DIGITAL GAZE AND CYBERFEMINIST RESISTANCE: FROM SURVEILLANCE TO SOLIDARITY

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Abstract

In the digital era, visibility has become both a source of power and a site of vulnerability. Digital spaces shape, how identities are constructed, surveilled, and consumed, often reproducing societal hierarchies and gendered norms. This paper looks at the notion of a digital gaze, from Laura Mulvey's (1975) theory of the male gaze and its elucidation of how women are objectified in films through to our current digital spaces where algorithms, social media and surveillance practices work to control bodies and their behaviour. The research examines the way in which cyberfeminism, as conceived by theorists such as Sadie Plant and collectives like VNS Matrix turns technology into a site of resistance, empowerment and creative self-determination. It also discourses to current issues like online harassment and digital harm, and highlights means of resilience used by women and other oppressed identities. By examining these dynamics, the paper considers how digital spaces could be refigured not simply as sites of exposure but also empowerment, collective solidarity and feminist activism that provide alternative modes for negotiating visibility and vulnerability in networked cultures.

Keywords: Cyberfeminism, digital gaze, digital harms, male gaze, resilience.

The digital age has turned visibility into both empowerment and exposure. Online spaces shape how identities are constructed, surveilled, and consumed, often reinforcing hierarchies that have long governed gendered representation. A central question emerges: when individuals step into the digital world, are they truly usersor are they being used? Although this concern appears rooted in contemporary technology, it reflects much older structures of observation and power. Throughout history, women have been scrutinised in ways that shaped their public image, social mobility, and agency. With the rise of digital technologies, this scrutiny has intensified and become algorithmic, constant, and global.

Indian history provides vivid examples of how women navigated the gaze long before the emergence of the internet. Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi, during the 1857 Rebellion, lived under intense scrutiny not through cameras or algorithms, but through colonial propaganda circulated via letters, military reports, and English-language newspapers. British accounts frequently cast her in contradictory roles: either as a dangerously rebellious figure or as an unfeminine leader whose bravery required diminishment. Such narratives reveal how the colonial gaze was deeply invested in controlling female visibility, shaping how power and gender intersected in public imagination.

Velu Nachiyar of Tamil Nadu experienced a similar intensity of observation following the death of her husband. Her strategic acumen, demonstrated in her training of the Udaiyaal women's battalion and her eventual reclamation of her kingdom, reveals how political surveillance was intertwined with gendered expectations. Figures like Ahilyabai Holkar, Rani Durgavati, and Rudramadevi likewise navigated constant observation from imperial authorities, local rivals, and patriarchal societies. Their successes, grounded in resilience and strategic self-fashioning, demonstrate that surveillance has historically been transformed into a site of empowerment. These figures did not merely endure the gazethey reshaped it.

In digital environments, this scrutiny takes a new form, the digital gaze. It is shaped not only by human viewers but also by platforms, algorithms, and data systems. Harnaam Kaur, a British woman of Indian origin with polycystic ovary syndrome, experienced severe trolling when her images circulated online. Her decision to embrace her beard and become a global activist demonstrates how digital visibility, though often hostile, can be reclaimed for empowerment. The digital gaze functions as an evolving mechanism that evaluates, interprets, and shapes identity within networked cultures.

The theoretical lineage of the digital gaze is rooted in Laura Mulvey's foundational essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." Mulvey argues that mainstream cinema positions women as objects to be viewed and consumed by a male spectator, with the camera and narrative techniques reinforcing patriarchal desire (11–12). In today's context, this objectification is amplified through constant digital visibilitythrough photographs, videos, livestreams, and curated social media performances. What Mulvey identifies in cinema persists in digital platforms, though now it is decentralised and omnipresent. Sadie Plant's *Zeros + Ones* celebrates the idea that women and machines share disruptive, non-linear modes of being that resist patriarchal structures (31). For Plant, technology destabilises binary thinking, opening space for feminist creativity.

