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# Mapping the literature on surveillance capitalism: Towards an empirical research agenda

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## Abstract

Surveillance capitalism (SC) — as intended by Shoshana Zuboff — is a fairly recent concept, but it has already attracted the attention of many scholars from various fields within social sciences. Despite this interest, a comprehensive review of the available literature on this concept is lacking. To address this gap, we systematically mapped the contributions on SC. Working on a database of 486 papers downloaded from *Scopus* and *Web of Science*, we conducted descriptive statistics to analyze the distribution of contributions over the years, the most cited works, the predominant approaches (*i.e.*, theoretical, empirical, methodological, etc.), and the co-occurrence of keywords. Additionally, we performed a close reading of a purposive sample of 50 articles. Our analysis revealed that empirical works remain limited compared to theoretical contributions. Furthermore, both theoretical and empirical papers often lacked a specific focus on the value(s) of data, with many scholars concentrating on surveillance, privacy, and big data. Building on these findings, we propose “future research directions” to guide and inspire empirical research on SC and to better address matters of value. Specifically, we identified four main directions: “privacy and beyond”, “big data and their relation to digital platforms”, “surveillance and the culture of surveillance”, and “platformization of consumer culture”. For each “direction”, we discuss *ad hoc* methodological implications and strategies.

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## 1. Introduction

Today, 62.2 percent of the global population has access to the Internet, and approximately 93.2 percent of Internet users access social media (Kemp, 2024). As users navigate the Internet daily and engage with social media, they generate an immense amount of data that underpins the contemporary digital economy (Srnicek, 2017). A handful of multinational tech corporations — Alphabet/Google, Amazon, Facebook/Meta, Apple, and Microsoft — dominate this landscape. Structuring themselves as platforms (Gillespie, 2010), they act as intermediaries between different user groups — developers, consumers,

advertisers — while simultaneously extracting vast amounts of data from these interactions (Srnicek, 2017; Plantin, *et al.*, 2018).

Shoshana Zuboff (2019) conceptualized this economic model as surveillance capitalism (SC) — a system built on the large-scale extraction, accumulation, and monetization of user data. Unlike traditional forms of surveillance, Zuboff (2019, 2015) argued that surveillance capitalism is not merely about monitoring individuals but about asymmetrically capturing data from citizens without their full awareness or consent. These data are then used to predict, personalize, and ultimately shape user behaviors for profit-driven purposes.

Although the concept of SC was introduced over a decade ago, it initially saw limited use before recently gaining substantial attention in academic literature and public discourse — particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic spurred the adoption of new mass surveillance systems and novel partnerships between public institutions and corporate platforms for surveillance purposes (see Milan, 2020; Milan, *et al.*, 2021; Newell, 2021). Despite this growing interest, no comprehensive mapping of published contributions on this topic currently exists — especially one that examines how scholars have engaged with this relatively new yet widely used concept over recent years. To our knowledge, only a meta-review of responses to Zuboff's book has been published so far (Jansen and Pooley, 2021). Therefore, conducting a systematic review of the literature on SC would be valuable. Such a review would provide insights into analytical approaches applied to the concept and key issues explored. On one hand, it would clarify how scholars have addressed SC thus far; on the other, it would help identify potential future research directions.

To achieve these objectives, we gathered 486 papers on SC from *Scopus* and *Web of Science*. A co-occurrence analysis of the most frequently used keywords was conducted to highlight the main topics covered in the literature and their interconnections (Flensburg and Lomborg, 2021). Additionally, descriptive analyses were performed to examine various metrics, including the distribution of contributions over the years, most cited works, and most commonly used research approaches (Flensburg and Lomborg, 2021). Furthermore, a close reading was conducted on a purposive sample of 50 articles, following a saturation approach (Lacy, *et al.*, 2015).

The findings from the comprehensive mapping of SC literature highlight one key issue: while the concept has gained substantial attention, empirical research remains significantly underdeveloped compared to theoretical discussions. Despite the increasing number of publications on SC, the literature is still largely dominated by conceptual analyses, with limited empirical investigations into how surveillance capitalism operates in practice. Additionally, both theoretical and empirical works lack a specific focus on the value(s) of data — a crucial dimension for understanding the economic and societal implications of SC. Addressing this gap is essential for advancing the debate beyond broad critiques and toward concrete assessments of its mechanisms and consequences. Based on the state of the art, we propose several future research directions to guide and inspire empirical studies on surveillance capitalism, as well as to better address questions of value from both a conceptual and practical perspective. Specifically, we identify four key areas: (1) privacy and beyond; (2) big data and its relationship with digital platforms; (3) surveillance and the culture of surveillance; and, (4) the platformization of consumer culture. For each of these directions, we discuss *ad hoc* methodological implications and research strategies to advance the field.

