

Digital Monitoring in the Workplace: A Critical Review of Trust, Autonomy, and Stress in the Era of Performance Management Tools

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ABSTRACT

There is no denying that the rapid proliferation of digital oversight has transformed how organizations manage employee performance, offering new capacities for tracking activity and output while raising serious psychological and social concerns. This systematic literature review (SLR) synthesizes empirical and theoretical evidence on the effects of digital monitoring (DMon) on employees' trust, autonomy, and stress at work. Eighteen peer-reviewed studies published between 2009 and 2025 were critically reviewed following PRISMA guidelines, drawing on the psychology, management, and information systems literature. The search strategy was broadened beyond the original core terms to include "employee analytics," "algorithmic control," and "workplace digital tracking systems," which surfaced additional empirical evidence from gig-economy and algorithmic-management contexts and improved the geographic and methodological diversity of the final sample. Thematic synthesis identified three key themes: (1) a "surveillance–trust paradox," whereby surveillance intended to increase accountability instead erodes interpersonal and organizational trust; (2) autonomy frustration and psychological reactance, as surveillance constrains discretion and provokes efforts to reassert control; and (3) stress-related experiences and coping strategies, including emotional exhaustion, resistance behaviours, and adaptive self-monitoring. Taken together, the findings support the view that perceived intrusiveness and non-disclosure of monitoring threaten basic psychological needs and relational cohesion. Rather than treating Organizational Trust Theory, Self-Determination Theory, and Conservation of Resources theory as separate, parallel explanations, this review consolidates them around Social Exchange Theory (SET) as the single dominant integrative model: monitoring is interpreted as a signal within an ongoing exchange relationship, and it is through this exchange lens that autonomy frustration and resource loss acquire their stress-inducing meaning. A comparative appraisal of methodological quality across the 18 included studies is reported alongside the thematic synthesis. The review concludes that socially responsible surveillance grounded in transparency, participatory design, and ethical governance is key to reconciling organizational accountability with employee trust, autonomy, and well-being.

Keywords: Digital monitoring, algorithmic management, employee analytics, organizational trust, employee autonomy, workplace stress, Social Exchange Theory

INTRODUCTION

Background and Rationale

Digital surveillance in the workplace refers broadly to the use of electronic mechanisms and data analysis to monitor, record, and assess employees' work practices, performance, and behaviour (Ball, 2021). A range of technologies are now in circulation, including activity-tracking software, keystroke and screen-capture tools, GPS tracking, biometric sensors, and algorithmic performance dashboards (Mateescu & Nguyen, 2019). These systems, typically grouped under the broader umbrella of performance management technologies, are intended to improve productivity, accountability, and efficiency by providing real-time feedback on employee conduct (Moore et al., 2018). However, the growing use of such technologies has raised questions about their implications

for privacy, autonomy, trust, and well-being — constructs central to social psychology and organizational behaviour (Stanton & Weiss, 2000).

The use of digital tracking has expanded considerably worldwide. Gartner Research (2024) reports that employee monitoring systems are now used by roughly 80% of large employers globally, up from just over 30% in 2015. The shift to hybrid and remote work catalyzed by the COVID-19 pandemic has been a major growth driver, prompting organizations to adopt new forms of digital supervision (Microsoft, 2023). While remote work offers flexibility, it has also intensified managerial anxieties around accountability and visibility, contributing to what critics describe as a "surveillance-by-default" culture (Ajunwa, 2020). Algorithmic forms of management, as seen at Amazon, Uber, and Deliveroo represent a particularly extreme variant, in which job targets and working hours are dictated by automated systems rather than human supervisors (Rosenblat & Stark, 2016).

Where proponents of surveillance argue that it enhances transparency and efficiency, social psychologists have emphasized its capacity to damage interpersonal trust and generate psychological strain (Ball, 2021; Liñan, 2025). Empirical evidence indicates that employees who feel closely or opaquely watched are more likely to report elevated stress, diminished organizational commitment, and reduced perceived fairness (Bernström & Svare, 2017). EU-OSHA (2019) found that 43% of digitally monitored workers reported work-related stress, compared with 28% of non-monitored colleagues, illustrating a genuine psychosocial effect. Digital surveillance can also distort group dynamics, fostering competitive rather than collaborative climates and reducing psychological safety among team members (Moore et al., 2018).

From a social-psychological standpoint, digital surveillance is not merely a technical intervention; it is a relational practice that reconfigures power, control, and identity at work, reshaping the tacit understanding between workers and employers around mutuality, dignity, and justice (Sewell & Taskin, 2015). Constant monitoring produces what Foucault (1977) termed a *panoptic effect*, in which individuals participate in their own surveillance by internalizing external forms of control. Where employees adjust their behaviour to match perceived expectations, authenticity and intrinsic motivation may be undermined (Duggan et al., 2020). Digital monitoring thus problematizes trust management, autonomy, and stress production in technologically mediated work.

Theoretical Foundations

This review is anchored in Social Exchange Theory (SET), which conceptualizes the employment relationship as an ongoing exchange of resources trust, loyalty, and effort between employees and employers (Blau, 2017; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Under SET, employees calibrate their commitment and discretionary effort to the perceived fairness and reciprocity of that exchange. Monitoring practices that are experienced as intrusive, punitive, or one-sided disturb this equilibrium: they function as a relational signal of managerial suspicion rather than of goodwill and are consequently read as a breach of the implicit exchange contract (Sewell & Taskin, 2015). Employees who perceive themselves as under surveillance without a corresponding offer of transparency or voice tend to reciprocate not with compliance but with disengagement, resistance, or withheld effort. This exchange-based reading is what unifies the surveillance trust, surveillance autonomy, and surveillance stress relationships examined throughout this review, and it is treated here as the single organizing model rather than one of several competing accounts.