The VNS Matrix collective articulated cyberfeminism through their iconic 1991 *Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21st Century*, declaring themselves "the virus

of the new world disorder." Their work uses irreverence, irony, and digital art to challenge heteropatriarchal control. As Tofts argues, VNS Matrix "queer the interface," disrupting the assumption that technology belongs to men. (87)

Algorithms determine what is seen, who becomes visible, and how reach is distributed. Cheney-Lippold identifies this as "algorithmic identity," where users are categorised based on behavioural data rather than self-representation (165). For women, this often results in hyper visibility excessive scrutiny, sexualisation, or moral policingor invisibility, where their voices are suppressed by biased detection systems. Banet-Weiser notes that digital culture produces a "popular feminism" that often commodifies women's visibility rather than challenging structural inequality (9). Thus, the digital gaze is never neutral; it is ideological, commercial, and deeply gendered.

To understand digital surveillance further, Michel Foucault's interpretation of the panopticon becomes relevant. Jeremy Bentham's eighteenth-century design imagined a prison in which inmates internalised discipline because they could never know when they were being watched. Foucault uses this model to describe modern societies where surveillance becomes a tool for regulating behaviour (200). Digital environments replicate this structure: social media metrics influence behaviour, users curate images in anticipation of judgment, and data trails are continuously recorded and analysed. Surveillance today no longer appears as an authoritarian figure but as invisible algorithms that monitor and shape online actions. Metrics such as likes and views serve as tools of control, shaping emotions, self-esteem, and identity performance.

The idea that "Big Brother is watching you," as articulated by George Orwell, now manifests not through a dictator but through algorithmic architectures that record, analyse, and interpret digital actions. Surveillance capitalism transforms personal data into a commodity, monetising users' behaviours and preferences in ways that shape what they see, consume, and believe. The digital panopticon ensures that visibility is intertwined with control, making the gaze both pervasive and profitable.

Digital harms, though disproportionately affecting women and gender minorities, also impact men who face sextortion scams, phishing attacks, and pressure to conform to online performances of masculinity. These experiences point to the need for a broader vocabulary surrounding digital victimisation, one that includes diverse forms of exploitation and harm across genders. Citron explains how cyber harassment functions as a civil rights violation that suppresses women's participation in public life (89). Digital harm also extends to young users who experience bullying, shaming, or pressure to conform to harmful beauty standards.

Algorithmic systems reinforce inequality. Buolamwini and Gebru's groundbreaking research shows that facial-recognition technologies exhibit racial and gender biases, misclassifying darker-skinned women at disproportionately higher rates (7). Such technologies replicate structural marginalisation.

Psychologically, digital harm manifests as trauma, self-doubt, and emotional fatigue. As Sharma states, online violence is not virtual but "bleeds into real lives, affecting safety, dignity, and mental well-being" (102).

The concept of the digital gaze must be expanded to include broader forms of digital exploitation. Women disproportionately experience online harassment, body shaming, non-consensual image circulation, and cyberstalking. However, digital victimisation extends beyond gender binaries. Men are frequently targeted by sextortion scams, phishing attacks, and coercive financial schemes, often exploiting fear and shame.

A recent case involving a retired banker in Delhi, who lost over ₹23 crores to a so-called "digital arrest" scam, illustrates how surveillance tactics and impersonation are used to control victims through fear and isolation. Such incidents reveal that digital harm is not abstract but deeply material, affecting mental health, financial stability, and social trust.

Digital culture thrives on trends—visual filters, artificial intelligence–generated images, and aesthetic movements such as the Ghibli and Gemini effects. Participation in these trends is a form of creative self-expression and social belonging. However, once images are uploaded, control over them is lost. Images can be misused, manipulated, or circulated without consent.

This raises a critical feminist question: should women restrict their participation in digital life to avoid harm? Cyberfeminist thought resists this logic. The problem lies not in women's visibility but in structures that punish it. Awareness, digital literacy, and collective response become essential tools for navigating risk without retreating into silence.