Our inquiry begins with a conceptual definition of surveillance capitalism, followed by an outline of our methodological approach. We then present the findings in the subsequent two sections. Finally, in the discussion, we reflect on these insights and explore the four proposed research paths in detail.

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## 2. The concept of surveillance capitalism

### 2.1. The concept of surveillance

Before discussing surveillance capitalism, it is essential to first define surveillance itself. Etymologically, the term derives from the combination of “sur-” (meaning “from above”) and “veillance” (meaning “to watch”) (Galič, *et al.*, 2017). One of the leading scholars in this field defined surveillance as “the focused, systematic, and routine attention to personal details for the purposes of influence, management, protection, or direction” [1]. As a concept with over two centuries of history, surveillance has undergone significant social, political, and technological transformations (Lyon, 2022). Early understandings of surveillance were closely tied to the panopticon metaphor, an architectural model of power designed to surveil and also promote self-discipline among observed subjects, as conceptualized by Bentham and later Foucault. Over time, more decentralized and technologically enhanced forms of surveillance emerged, prompting the development of new theoretical frameworks — including surveillance capitalism — to better capture these evolving dynamics (Galič, *et al.*, 2017; Lyon, 2022).

## **2.2. Zuboff’s conceptualization of surveillance capitalism**

Shoshana Zuboff is widely considered the pioneer of the concept of SC. It has been argued that “Marx himself saw surveillance as a fundamental aspect of the capitalist economy and the modern nation state, understanding surveillance as both an economic and a political concept” [2] which could be used to control and discipline workers. Before Zuboff, Foster and McChesney (2014) also connected the concept of capitalism and surveillance, using the exact term “surveillance capitalism” to describe a turn in contemporary capitalism, driven by the computing competencies and technologies stimulated by financialization, and largely focused on gathering, storing, and analyzing consumer data. Similarly, Zuboff perceived SC as a reconfiguration of “information capitalism” that “aims to predict and modify human behavior as a means to produce revenue and market control” [3]. She also defined it as a “new logic of accumulation” [4] heavily dependent on big data. In her initial (Zuboff, 2015) and later (Zuboff, 2019) accounts, Zuboff identified Google as the company that best monetized the turn to data in capitalism (Couldry and Yu, 2018; Milan and van ver Velden, 2016) through advertisement based on the gathering, storing, and analysis of user data. Many of these practices raised, and continue to raise, questions of justice and rights violation, as also stressed by other scholars (Cinnamon, 2017; Dencik, *et al.*, 2016). However, Zuboff argued that “Google and other actors learned to obscure their operations, choosing to invade undefended individual and social territory until opposition is encountered, at which point they can use their substantial resources to defend at low cost what had already been taken. In this way, surveillance assets are accumulated and attract significant surveillance capital while producing their own surprising new politics and social relations” [5] which ultimately led to the institutionalization of surveillance capitalism.

## **2.3. Critics to Zuboff’s concept**

The concept of SC has gained considerable attention from scholars and specialized journalists (Varghese, 2019; Ball and Webster, 2020), but criticism as well. The two main critiques that have been moved toward the concept of SC, as intended by Zuboff (2019), are those of techno-determinism and U.S.-centrism (Evangelista, 2018; Wood and Monahan, 2019). On the one hand, SC seems to be framed as a monolith that imposes itself over social actors, without leaving any space of awareness, engagement, or resistance. On the other hand, Zuboff’s analysis of SC has been considered by some as biased towards an American context, in a very specific legal framework and cultural tradition. Wood and Monahan (2019) have pointed out that Zuboff does not take into full consideration the key role of digital platforms in the functioning of the whole SC system as well as their logics and user relations. Furthermore, and more broadly, other scholars have stressed that Zuboff overstated the ability of digital platforms to predict and control user behavior, and the impact of surveillance capitalism on contemporary capitalism as a whole (Curran, 2023; Morozov, 2019; Kapczynski, 2020). We believe that a more systematic focus on empirical research about SC could be helpful in overcoming its inherent biases and limitations, thus broadening our knowledge on its nature, functioning, and socio-cultural implications.

