (p. 105). Mae finds out that even solitary leisure cannot be private if it is to be publicly recognized and valued as a social and consumer service. In Zahara (2020), she claims that the Circle uses play-based disciplinary strategies and that they maintain relationships with children force's goal is to turn individual human beings into "docile bodies" (p. 4). Mae’s self-examination – “What kind of person was she?… Be a person of some value to the world” (p. 107) illustrates her gradual shattering of self as she absorbs the belief that, without posting, sharing, and verification online, experiences are worth nothing. Mae's identity is completely changed by the constant gaze of the digital, with the theft of her kayak, the panopticon made the transition from outside the watch to inside it. Seeking to internalize self-regulation and to lose one's self.

Lyon (2018) maintains that participatory, pervasive, automated surveillance is introduced by the digital realm. Mae's last time in the digital panopticon comes when she herself is captured on SeeChange. Cameras that are unlicensed kayakers. Her first instinct is self-hatred and confusion: “Who she was hated, her head was echoing with self-denunciations” (Eggers, 2013, p. 154). It's not only the act that she's guilty of, but it's also being exposed. Bailey’s interrogation exemplifies the company's disciplinary practices, which are manipulative; she always had to be honest. Her imposed transparency, which began when the locket camera hung over her heart, starts the whole falling apart of her private personality. The camera is an all-seeing eye with a camera that is able to capture and broadcast at all moments of her life.

The shift from ad hoc monitoring to full visibility reflects the digital panoptic mechanism, by which people are never aware that they are being observed, but they assume perpetual monitoring, as Foucault (1977) states that living in a society of constant surveillance makes people feel they must keep an eye on and manage themselves and their behavior (p. 201). This is a situation that makes Mae adjust to an idealized, performance—like existence. “She was allowed to turn” is a work that is part of the character series. She had to use off the SeeChange cameras in the room, but she did not do so often” (p. 183). Zuboff (2019) maintains that “individuals in surveillance capitalism are reduced to the data as she becomes 'commodified' as a behavior harvester and monetizer of points” (p. 8). The number of 'smiles' and 'frowns' determines her actions and is her judgement as online presence is demanded, appreciated and dictated by the Circle’s consumers.

Mae's altered behavior and suppressed emotions start to reveal her psyche. Increases in omnipresent surveillance are a cause for concern. Her friendship with Kalden, under normal circumstances, would involve spontaneous and intimate encounters that are not possible when… the monitoring eye of the SeeChange audience, as Lyon (2018) says, “the fear of being

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watched leads to the loss of freedom and creativity". Mae recognizes this loss, "a day she'd done without things she didn't want to" (Eggers, 2013, p. 181). Her inability to engage in unsanctioned activities indicates the effectiveness of the digital panopticon in reconstructing her identity through public self-assertion and conformity. The spontaneous, other days it's authentic Mae, a time-honored sailor with a passion for solitude in kayaking, and intimacy in private spaces. It has been superseded by a fractured persona that's marked by the number of views, zings, and ratings it gets. This division also affects the protagonist's family ties to the very degree that they are so broken. Interruption of her parents' private life. Mae is caught on camera as she parents, her father sitting on the bed, and her mother kneeling on the floor, penis in her hand. It was a split second; in a way, they all knew the consequences" (p. 202) when they compromised her personal position, and familial boundaries were obliterated. This is an event that marks the Ultimate violation of privacy, sacrifice of purity, and integrity of the family group for the benefit of transparency. But Mae's answer is significant: when asked about the system that she is opposing, Mae says instead that she feels her privacy was invaded, and she gets the idea that privacy is the enemy.

Individuals are reduced, as noted by Ransom (1997), "to a political force" and are meant to be put to use. They should be used in the best way within their skill level (p. 46). The normalization process is utilized as one of the following: a tool, as Foucault (1977) believes that the main goal of disciplinary power is to compel others to adhere to the discipline's norm, manifesting in Circle's handling of the situation to make Mae forget about the incident. The Circle's digital panopticon controls Mae's outward actions, but also her inner thoughts and emotions, which remix her own sense of self. She is always torn between what is right and what is wrong. Her desires and the needs of her overseen life. She is continually torn between sincere wishes and the expectations of her "surveiled life. The discourse of The Circle continues to create this cognitive dissonance with slogans such as "SECRET ARE LIES / SHARING IS CARING / PRIVACY IS THEFT" (Eggers, 2018, p. 168). Mae internalizes this as the ideology, which breaks her individuality down until she willingly joins in her subjugation. This is one of the symptoms of fragmentation of identity is her complete disassociation from her past. She loved the feel of kayaking in places, as outlined above, the freedom, and self-reflection. However, as she gets more immersed in the Circle's ideology, she is no longer alone, but her moments of solitude are filled with a need for public acceptance. Her internal temporary pause in the action to consider the company's ideology is: "The amount of information, amount of data, amount of judgments, and amount of measurements… too much was too much and too many people were too many, too many desires of too many people, and too many opinions of too many people" (p. 224).

During this moment of clarity, this reveals the psychological impact of being in a digital panopticon with an ever-present flow of information. Mae's sense of self is drowned out by information and the pressure to fit in with society's expectations of self. But after this glimmering, Mae ends up doing what the Circle tells her to do, showing how technology has dehumanised us. Mae can't help but be attracted to the company, which shows an inability to give away the benefits she is getting from the Circle. It points out the current social phenomenon whereby people donate their independence to get the materialistic benefits of openness and internet connectivity. The alteration of identity and self of the protagonist Mae highlights the way through which an ever-watching eye of the digital panopticon is backed up by artificial intelligence. As the character of Mae, Eggers' audience is cautioned about the personal in a warning message. With the loss of identity and self due to the contemporary emergence of social media, the world has drastically transformed. The fact that it is relevant to the fiction is presented in the paper, with applicability to the ongoing debates about privacy and independence of people in today's digital age.

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Conclusion

In conclusion, The Circle by Dave Eggers is a strong condemnation of the social as it is… as psychological effects of surveillance enabled by AI and its excess in this modern day and age, technology is a factor that is very much present. It highlights the ways through which the digital and technologically advanced age, the panopticon, leads to loss of identity, human relationships, and individuality. Dropping the protagonist from a future-oriented to a present-oriented perspective. When you have an employee who is rude and expectant, but another employee is rude and negative, it can have dehumanizing effects in a hyperconnected scenario. The novel tells about the current problems of how Modern technology has an impact on human personal relations and freedom. The research mirrors the present scenarios in the sense that social media is transforming society into a reason for dystopia due to the surveillance practice using AI. The commercialization of personal individuality, acceptance of surveillance by tech companies, and the end of privacy are no longer theoretical but real aspects of the present era. Eggers provides the audience with a feeling of warning that individuality is being taken away and the possibility of individuality being lost. An era that is moving towards technological dominance, which is unchecked in society.

Recommendations

The research calls for critical engagement of people and society with surveillance, questioning moral implications, and opposing technologies that continuously monitor their freedom and privacy. To establish harmony between technology and humans, both online and offline, digital literacy is a key topic to support people in navigating the dangers of hyperconnectivity. Governments need to hold tech companies accountable and ensure transparency and tougher rules to tackle surveillance capitalism. People should foster true human relationships and connections in a digital world that is growing.

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