Cyberfeminism offers a counter-narrative to digital oppression. Emerging in the 1990s, it was articulated by thinkers such as Sadie Plant and the Australian collective VNS Matrix, who envisioned the digital world as fertile ground for feminist disruption. The "Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21st Century" famously refers to women as "the virus in the machine," signalling a refusal to conform to patriarchal digital architectures (VNS Matrix). Cyberfeminism imagines technology not only as a tool of control but also as a platform for creative rebellion, storytelling, and solidarity.

Cyberfeminism extends beyond manifesto writing into concrete practices of activism, creativity, and community building. Global movements like #MeToo demonstrate how digital platforms can be mobilised to challenge institutional

silence and bring collective visibility to survivors of sexual harassment and assault. The power of such movements lies in their ability to transform individual trauma into shared resistance, creating networks of support that disrupt patriarchal norms. Digital art collectives produce works that reclaim women's bodies from objectification, challenging viewers to reconsider assumptions embedded in visual culture. Blogs, podcasts, and social media communities amplify feminist discourse, enabling individuals to tell their stories, challenge stereotypes, and support one another across geographical boundaries.

Intersectionality remains central to cyberfeminist practice, acknowledging that digital experiences differ across caste, class, race, sexuality, and disability. The digital gaze does not treat all bodies equally; algorithmic bias privileges certain forms of beauty, behaviour, and identity while marginalising others. Cyberfeminism, therefore, insists on inclusive digital futures that dismantle these hierarchies rather than reproduce them.

Despite cyberfeminism's transformative possibilities, digital spaces remain fraught with challenges. Online harassment, trolling, misinformation, and invasive surveillance create hostile environments that demand emotional labour from marginalised users. Yet within these constraints, women demonstrate remarkable resilience by creating alternative networks, using anonymity strategically, adopting counter-surveillance practices, and forming communities that prioritise care, solidarity, and empowerment. This shift from surveillance to solidarity represents one of the most compelling possibilities of the digital age. Online feminist communities offer emotional support, digital self-defence training, bystander intervention, and collective reporting of abusive accounts. Hashtag movements further amplify marginalised voices, forming what Castells calls "networked counter-publics" that challenge dominant power structures (78).

Queer and Dalit feminist digital spaces in India further redefine visibility by creating safe environments for storytelling, art, and political dialogue. These spaces destabilise the digital gaze by shifting the terms of representation.

Cyberfeminist resistance also includes: reclaiming narrative authority, disrupting sexist algorithmic patterns, producing alternative aesthetics, and fostering community healing spaces. Thus, solidarity becomes an essential feminist practice. Visibility transforms from exposure to empowerment.

In response to the intensification of digital surveillance, harassment, and exploitation, it becomes necessary to introduce the concept of cyber confidence. Cyber confidence may be defined as the capacity of individuals particularly women and gender minorities to inhabit digital spaces with awareness, agency, and psychological resilience, without internalising online abuse or withdrawing from visibility. Unlike digital literacy, which focuses on technical competence, cyber

confidence foregrounds emotional strength, ethical self-positioning, and informed decision-making within hostile or scrutinising online environments.

Cyber confidence does not advocate self-censorship or retreat from digital platforms. Nor does it shift responsibility for safety entirely onto users. Rather, it asserts the right to digital presence, self-expression, and pleasure, even while recognising the structural realities of trolling, body shaming, moral policing, and algorithmic surveillance. For women, this confidence is deeply political, as digital spaces often reproduce historical patterns of patriarchal scrutiny similar to those theorised through the male gaze.

Cyber confidence thus represents a refusal to disappear. It marks the transition from victimhood to agency, enabling individuals to remain visible, vocal, and self-defined despite the pressures of the digital gaze. While cyber confidence articulates an individual's capacity to remain present and self-defined within digital spaces, its significance becomes clearer when examined through lived experiences. The following case studies like the Pollachi sexual assault case and the online harassment faced by the content creator Keerthi History, illustrate how digital visibility can become a site of extreme harm, as well as a space for resilience and empowerment.