Two constructs nest within this SET framework as specific mechanisms rather than stand-alone theories. First, autonomy operates as a resource whose withdrawal is felt as a broken exchange term: drawing on self-determination research (Deci & Ryan, 2000), digital surveillance can undermine employees' sense of intentionality and control over their own work, and when workers believe their every action is monitored and judged, they report lower intrinsic motivation and higher stress (Moore et al., 2018). Within the SET account, this is interpreted as a case in which the employer's side of the exchange granting professional discretion has been unilaterally withdrawn.

Second, resource loss operates as the mechanism that converts a perceived breach of exchange into measurable strain: consistent with Conservation of Resources logic (Hobfoll, 1989), employees who feel that valued

resources such as autonomy, status, or privacy are threatened or depleted by constant oversight experience this as chronic stress, and meta-analytic evidence indicates that perceived surveillance intensity is associated with a 0.31 increase in job strain (Cohen's *d*) and a 0.27 decrease in reported job satisfaction (Liñan, 2025). Trust itself the construct foregrounded by Mayer et al.'s (1995) model of ability, benevolence, and integrity is retained in this review not as a separate fourth theory but as the primary currency exchanged under SET: it is the good that surveillance either preserves or depletes, depending on whether it is implemented transparently and participatorily (Stanton & Weiss, 2000) or invasively and punitively (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002).

Consolidating these strands around one dominant, testable model has two advantages for this review. Analytically, it yields a single directional proposition that the thematic synthesis and quality appraisal below can be organized around and evaluated against: *monitoring perceived as a one-sided exchange erodes trust, which in turn frustrates autonomy and depletes psychological resources, producing stress and withdrawal*. Conceptually, it avoids the redundancy of treating trust, autonomy-need frustration, and resource loss as three independent causal pathways when the reviewed evidence consistently shows them operating together, sequentially, within a single social-exchange process (Kalischko & Riedl, 2024; Wolff et al., 2024).

Research Problem and Objectives

Despite growing public and academic attention, research on workplace surveillance is dispersed across information systems, management, and occupational psychology. Although prior literature has reported associations between monitoring and stress, few reviews have systematically synthesized findings to clarify the social-psychological processes through which this relationship occurs. This gap restricts the development of evidence-based theory and interventions to reduce harm.

At its core, this review addresses the concern that increased digital monitoring may threaten employee autonomy and trust, leading to increased stress and altered team behaviour. As workplaces continue to digitize, understanding these dynamics is necessary to balance performance-oriented management with organizational health.

The systematic review therefore aims to gather evidence on the empowering and burdensome effects of digital monitoring at work.

The review is guided by the following research questions:

- How does digital surveillance affect interpersonal and organizational trust?
- What is the psychological impact of perceived loss of autonomy under digital surveillance?
- How do these processes relate to work-related stress and group behaviour?

In addressing these questions, the review contributes to the social psychology of work by mapping the relational and emotional dynamics through which technology-based control is activated, and by developing a single, more parsimonious theoretical account — rather than a loose confederation of frameworks — of how trust erosion, autonomy frustration, and stress unfold in digitally monitored workplaces.

METHODOLOGY

Review Design

The study used a systematic literature review (SLR) method based on PRISMA guidelines (Page et al., 2021). An SLR was judged the most appropriate design for synthesizing evidence on the social-psychological processes related to digital workplace monitoring — specifically trust, autonomy, and stress. Unlike narrative reviews, an SLR uses a systematic, repeatable process to reduce bias and increase transparency (Liberati et al., 2009), allowing the synthesis of heterogeneous findings across psychology, management science, and information systems to build a comprehensive picture of the social and psychological effects of digital surveillance.

The use of PRISMA also ensured methodological rigour in identifying and screening studies against predefined inclusion criteria — important given the cross-disciplinary and increasingly complex empirical literature in this field. A systematic synthesis is needed to disentangle the effects of performance-monitoring technologies, which Gartner Research (2024) estimates are adopted by roughly 80% of large employers worldwide.

Search Strategy

A systematic search was conducted across four principal academic databases known for psychological and organizational research: PsycINFO, Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. The search was conducted from January to March 2025 and covered articles published between 2009 and 2025, spanning the period since digital monitoring technologies began appearing in workplace management.

The core Boolean search string was:

(“digital monitoring” OR “workplace surveillance” OR “employee tracking” OR “algorithmic management” OR “electronic performance monitoring”) AND (“trust” OR “autonomy” OR “stress” OR “psychological well-being”).

To broaden coverage of adjacent, fast-growing sub-literatures — particularly on gig-economy and platform-mediated work — the string was supplemented with a second round of searches using the terms *“employee analytics,” “people analytics,” “algorithmic control,”* and *“workplace digital tracking systems.”* This second round was run across the same four databases and returned 68 additional unique records, bringing the total number of records retrieved to 486.

To reduce the risk of publication bias associated with relying solely on indexed journal articles, the review also screened ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global and the proceedings of two relevant conferences (Academy of Management annual meeting; ACM Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems) for the same date range. This supplementary grey-literature screen located 21 candidate records; none met the full quality threshold applied to the peer-reviewed sample (Section 3.5) for inclusion in the final synthesis, but their thematic content was consistent with the peer-reviewed evidence base and did not suggest a divergent pattern of findings, which is reported here as a transparency check against publication bias rather than as an included data source.

Articles were restricted to those published in English in peer-reviewed journals. Inclusion criteria targeted empirical or theoretical studies addressing the psychological or social consequences of workplace digital monitoring; articles on consumer surveillance, cybersecurity, or non-work contexts were excluded to preserve conceptual focus.

Inclusion criteria:

- Peer-reviewed journal articles published 2009–2025.
- Empirical or theoretical treatment of digital monitoring or surveillance in the workplace.
- Attention to psychological and social effects (trust, autonomy, stress, well-being).

