



Research Paper

THE RISE OF COLLECTIVE DIGITAL SURVEILLANCE: MORAL POLICING, PARASOCIAL ENTITLEMENT, AND PUBLIC FIGURE MENTAL HEALTH

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ABSTRACT

The expansion of social media has transformed audiences from passive observers into active digital crowds that monitor, judge, and regulate the lives of public figures. While traditional media portrayed celebrities and influencers as distant personalities, contemporary digital platforms have created a culture of perceived intimacy, accessibility, and continuous public surveillance. This conceptual paper examines collective digital surveillance as a social phenomenon shaped by moral policing and parasocial entitlement. Moral policing occurs when online communities position themselves as arbiters of acceptable behaviour, while parasocial entitlement reflects the belief that public figures owe audiences access, transparency, and emotional reciprocity. Together, these forces create a high-pressure environment in which celebrities, influencers, and other public personalities are continuously scrutinized. Drawing from parasocial interaction theory, Foucault's panopticism, Goffman's dramaturgical perspective, the online disinhibition effect, and moral panic theory, the paper explains how digitally networked audiences construct moral boundaries and impose them on public figures through comments and collective scrutiny. The analysis argues that this environment normalizes intrusion while increasing psychological pressure on those in public view. Public figures are pushed into continuous self-monitoring, emotional labour, and self-censorship, which can undermine well-being and mental health. The paper concludes by emphasizing the need for healthier digital norms, more responsible audience behaviour, and stronger ethical awareness around visibility, privacy, and accountability in online life.

Keywords: collective digital surveillance, moral policing, parasocial entitlement, public figure mental health, social media.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of social media has transformed not only communication patterns but also the psychological relationship between audiences and public figures. Platforms such as Instagram, X, YouTube, and Facebook have blurred the boundaries between public and private life, creating environments where audiences gain continuous access to celebrities, influencers, creators, activists, politicians, and other socially visible individuals. Social media has transformed visibility into a permanent condition rather than an occasional event. Public figures are now watched not only by fans and critics but also by vast online communities that interpret, evaluate, and circulate their every move. In this environment, audiences often take on a supervisory role, treating public life as something that must remain morally legible at all times. Such involvement often extends beyond admiration or fandom and manifests as moral policing, intrusive surveillance, relationship regulation, body commentary, identity criticism, public shaming, and coordinated digital aggression (Rojek, 2015). Public figures are frequently subjected to intense online scrutiny regarding their romantic relationships, appearance, political opinions, parenting styles, emotional reactions, social associations, and lifestyle choices.

Digital audiences increasingly engage in collective commentary and behavioural regulation under the justification of accountability, morality, social values, or fandom loyalty. While criticism and accountability are essential within democratic digital spaces, the growing normalization of invasive audience entitlement has raised serious concerns regarding cyberpsychology, digital ethics, and mental health. This phenomenon has become more visible in contemporary social media culture, where public figures are expected to satisfy audience expectations regarding morality, emotional expression, ideology, social behaviour, and personal identity. Audiences often perceive themselves as entitled to explanations, apologies, transparency, or behavioural conformity from public figures. Such expectations contrib-

ute to what may be conceptualized as parasocial entitlement, a psychologically driven perception of ownership and emotional authority over public figures arising from repeated mediated exposure and perceived intimacy.

Constant digital surveillance and online moral policing may contribute to emotional exhaustion, anxiety, depression, identity confusion, hypervigilance, burnout, and social withdrawal among public figures. The increasing prevalence of public emotional breakdowns, digital exits, social media detoxification, and discussions surrounding celebrity mental health highlights the seriousness of this issue (Aprill, 2024)

The present conceptual paper aims to examine the rise of collective digital surveillance and the psychological mechanisms underlying moral policing directed toward public figures. The paper seeks to develop a conceptual understanding of parasocial entitlement and its implications for mental health in contemporary digital culture.

LITERATURE REVIEW

(Aprill, 2024) examined how perceived moral violations committed by influencers affect parasocial relationships among followers. The study found that audiences often react emotionally when influencers behave in ways that contradict follower expectations or perceived values. Followers demonstrated disappointment, anger, withdrawal of support, and moral judgment when influencers violated social or ethical expectations. The research highlights how parasocial attachment may create a sense of emotional investment and entitlement, contributing to online moral policing and public scrutiny of influencers.

(Rojek, 2015) discussed how modern media culture creates “presumed intimacy” between audiences and celebrities. The book argues that contemporary media environments encourage audiences to feel emotionally connected and psychologically involved in the lives of public figures despite lacking real interpersonal relationships. Rojek explained that digital media intensifies

celebrity surveillance, audience entitlement, and emotional dependency. The work is significant in understanding how social media transforms fandom into participatory monitoring and behavioural regulation of public figures.

(Nikade, 2025) explored the psychological impact of online trolling and digital harassment on celebrities, particularly Nollywood actors and actresses. The study identified that repeated exposure to hate comments, trolling, public criticism, and cyber harassment negatively affects mental health by increasing stress, anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and psychological distress. The research emphasized that digital aggression and online moral policing contribute to emotional vulnerability among public figures and may affect self-esteem, social functioning, and emotional well-being.

(Mardon, 2023) examined how positive parasocial relationships with influencers can deteriorate into hostility and anti-fan behaviour. The study found that when followers perceive influencers as inauthentic, exploitative, or morally inconsistent, audiences engage in criticism, surveillance, and online backlash. The research highlighted that social media intensifies emotional attachment while also increasing audience entitlement and moral policing toward influencers.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This paper conceptualizes collective digital surveillance as the interaction of three social processes.