The Pollachi sexual assault case in Tamil Nadu demonstrates how digital technologies can be weaponised for blackmail and control. Yet the case also reveals collective resilience: survivors pursued justice, witnesses stood firm, and the legal system responded with life sentences for the perpetrators. This outcome highlights how resistance can operate beyond individual endurance, becoming institutional and communal.

Another significant contemporary example is Keerthika Govindhasamy, popularly known as *Keerthi History*. Awarded the Best Storyteller Award by the Prime Minister of India in 2024, she has used digital platforms to bring lesser-known histories to young audiences. Despite her recognition, she has been subjected to intense digital harassment for challenging dominant narratives. Following her discussion of Gandhi's celibacy experiment, she received vulgar, violent abuse targeting her body, skin colour, and family.

Rather than retreating, Keerthika exposed these messages publicly, transforming harassment into evidence of systemic misogyny. Her response exemplifies cyberfeminist resilience: continuing to speak, refusing erasure, and using visibility strategically to challenge silence.

The digital gaze, as this paper has argued, is not merely a technological phenomenon but a continuation of older structures of power that have long regulated bodies, voices, and identities. From the colonial surveillance of women leaders like Rani Lakshmibai and Velu Nachiyar to the algorithmic monitoring of

contemporary digital subjects, the act of watching has always been deeply political. What has changed is not the presence of scrutiny, but its scale, speed, and intimacy. Digital platforms collapse public and private spaces, turning everyday acts of self-expression into data, spectacle, and potential sites of control. Within such environments, visibility becomes paradoxical simultaneously enabling recognition and inviting vulnerability.

Yet, this paper insists that the digital gaze does not operate as an all-powerful force. Drawing from Laura Mulvey's articulation of the male gaze and extending it through Foucauldian notions of surveillance, it becomes evident that power is never entirely unilateral. The digital Panopticon may encourage self-regulation, fear, and conformity, but it also produces cracks through which resistance can emerge. Women and marginalised identities are not passive recipients of digital violence; they actively negotiate, reinterpret, and challenge the conditions under which they are seen. The experiences of figures such as Harnaam Kaur and Keerthika Govindhasamy demonstrate how digital visibility, though fraught with risk, can be transformed into a platform for self-definition, truth-telling, and collective mobilisation.

Cyberfeminism offers a critical framework to understand this transformation. By reimagining technology not as a neutral tool but as a contested space, cyberfeminist thought foregrounds agency, creativity, and solidarity. The interventions of theorists like Sadie Plant and collectives such as VNS Matrix remind us that digital systems are not fixed; they are coded, maintained, and therefore open to disruption. Movements such as #MeToo, feminist digital storytelling, and online support networks exemplify how women have used the very infrastructures designed for surveillance and profit to build communities of care, resistance, and political action. These practices challenge the logic of isolation that surveillance thrives on, replacing it with shared narratives and mutual support.

Resilience in the digital age should not be misunderstood as individual endurance alone. While personal strength and courage are vital, resilience must also be structural and collective. The persistence of online harassment, doxxing, algorithmic bias, and digital exploitation reveals the urgent need for ethical platform governance, legal accountability, and digital literacy. Cases such as the Pollachi sexual assault scandal illustrate how technology can be weaponised, but they also reveal the power of collective resistance where survivors, activists, and institutions come together to demand justice. Resilience, in this sense, is not about adapting to harm but about transforming the conditions that allow harm to persist.

In refiguring digital spaces from sites of exposure to arenas of empowerment, this paper ultimately argues for a shift in how visibility is understood. To be seen online need not mean being consumed or controlled; it can

also mean being heard, validated, and connected. The choice between being confined by the gaze or fuelled by it is not always easy, nor is it equally available to all. However, through cyberfeminist resistance, ethical awareness, and collective solidarity, digital subjects can reclaim authorship over their narratives. The digital gaze may remain ever-present, but it does not have to be final. When challenged, reworked, and resisted, it becomes not a tool of domination, but a catalyst for dialogue, justice, and feminist futures.

By reframing surveillance as a condition that can generate solidarity, this paper contributes a distinctly intersectional cyberfeminist perspective to debates on gender and digital visibility.

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