### 3. Methods and data

The systematic approach to studying the available literature on SC was largely inspired by Flensburg and Lomborg (2021), whose work focused on datafication. At the beginning of December 2023, we conducted a search on *Scopus* and *Web of Science* using the phrase “surveillance capitalism” to find all available publications that mentioned it in the title, keywords, or abstract. We chose such a specific search input because our contribution focused on this concept exclusively, rather than exploring also other similar concepts. The query yielded 397 contributions for *Web of Science* and 408 for *Scopus*. We downloaded the metadata into a MS Excel file and deleted duplicates. An initial screening of titles and abstracts was conducted to ensure that the collected materials aligned with our research objectives. Following this initial review, three non-relevant entries were removed, as they consisted solely of lists of papers from conference proceedings. The final dataset comprised 486 contributions. Some entries had missing information, such as abstracts or keywords, but these omissions did not appear to compromise the broader analysis that we aimed to conduct.

Despite this broad inclusion criterion, it is essential to acknowledge an additional limitation to our approach. *Scopus* and *Web of Science* might miss some relevant contributions on the topic of interest. For instance, Zuboff (2019) is not found in either database. In general, coverage across *Scopus* and *Web of Science* includes journal articles, books, conference proceedings, and preprints. That means that some monographs, reports, media articles, and grey literature were excluded.

On the 486 selected contributions, we conducted descriptive analyses, considering the most important metrics that could help depict the publishing scenario over time. Our focus was on the year of publication, number of citations, and the most frequently used keywords. To visualize keyword co-occurrence, we utilized the software VOSviewer (Flensburg and Lomborg, 2021). To maintain clarity in the analysis, we included only keywords used at least five times, excluding the phrase “surveillance capitalism,” as its frequent occurrence would have offered low informative value (Flensburg and Lomborg, 2021). Additionally, we manually categorized all abstracts based on the main approach of the contributions into six categories: theoretical, empirical, methodological, literature review, other, and no abstract.

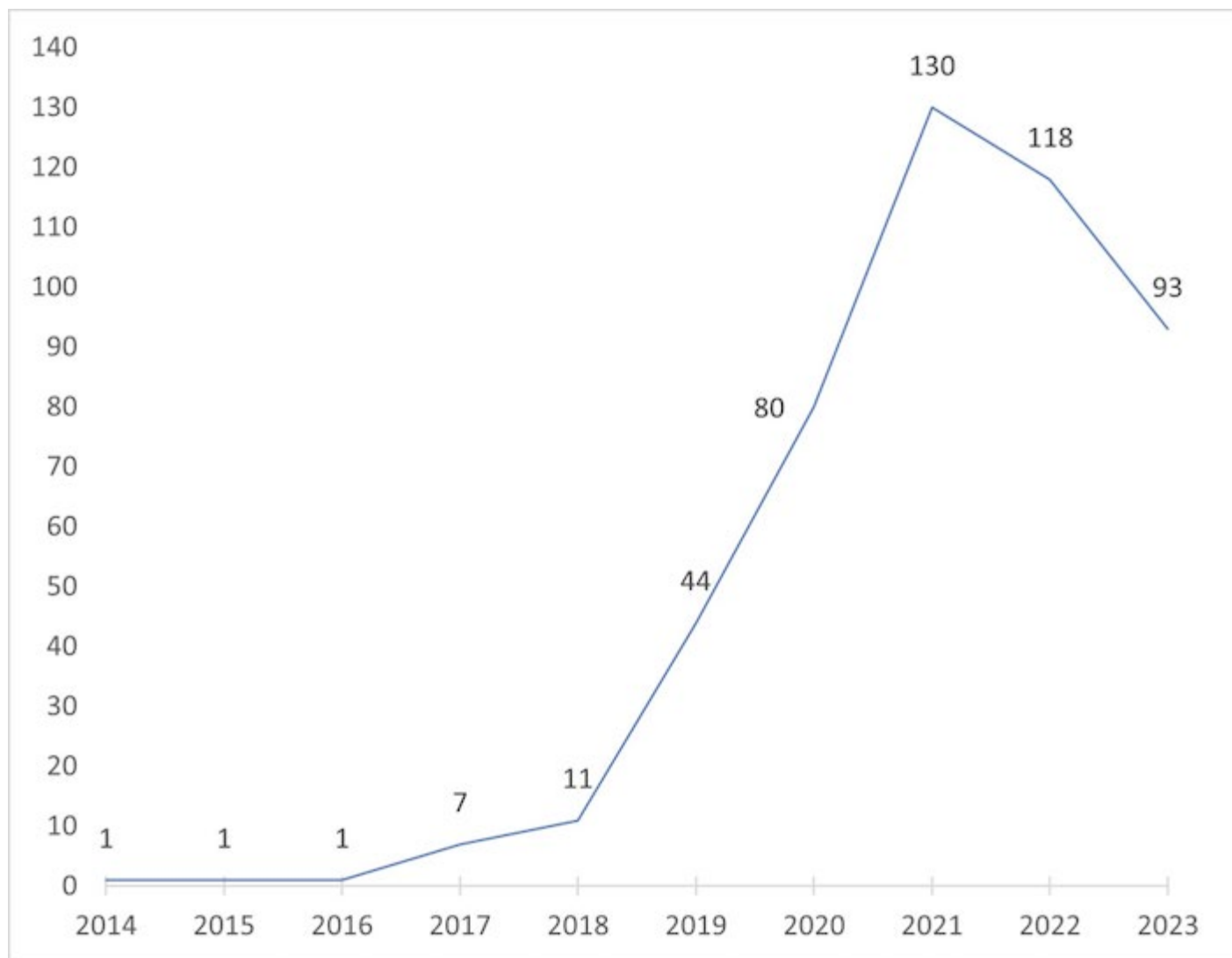
Based on insights gathered from these metrics, we conducted a close reading of 50 contributions from the database. This in-depth examination helped us better understand the field of study and propose four additional research pathways that could further expand knowledge on SC. Drawing from the evidence obtained through mapping and engaging with additional literature, we introduce and describe the following research pathways: “privacy and beyond,” “big data and their relation to digital platforms,” “surveillance and the culture of surveillance,” and “platformization of consumer culture.”