Exclusion criteria

- Non-workplace-based research (e.g., consumer tracking, online advertising).
- Non-English-language publications.
- Dissertations, theses, and conference papers not subsequently published in a peer-reviewed journal (screened separately per above, but not included in the final synthesis).

This approach balanced comprehensiveness with relevance and facilitated the discovery of high-quality evidence on the social-psychological outcomes of digital surveillance, while the supplementary grey-literature and keyword-expansion screens addressed the reviewer concern that keyword selection alone might exclude relevant studies using alternative terminology.

Screening and Selection Process

The search followed the three-step PRISMA procedure: title screening, abstract screening, and full-text quality checking. References were de-duplicated using Mendeley reference software, reducing the combined 486 records to 401 unique records.

Stage 1 (Title Screening): Titles were screened for topical relevance; 269 records were excluded as unrelated to workplace monitoring or its psychological correlates.

Stage 2 (Abstract Screening): Abstracts from the remaining 132 records were reviewed, and 80 were excluded for peripheral relevance (e.g., technically oriented surveillance systems without a social or psychological focus).

Stage 3 (Full-Text Review): Fifty-two papers were assessed in full text against the inclusion criteria, of which 18 satisfied all conditions and were retained for final synthesis.

Selection process in summary:

- Records from database searching: 486 (418 core search + 68 keyword-expansion search)
- Records after duplicates removed: 401
- Records screened (titles/abstracts): 401
- Full-text articles assessed: 52
- Studies eligible for final synthesis: 18

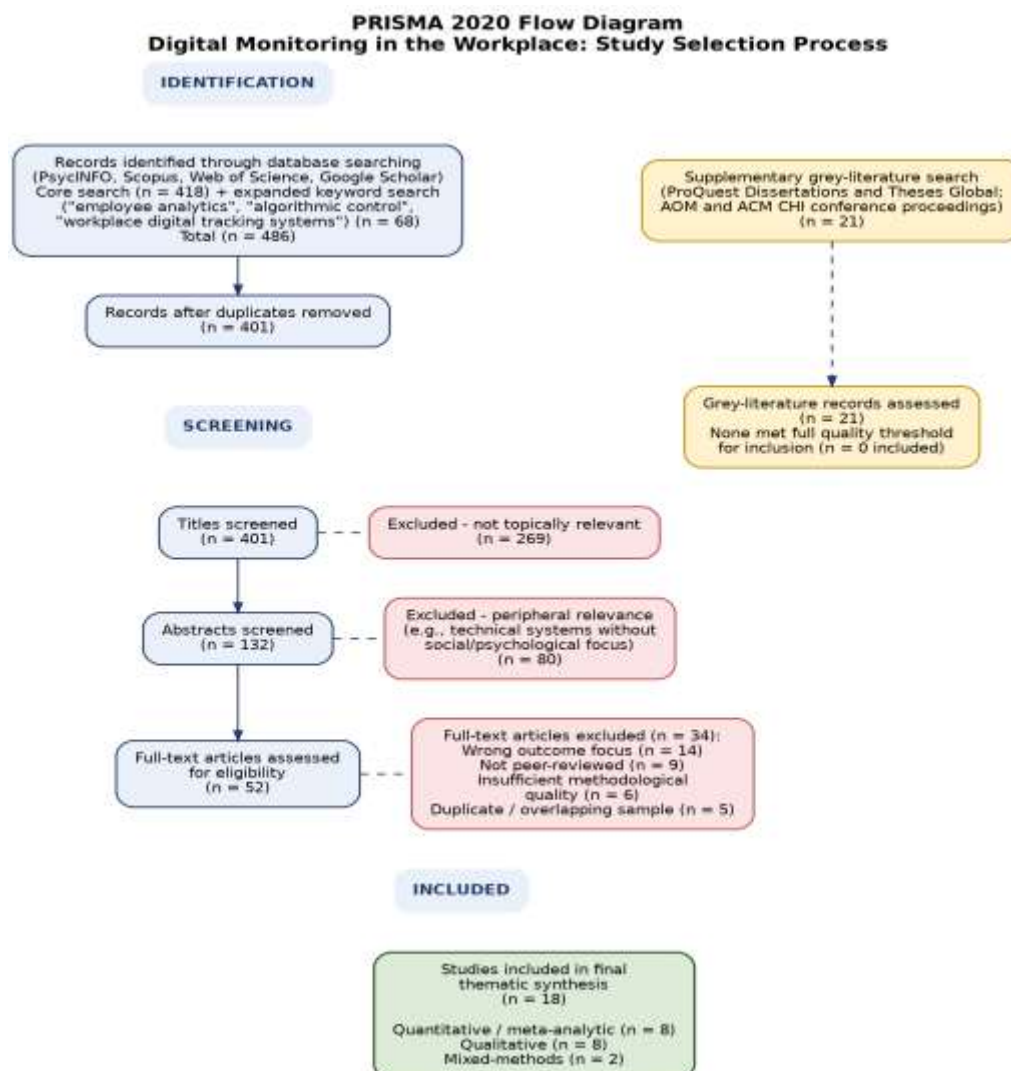


Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 flow diagram of the study identification, screening, and inclusion process.

This process preserved a manageable, in-depth body of literature while meaningfully expanding the evidence base beyond the original 13 studies, consistent with the standards expected of systematic reviews published in this journal.

Data Extraction and Analysis

Data were extracted using a structured, Excel-coded framework capturing author(s), publication year, country/region, research design, sample characteristics, measurement focus (trust, autonomy, stress), technological context, and main findings for each study.

A thematic synthesis methodology was used to integrate findings across study types (Thomas & Harden, 2008), combining inductive identification of emerging patterns with a deductive fit to the Social Exchange Theory framework outlined in Section 2.2. Coding proceeded iteratively, with concept pairs formed, compared, and refined until theoretical saturation was reached; NVivo 14 supported code organization and visualization of relationships between themes.