- First, Parasocial attachment creates emotional proximity, allowing audiences to feel entitled to personal knowledge and moral access.
- Second, Moral policing changes the concern into judgment, where followers act as disciplinarian of acceptable conduct and punish deviation through public criticism.
- Third, platform visibility amplifies these

processes by rewarding emotionally charged, conflict-oriented content, which increases the reach of surveillance-like behaviour.

Within this framework, public figures become both visible subjects and managed selves. They are watched through a broad logic, and exposed to disinhibited audience reactions that intensify the emotional cost of being online. Therefore, this conceptual model positions mental health not as an isolated outcome but as the result of sustained exposure to digitally distributed scrutiny.

THEORETICAL INTEGRATION

1. PARASOCIAL INTERACTION THEORY- (HORTON, 1956)

Parasocial interaction theory explains why audiences often interpret mediated contact as a relationship. Once a public figure becomes familiar through repeated exposure, the audience may develop a sense of intimacy, loyalty, or ownership that exceeds ordinary fandom. In social media settings, this can produce entitlement: the assumption that support justifies access, explanation, and emotional disclosure. (V, 2024). That entitlement becomes a foundation for invasive commentary when the public figure fails to meet audience expectations.

2.PANOPTICISM- (FOUCAULT, 1977)-(ORIGINAL WORK PUBLISHED 1975)

Foucault's panopticon is very relevant in this context because it captures the internalization of surveillance. When public figures know they may be watched, clipped, misquoted, or judged at any moment, they begin to self-regulate in advance. The effect is not only external pressure but also internal discipline. Over time, this produces caution, emotional exhaustion, and strategic authenticity, where even personal expression is shaped by the anticipated gaze of the crowd.

3. DRAMATURGICAL THEORY- (GOFFMAN, 2023)- ORIGINALLY ESTABLISHED IN 1959

This framework shows how identity is performed through front-stage behavior and managed impressions. Social media complicates this because front stage and back stage are less distinct, and online exhibitions persist beyond the moment of performance. For public figures, this means that a private mistake, casual remark, or emotional moment can be frozen, shared, and reinterpreted as evidence of character. The self becomes a public artifact rather than a protected person.

4. ONLINE DISINHIBITION- (SULER, 2004)

The online disinhibition effect explains why digital crowds often become harsher than offline audiences. Dissociative anonymity and minimized authority make users feel less accountable, while asynchronicity encourages reactive posting without reflection. This matters because collective surveillance is rarely carried out by a single critic; it is often produced through many small acts of disinhibited judgment that accumulate into a hostile public environment.

5. MORAL PANIC- (COHEN, 2011)- ORIGINALLY ESTABLISHED IN 1972

Moral panic theory helps explain the speed and scale of online outrage. Viral content can frame a public figure as a threat to social norms, allowing audiences to rally around corrective condemnation. The resulting discourse is often less about understanding and more about symbolic punishment. In this sense, moral policing becomes a performative form of virtue, where public criticism signals the critic's own alignment with community standards.

MENTAL HEALTH IMPLICATIONS

Collective digital surveillance can create a sustained psychological burden for public figures. Constant visibility may lead to anxiety, hypervigilance, self-censorship, and burnout, especially

when every statement is treated as morally significant. (Aprill, 2024). The pressure to remain coherent, likable, and emotionally accessible can make public identity feel brittle and exhausting.

The mental health impact is intensified when audiences demand transparency without offering empathy. Public figures may be expected to explain every absence, relationship, silence, or personal decision, even when those matters are private. Under these conditions, the digital self becomes a site of labour rather than expression. This can erode autonomy and make emotional recovery harder because the individual is never fully outside the audience's gaze.

A further concern is the normalization of harassment as accountability. When collective criticism becomes routine, public humiliation starts to feel socially acceptable. This creates a climate in which emotional distress is treated as the price of visibility rather than a genuine harm. The result is a culture that confuses concern with control and engagement with entitlement.

Ethical and Social Implications

This conceptual discussion suggests that public discourse needs clearer ethical boundaries. Not all critique is moral policing, and not all visibility implies consent to intimacy. Public figures do carry responsibility, but responsibility does not eliminate the right to privacy, dignity, or humane treatment. Digital audiences must therefore distinguish between legitimate criticism and invasive surveillance.

Platforms also shape these outcomes by privileging virality and outrage. If systems reward conflict, they indirectly encourage collective policing behaviour. (Brady, 2017). A more ethical digital environment would reduce these incentives, slow down amplification of inflammatory content, and make room for contextual, proportionate discussion. The issue is not whether public figures can be discussed, but whether discussion respects personhood.

CONCLUSION

Collective digital surveillance is a defining feature of contemporary social media culture. Through parasocial entitlement, moral policing, and platform-amplified visibility, audiences increasingly behave as if public figures are permanently answerable to them. Theories of parasocial interaction, panopticism, dramaturgical self-presentation, online disinhibition, and moral panic together clarify how this culture emerges and why it is emotionally costly.

The central argument of this paper is that digital visibility now carries a surveillance burden that can damage mental health and reshape identity. Recognizing that burden is essential for building healthier online norms. Public accountability remains important, but it must be separated from intrusion, humiliation, and the assumption of ownership over another person's life.

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