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## 4. Descriptive findings

### 4.1. Surveillance capitalism contributions across time

Surveillance capitalism, as depicted in [Figure 1](#), was first introduced as a concept in 2014. Foster and McChesney (2014) arguably coined the phrase. In 2015, Shoshana Zuboff, who would later become widely recognized as a pioneer of this concept, published a paper entitled “Big other: Surveillance capitalism and the prospects of an information civilization” (Zuboff, 2015). However, academic attention toward this concept remained quite low initially. This situation changed significantly in 2019 with the publication of Zuboff’s (2019) book *The age of surveillance capitalism*. As Figure 1 demonstrates, since then, the number of contributions dealing with this concept has been steadily growing until 2022, which still registered a considerable number of publications on SC.



**Figure 1:** Publications per year.

#### ***4.2. Most cited contributions on surveillance capitalism***

As mentioned earlier, the scholarship of Shoshana Zuboff has had a significant influence on subsequent contributions. This is further confirmed by the number of citations her 2015 paper received. [Table 1](#) displays the most cited works in the analyzed databases. Interestingly, the work by Foster and McChesney (2014) is also present but did not reach the numbers registered by Zuboff. The work by Dencik and colleagues (2016) on anti-surveillance resistance has been influential in the field, particularly because they introduced the notion of data justice. The issue of justice, or the lack thereof in SC, was also emphasized in other significantly cited contributions (Cinnamon, 2017), which also engaged with the concept of “digital colonialism” (Kwet, 2019).

Other papers among the top 10 most cited mainly covered issues related to business (Williamson, 2021), such as the manipulations of user behavior in digital marketing (Darmody and Zwick, 2020) or social media (Saura, *et al.*, 2021). SC has also been successfully applied to the study of the COVID-19 pandemic (Kitchin, 2020), as well as theoretically situated within the surveillance studies tradition, as an evolution of studies on Bentham and Foucault (Galič, *et al.*, 2017).

<b>Table 1: Top 10 most cited authors.</b>									
	<b>2014</b>	<b>2015</b>	<b>2016</b>	<b>2017</b>	<b>2018</b>	<b>2019</b>	<b>2020</b>	<b>2021</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Zuboff, S.</b>		1,413				128			<b>1,541</b>
<b>Dencik, L., <i>et al.</i></b>				174					<b>174</b>
<b>Kwet, M.</b>						144			<b>144</b>
<b>Galič, M., <i>et al.</i></b>				137					<b>137</b>
<b>Kitchin, R.</b>							127		<b>127</b>
<b>Williamson, B.</b>								97	<b>97</b>
<b>Foster and McChesney</b>	85								<b>85</b>
<b>Saura, J.R., <i>et al.</i></b>								65	<b>65</b>
<b>Woods, H.S.</b>					59				<b>59</b>
<b>Darmody and Zwick</b>							58		<b>58</b>