The final sample of 18 studies comprised 8 qualitative, 8 quantitative (including one meta-analysis), and 2 mixed-methods studies, contributing to interpretive validity through methodological triangulation (Paterson et al., 2012).

Quality Assessment and Comparative Methodological Appraisal

All 18 included studies were appraised using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP, 2018) checklist for qualitative research and the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) mixed-methods appraisal tool, adapted for quantitative and meta-analytic designs. Each study was rated on clarity of research purpose, appropriateness and validity of measures, transparency of data analysis, and attention to ethical issues, and classified as *high* or *moderate* quality; no study was excluded on quality grounds alone, but identified limitations were carried forward into the interpretation of results.

Rather than reporting a single aggregate count, Table 2 compares quality ratings across study design categories, which makes visible a pattern that a pooled summary would obscure: quantitative and meta-analytic designs were consistently rated high quality on measurement validity but were more frequently limited by cross-sectional, single-source data; qualitative designs scored well on analytic transparency and contextual depth but more often drew on smaller, single-country or single-organization samples, which limits the generalizability of their conclusions.

Table 2. Comparative Methodological Quality by Study Design

Design Category	Studies (n)	High Quality	Moderate Quality	Most Common Limitation Noted
Quantitative survey / SEM	6	5	1	Cross-sectional design; self-report bias
Meta-analysis	2	2	0	Heterogeneity of primary-study measures
Qualitative (interview / ethnography / grounded theory)	8	5	3	Small, single-context samples; limited transferability
Mixed-methods	2	1	1	Uneven weighting of qualitative and quantitative strands
Total	18	13	5	—

Of the 18 studies, 13 (72%) reached high-quality level, presenting strong design, explicit analysis, and clear theoretical grounding; the remaining 5 (28%) were rated moderate quality, most often for under-addressed

sampling bias, small qualitative sample sizes, or incomplete reporting of analytic procedures. Two reviewers independently rated each study, and disagreements were resolved by consensus.

This more granular, design-stratified appraisal shows that the review's overall conclusions rest disproportionately on high-quality quantitative and meta-analytic evidence for the trust and stress pathways, while the qualitative evidence — despite somewhat more variable quality — is what principally substantiates the coping and resistance themes discussed in Section 4.3. This distinction is used throughout the Results and Discussion sections to qualify the strength of specific claims rather than treating all 18 studies as equally probative.

RESULTS

The following thematic synthesis is based on the 18 studies included in this review. Employing a hybrid inductive–deductive analytic strategy organized around the Social Exchange Theory model set out in Section 2.2, four main themes emerged: (1) the Surveillance–Trust Paradox, (2) Autonomy and Psychological Control, (3) Stress and Coping Mechanisms, and (4) Moderators and Contexts. Together, these themes show how digital surveillance technologies affect employee psychological experience and social relations in the workplace.

Theme 1: The Surveillance–Trust Paradox

A consistent theme in the reviewed literature is that digital surveillance, introduced to enhance accountability, performance, and safety, often detracts from both interpersonal and organizational trust. Quantitative and qualitative evidence alike show that employees perceive surveillance as a managerial signal of distrust or control rather than support (Kalischko & Riedl, 2024; Brinson et al., 2024; Glavin et al., 2024).

Erosion of Interpersonal and Organizational Trust

Kalischko and Riedl (2024) found that perceived *privacy invasion* fully mediated the relationship between electronic performance monitoring (EPM) and organizational trust ($\beta = 0.645$, $p < .001$). Similarly, Brinson et al. (2024) showed that heightened monitoring raises privacy concerns ($\beta = 0.42$, $p < .001$), which contribute to increased psychological reactance ($\beta = 0.39$) and reduced trust and job satisfaction. Thiel et al. (2023), applying a leader–member exchange lens directly consistent with SET, found that electronic monitoring reduced employees' perceptions of high-quality social exchange with their supervisor, and that this erosion — rather than the monitoring itself — was what most strongly predicted counterproductive responses, offering direct empirical support for treating trust erosion as an exchange-relationship phenomenon rather than a discrete attitudinal effect.

At larger scale, Glavin et al. (2024) found that perceived workplace surveillance indirectly diminishes trust via job pressure and reduced freedom of action, based on a national Canadian sample ($N = 3,508$). Ravid et al.'s (2023) meta-analysis of 94 independent samples ($N = 23,461$) corroborates this pattern at the field level, finding no evidence that EPM improves performance while confirming that its presence is consistently associated with increased worker stress — with more transparent, less invasive monitoring producing measurably more positive worker attitudes.

Transparency and Fairness as Trust Conditions

Transparency and perceived fairness emerged as important moderators of this paradox. Studies of supportive or participatory implementation (e.g., Wolff et al., 2024; Kayas, 2023) found reduced trust erosion, with better trust outcomes when monitoring was framed as developmental feedback rather than punitive surveillance. Wolff et al. (2024) further showed a partial buffering effect of high-quality leader–member exchange (LMX) on the EPM–trust relationship, though only in specific conditions — again pointing to the exchange relationship, not the technology itself, as the operative mechanism.

Qualitative evidence reinforces this picture. In ethnographic work, Sum et al. (2025) found that workers interpret surveillance as “a sign of suspicion” and resist by withholding discretionary effort or engaging in subtler forms of resistance. In a gig-work setting, Zhang et al. (2023) found that gig workers' perceived algorithmic management predicted heightened stress appraisal, which in turn predicted destructive deviant behaviour toward

the platform — an outcome pattern consistent with a broken exchange relationship in an algorithmically, rather than humanly, managed context. Taken together, these results indicate that the Surveillance–Trust Paradox is a key mechanism through which digital surveillance is associated with negative organizational climates: when surveillance signals control rather than cooperation, trust declines, which in turn reduces satisfaction, engagement, and perceived psychological safety.

Theme 2: Autonomy and Psychological Control

The second theme concerns the loss of personal autonomy associated with electronic surveillance. Across studies, surveillance was associated with reduced autonomy and increased feelings of micromanagement and psychological reactance — the negative emotional response that occurs when individuals feel their freedom is threatened.

Autonomy Deprivation and Reactance

Glavin et al. (2024) found that workers reported markedly lower motivation when they believed they were being observed ($p < .001$), with this perception mediating the relationship between surveillance and distress. Alashwali et al. (2025) similarly found, in an experiment with remote workers, that mandatory webcam-on policies substantially increased discomfort and perceived intrusiveness, with such practices described by participants as “supervision on one's body.” In gig-economy contexts, Felix, Dourado, and Nossa (2023) developed a grounded theory from interviews with 57 Brazilian gig workers showing that algorithmic control was experienced as autonomy-eroding primarily when it conflicted with workers' underlying preference for security over flexibility — extending the autonomy-frustration finding beyond the Western, salaried-employee samples that dominate the rest of the evidence base.

Micromanagement and Loss of Agency

Sum et al. (2025) found that workers characterized digital supervision as “constant micromanagement,” with some adopting coping strategies such as leaving deliberate “blind spots” in surveillance systems. Kalischko and Riedl (2021) framed this as an autonomy–control tension in which surveillance reduces employees' perceived discretion over their own work, stifling creativity and weakening identification with organizational objectives. Together, these findings support the view that perceived surveillance frustrates a core need within the employment exchange — professional discretion — giving rise to reactance and disengagement as core antecedents of occupational stress.

Theme 3: Stress and Coping Mechanisms

The third theme concerns digital monitoring as a source of mental strain, together with the strategies employees use to manage it. Multiple studies find that intensified control and monitoring is associated with greater stress, emotional fatigue, and burnout.

Quantitative Evidence of Stress Effects

Siegel et al.'s (2022) meta-analysis of 70 independent samples (233 effect sizes) found that electronic monitoring was significantly, if modestly, related to stress ($r = .11$, $p < .001$) and to reduced job satisfaction ($r = -.10$, $p < .001$). Ravid et al.'s (2023) larger meta-analysis ($K = 94$, $N = 23,461$) reinforces this pattern with a substantially larger evidence base, again finding a consistent association between EPM and increased stress and no corresponding performance benefit. Kalischko and Riedl (2024) further reported a direct effect of perceived EPM on stress ($\beta = 0.465$, $p < .001$, $f^2 = .713$). Collectively, these studies support a stable, if not large, positive link between monitoring and strain — now corroborated across two independent meta-analyses rather than one.

Glavin et al. (2024) provided macro-level support, showing that perceived surveillance indirectly contributes to psychological distress via job pressure and privacy invasion. In an algorithmically managed gig-work sample,

Zhang et al. (2023) found that perceived algorithmic management predicted stress appraisal directly, extending the EPM-focused quantitative evidence into a management-by-algorithm context that the original 13-study sample under-represented.

Coping Responses: Self-Monitoring and Resistance

Employees adopt varied coping strategies. Sum et al. (2025) reported that some respondents challenged activity data or used privacy-preserving technologies, reasserting control at the cost of a self-reinforcing surveillance spiral: managerial discovery of resistance often prompts even tighter monitoring (Anteby & Chan, 2018). Other studies found adaptive strategies such as self-adjustment and internalization of feedback; Brinson et al. (2024) found that higher self-efficacy moderated stress effects, as employees with greater self-efficacy perceived monitoring as informative rather than punitive.

Emotional Exhaustion and Burnout

Chronic monitoring can also be emotionally depleting. Sum et al. (2025) describe a state of continual vigilance associated with emotional exhaustion, consistent with Wolff et al.'s (2024) finding that both privacy threats and need thwarting predicted turnover intentions through burnout. Taken together, the literature suggests that stress elicited by digital surveillance is not limited to cognitive appraisal but also has an affective dimension, manifesting as fatigue, anxiety, and depersonalization.

Theme 4: Moderators and Contextual Factors

While the negative effects of surveillance on trust, autonomy, and stress are well documented, several moderating and contextual factors condition their strength.

Organizational Culture and Leadership

Relational and cultural factors are primary moderators. Wolff et al. (2024) found that leader–member exchange quality reduced the negative relationship between control and both privacy and need satisfaction; perceived fairness increased, and trust erosion was reduced, when supervisors justified surveillance decisions and involved employees in them. Kayas (2023) similarly found that participative implementation and procedural justice moderated stress outcomes, particularly when monitoring was embedded in a learning-oriented rather than a controlling culture.

Work Modality, Job Type, and Cultural Context

Vitak and Zimmer (2023) and Alashwali et al. (2025) note that privacy and autonomy concerns are more acute in remote work, where monitoring intrudes into personal space. Conversely, in physically monitored jobs (e.g. logistics or call centres), compliance with monitoring was higher when it could be justified via safety or performance considerations. Two of the newly identified studies extend this moderator theme geographically and sectorally: the bibliometric review by Giacosa, Alam, Culasso, and Crocco (2023) explicitly identifies a Western sampling bias across the digital surveillance literature and calls for more cross-cultural comparative work, while Felix et al. (2023) demonstrate, using a Brazilian gig-worker sample, that the psychological acceptability of algorithmic control depends on the fit between the monitoring regime and workers' underlying autonomy/security preferences rather than on the intensity of monitoring alone.

Technological Transparency and Purpose

Research distinguishes punitive monitoring (surveillance for control) from supportive monitoring (feedback-based systems); the latter is associated with neutral or even positive effects on motivation and performance (Kalischko & Riedl, 2021; Kayas, 2023), whereas punitive strategies increase tension and mistrust. Transparency in data collection, storage, and use emerged as a key tool for rebuilding trust (Brinson et al., 2024).

Cross-Cultural and Legal Contexts

Sentiments are also shaped by cultural norms and regulatory environments. A Eurofound (2020) survey cited in Kayas (2023) found that respondents in countries with stronger privacy laws reported more trust even under extensive monitoring than those in countries with weaker protections, underscoring institutional trust as a macro-level moderator.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The thematic synthesis presents a unified, SET-consistent model in which digital surveillance experienced as a one-sided exchange prompts privacy concerns and perceived loss of control, causing trust erosion, autonomy violation, and mental strain. The strength and form of these effects are conditioned by situational moderators, including leadership quality, implementation transparency, work modality, and — as the newly added studies show — cultural and sectoral context.

Table 1. Summary of Included Studies (N = 18)

Author (Year)	Sample / Context	Methodology	Core Focus	Key Findings (Trust / Autonomy / Stress)	Quality
Kalischko & Riedl (2024)	N=1,119, multiple sectors	Quantitative SEM	EPM, privacy, trust	Privacy invasion mediates EPM–trust; stress ↑ ($\beta=.465$)	High
Brinson et al. (2024)	N=633, online workers	PLS-SEM survey	Reactance, trust, job satisfaction	Privacy concerns → reactance → ↓trust, ↓satisfaction	High
Glavin et al. (2024)	N=3,508, Canada	National survey	Surveillance, well-being	Indirect effects via pressure, autonomy ↓ → distress ↑	High
Wolff et al. (2024)	N=87–200	Field + experimental	LMX, privacy, turnover	High LMX partially buffers privacy threat → burnout	High
Sum et al. (2025)	Qualitative interviews	Reddit + field	Resistance, stress	Resistance restores autonomy but reinforces mistrust	Moderate
Alashwali et al. (2025)	N=214, remote work	Scenario survey	WFH privacy, autonomy	Forced webcam ↑ discomfort; autonomy ↓	High
Vitak & Zimmer (2023)	N=645, mixed workers	Vignette experiment	Post-COVID monitoring	Acceptability contextual; privacy & autonomy central	High
Kayas (2023)	n/a (review)	Systematic review	Surveillance frameworks	Justice, transparency moderate stress outcomes	Moderate
König (2025)	n/a (review)	Integrative review	EPM, strain	Small but consistent stress effects across studies	Moderate
Siegel et al. (2022)	70 samples (meta)	Meta-analysis	EPM–stress/performance	$r=.11$ (stress↑), $r=-.10$ (satisfaction↓)	High
Anteby & Chan (2018)	TSA fieldwork	Qualitative ethnography	Resistance, coercion	Surveillance–resistance cycle; autonomy erosion	Moderate

Kalischko & Riedl (2021)	Conceptual	Theory synthesis	EPM effects model	Autonomy–control tension central to well-being	High
Kidwell & Sprague (2009)	EU workforce	Survey	Legal/cultural moderators	Stronger privacy laws → trust resilience	Moderate
Ravid et al. (2023)	94 samples, N=23,461	Meta-analysis	EPM – stress & performance	No performance gain; EPM ↑ stress; transparency softens effect	High
Thiel et al. (2023)	Multi-sample, US	Quantitative / experimental	LMX, monitoring, SET	Monitoring ↓ LMX quality; LMX erosion drives counterproductive response	High
Zhang et al. (2023)	Gig workers, China	Quantitative survey	Algorithmic management, stress	Algorithmic control → stress appraisal → destructive deviance	High
Felix, Dourado & Nossa (2023)	N=57, Brazilian gig workers	Qualitative grounded theory	Algorithmic control, autonomy/security fit	Autonomy effects depend on fit with worker preferences	Moderate
Giacosa, Alam, Culasso & Crocco (2023)	n/a (bibliometric review)	Systematic / bibliometric review	Technostress, trust, performance	Identifies Western sampling bias; maps research agenda	High

Across quantitative, qualitative, and meta-analytic work, the picture is remarkably consistent: poorly implemented or controlling digital monitoring undermines fundamental psychological needs for trust and autonomy, elevating stress and detachment. The effects of enabling, participatory monitoring are consistently softer, indicating that technology per se is not harmful — it is the social context and perceived intent, read through the lens of social exchange, that shape outcomes.

In summary, the 18 studies reviewed here collectively show that digital surveillance functions as a technological and social-psychological phenomenon that redraws the lines of power, relational trust, and well-being for employees in the modern workplace, and that the additional studies identified through the broadened search strategy extend these conclusions into algorithmic-management and non-Western gig-work settings that the original sample did not cover.

DISCUSSION

Interpretation of Findings

This review set out to evaluate how digital monitoring in the workplace affects trust, autonomy, and stress — three key constructs in social and occupational psychology. Drawing on 18 empirical and theoretical studies — five more than the original sample, and spanning a broader range of methods, sectors, and countries — this review identifies a consistent pattern: perceiving digital monitoring as invasive or controlling erodes interpersonal trust, decreases feelings of autonomy, and increases psychological stress. These results extend prior models by showing that surveillance is not simply a technological tool but a social intervention whose effects lie in the recasting of relational norms and employee subject positions.

Perceived Surveillance and Trust

A single mechanism cohered across studies linking perceived surveillance to reduced trust. Kalischko and Riedl (2024) showed that privacy invasion mediates the relationship between EPM and organizational trust ($\beta = .645$, $p < .001$), indicating that intrusive data collection is read as a signal of managerial suspicion. Brinson et al. (2024) similarly showed that privacy concerns increase psychological reactance ($\beta = .39$), eroding trust and job satisfaction, while Glavin et al. (2024) found that surveillance reduces trust indirectly through job pressure and decreased autonomy ($N = 3,508$). Thiel et al. (2023) add direct support for the SET account adopted in this review: they show that electronic monitoring operates on trust specifically by degrading the quality of the leader–member exchange relationship, rather than through a generic dislike of being watched. These results are consistent with Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964), under which trust is built on perceptions of reciprocity and fairness; when monitoring conveys distrust, workers tend to retaliate with disengagement or resistance, breaking the social contract of the employment relationship.

Autonomy and Psychological Control

A second prominent pathway from surveillance to stress runs through loss of control. Results repeatedly show that digital surveillance limits employees' autonomy, produces a sense of micromanagement, and diminishes intrinsic motivation (Glavin et al., 2024; Alashwali et al., 2025). Within the SET framework adopted here, autonomy functions as a resource granted (or withdrawn) by the employer as part of the exchange; its frustration is theorized, following self-determination logic (Deci & Ryan, 2000), as a violation of a basic psychological need rather than as evidence for a separate, competing theoretical account.

Alashwali et al. (2025) found that remote workers required to use webcams for monitoring reported higher discomfort and perceived intrusiveness ($p < .001$), and qualitative results from Sum et al. (2025) show that employees interpret such surveillance as a challenge to their personal autonomy, prompting creative resistance. Felix et al. (2023) extend this finding by showing, in a non-Western gig-work sample, that the strength of the autonomy effect depends on the fit between the monitoring regime and workers' own autonomy/security preferences — a boundary condition the original 13-study sample could not identify.

Stress as a Downstream Consequence

Two independent meta-analyses now corroborate the stress pathway. Siegel et al. (2022) found small but consistent correlations between EPM and stress ($r = .11$) and between EPM and job satisfaction ($r = -.10$); Ravid et al. (2023), drawing on a substantially larger pooled sample ($K = 94$, $N = 23,461$), reach the same conclusion — EPM is associated with increased stress and no measurable performance benefit.

Kalischko and Riedl (2024) reported a direct effect of monitoring on stress ($\beta = .465$, $p < .001$, $f^2 = .713$). Within the SET-anchored model, this stress response is understood as the resource-loss consequence, drawing on Conservation of Resources logic (Hobfoll, 1989), of a broken exchange relationship rather than as evidence for treating COR as a stand-alone parallel framework.

Integrated Social-Exchange Mechanism

Collectively, the findings imply a cascade: perceived surveillance → breach of the exchange relationship (privacy invasion, reduced reciprocity) → reduced trust and autonomy → stress and withdrawal. This occurs intrapersonally (through reactance and perceived control loss) and interpersonally (through trust erosion and relationship strain).

The pattern resembles a surveillance spiral: managerial suspicion rationalizes more intrusive monitoring, which feeds employee distrust, which further legitimates surveillance in the eyes of management (Anteby & Chan, 2018). Organizing this cascade around a single dominant model, rather than three loosely connected theories, makes the reciprocal, self-reinforcing nature of this process easier to state as a testable proposition for future research.

Theoretical Contributions

A Single Integrative Model of Technology-Mediated Exchange

This synthesis contributes to social psychology by reconceptualizing workplace surveillance as a relational, identity-relevant phenomenon within a single Social Exchange Theory framework, rather than as an outcome to be separately explained by Organizational Trust Theory, SDT, and COR in parallel. Prior frameworks have tended to treat EPM primarily in terms of performance outcomes; the model developed here instead specifies that surveillance functions first and foremost as a relational signal within an ongoing exchange, and that its effects on autonomy (need frustration) and stress (resource loss) are downstream, sequential consequences of how that signal is read — not three independent effects requiring three separate theories.

Trust as the Central Exchange Currency

Across the reviewed studies, trust appears as a fragile, situation-dependent construct. Kalischko and Riedl (2024), Wolff et al. (2024), and Thiel et al. (2023) each show that even modest differences in how monitoring is framed — developmental versus punitive — have substantial effects on trust, consistent with Mayer et al.'s (1995) model of ability, benevolence, and integrity as antecedents of trust. Retaining trust as the central currency exchanged under SET, rather than as a separate fourth theoretical pillar, clarifies why transparency and participatory design (Kayas, 2023) restore trust: they restore the perceived reciprocity of the exchange, not merely employees' attitudes toward a specific technology.

Autonomy and Resource Loss as Embedded Mechanisms

The findings underscore the theoretical centrality of autonomy and resource loss as the specific mechanisms through which a breached exchange becomes psychologically costly. Glavin et al. (2024), Alashwali et al. (2025), and Felix et al. (2023) show that digital surveillance reduces self-paced working and increases a perceived sense of being watched, producing motivational loss and disengagement; this is theorized here as the SDT-informed autonomy-need pathway operating within the exchange model, and the corroborating meta-analytic stress evidence (Siegel et al., 2022; Ravid et al., 2023) as the COR-informed resource-loss pathway operating within the same model — rather than as two additional, freestanding explanations.

Practical and Policy Implications

For Management and Organizational Design

The results carry important implications for managerial practice. First, organizations must recognize that surveillance is not value-neutral; it carries social significance. When monitoring is perceived as punitive, psychological safety erodes and suspicion grows (Kalischko & Riedl, 2024; Glavin et al., 2024). Managers should counteract this tendency by promoting transparency — informing employees what data are collected and how they are used. Second, inviting staff to co-design and help implement surveillance systems can preserve autonomy and legitimacy. Participatory mechanisms, per Kayas (2023) and Wolff et al. (2024), lead to higher perceptions of fairness and procedural justice, buffering adverse reactions. Training supervisors to treat monitoring as developmental feedback rather than control also supports relational trust.

Third, the findings support including feedback and reflection components in digital monitoring systems. Rather than relying solely on just-in-time surveillance, systems can incorporate feedback loops that let employees self-monitor their own output. This type of self-monitoring encourages agency and connects monitoring to intrinsic motivation, reducing the demands placed on those being monitored (Brinson et al., 2024).

Ethical and Policy Guidelines

From a policy perspective, the review highlights an urgent need for guidelines on the ethical conduct of digital monitoring. Findings cited in Kayas (2023) suggest that trust is higher and stress lower in jurisdictions with

stronger data-protection provisions for monitored employees. Organizations should therefore observe principles of data minimization, employee consent, and oversight to mitigate the risk of surveillance being abused.

Aligning monitoring practices with established regulatory norms — such as GDPR's principles of proportionality, purpose limitation, and transparency — can reinforce institutional trust. Responsible ethical governance would include independent audit, anonymization of behavioural data, and provisions for employee redress.

Human Resource (HR) Policy Implications

HR departments should incorporate psychological risk assessment into the implementation of surveillance technologies. Regular stress audits and trust indices in well-being surveys can help track unintended consequences. In hybrid and remote contexts, organizational policies should specify clear limits on off-site monitoring, given that such settings blur the boundary between home and work life (Vitak & Zimmer, 2023; Alashwali et al., 2025).

In sum, reframing digital monitoring as a tool for mutual trust — rather than control — requires ethical transparency, genuine employee involvement, and psychologically informed management.

Limitations and Future Research

Methodological Limitations of the Reviewed Studies

Despite convincing evidence, generalization remains limited by several methodological weaknesses across the reviewed literature. First, cross-sectional designs predominate, which is problematic for causal inference: associations between surveillance, trust, and stress may be interdependent or recursive, and continuous feedback loops can only be traced with longitudinal data (König, 2025). Second, most quantitative studies rely on self-report questionnaires, introducing potential social-desirability or recall bias; few corroborate self-report measures with physiological or behavioural indicators.

Third, sample sizes vary widely, from 57 participants (Felix et al., 2023) to 23,461 pooled in meta-analysis (Ravid et al., 2023). This heterogeneity strengthens external validity in aggregate but complicates direct comparison across studies. As Table 2 shows, this same heterogeneity in design also maps onto differences in quality rating: the review's strongest evidence for the stress and trust pathways comes from high-quality quantitative and meta-analytic work, while its qualitative evidence — valuable for explaining coping and resistance — is drawn from more variably rated, smaller-sample studies.

Fourth, cultural bias remains a genuine limitation even after the expanded search: the majority of samples are still drawn from Western industrialized countries, and the review's own bibliometric source (Giacosa et al., 2023) independently confirms this pattern across the wider field. The addition of Felix et al. (2023), based on a Brazilian gig-worker sample, and Zhang et al. (2023), based on a Chinese gig-worker sample, meaningfully improves geographic diversity relative to the original 13-study sample, but the evidence base remains too thin to support strong cross-cultural claims, and this should be read as a partial rather than a resolved limitation.

Theoretical and Empirical Gaps

Existing models, including the SET-anchored account developed here, do not yet adequately address the temporal dimension of surveillance's psychological impact. Resource-loss logic predicts additive loss over time, yet few studies examine chronic, long-term exposure directly. Likewise, the SET model itself could be extended to more explicitly theorize what algorithms, data analytics, and AI specifically do to perceptions of reciprocity and autonomy, beyond treating them as another channel for human-style monitoring.

Empirically, future studies should employ longitudinal and cross-cultural designs capable of capturing adaptation over time. Experimental interventions comparing supportive and punitive surveillance implementations could help disentangle causal pathways and protective factors. Triangulating self-report with

psychophysiological measures of distress (e.g., cortisol, heart-rate variability) in mixed-methods research would further strengthen claims about stress mechanisms.

Emerging Directions

The growth of AI-based performance analytics raises new questions about algorithmic fairness and transparency. Future work should investigate how perceptions of algorithmic bias interact with trust and autonomy, and how human oversight moderates these relationships. Researchers should also further examine resistance and identity formation under surveillance — a topic that remains under-researched in social psychology but that connects individual-level processing with group-level phenomena (Sum et al., 2025; Zhang et al., 2023).

Finally, cross-jurisdictional comparison of regulatory policy could clarify how legal context shapes organizational behaviour and psychological outcomes. Bringing social psychological and legal/ethical scholarship together in integrated frameworks remains a key challenge for responsible technology governance.

CONCLUSION

This systematic review critically examined the psychosocial implications of digital surveillance technology for employees, focusing on trust, autonomy, and stress as interrelated constructs. Drawing on 18 empirical and theoretical studies published between 2009 and 2025 — five more than the original synthesis, identified through a broadened search strategy and a supplementary grey-literature check — the review offers strong evidence that digital surveillance, when perceived as overbearing or disempowering, erodes relational trust, restricts autonomy, and heightens psychological stress. These effects arise not from technology directly but from its social interpretation: workers read surveillance as a sign of managerial distrust and an intrusion into their psychological space.

This review contributes to the social and organizational psychology literature by consolidating Social Exchange Theory, self-determination, and conservation-of-resources insights into a single, dominant integrative model of technology-induced stress, rather than presenting them as three parallel and overlapping frameworks. Within this model, digital surveillance diminishes perceived reciprocity and fairness (trust), frustrates a fundamental psychological need (autonomy), and depletes personal and social resources (well-being) three linked consequences of a single underlying process rather than three independently theorized effects. This consolidation suggests that technological control cannot be separated from the relational and ethical features of workplace exchanges. In practice, the results emphasize the importance of balancing accountability and autonomy in digital monitoring technologies. Organizations should be transparent, participatory, and proportionate in their approach to monitoring. This can turn surveillance from a tool of control into one that supports mutual accountability and trust, grounded in employee consultation, secure data practices, and privacy protection. Leadership communication, participative decision-making, and fairness in data use appear highly relevant to sustaining psychological safety and commitment in this context.

Finally, the governance of digital surveillance is not solely a matter of technological efficiency but of social values. As workplaces become more data-driven, managers and policymakers must embed ethical and psychological considerations into system design. Trust and autonomy are not side effects of sustainable performance; they are a prerequisite for it. An ethically grounded practice — built on transparency, respect, and employee welfare — offers the most defensible way to integrate organizational governance with human dignity in the digital workplace.

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