#### ***4.3. Most cited contributions on surveillance capitalism***

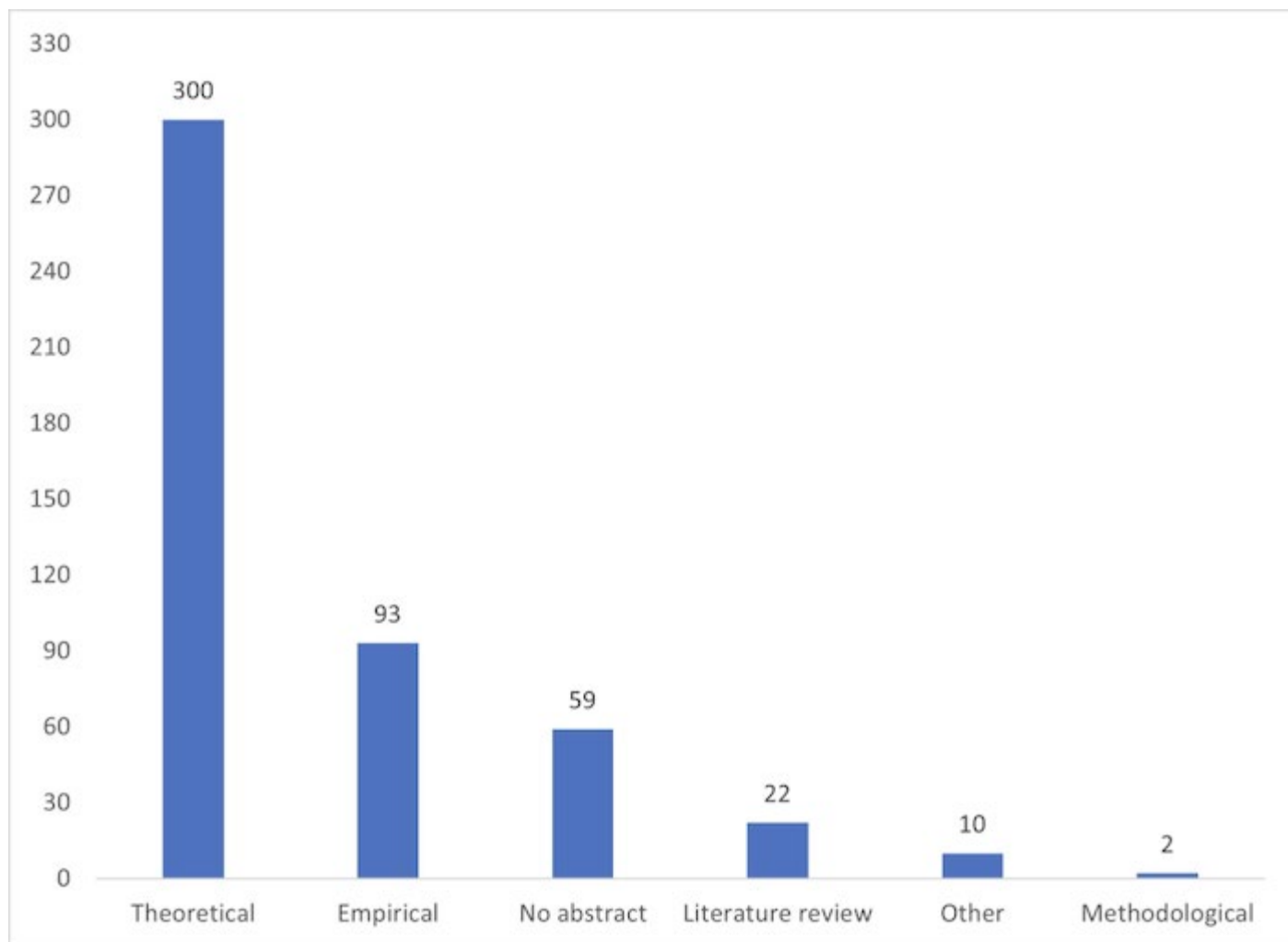
When considering different types of contributions dealing with the concept of SC, a clear predominance of papers oriented toward theoretical aims emerge. [Figure 2](#) shows that theoretical papers surpass all other types combined. In this predominant category, of course, falls Shoshana Zuboff (2015), but also more recent contributions introducing new perspectives to the issue of interest, especially when it comes to resisting surveillance capitalism (Borradaile and Reeves, 2020) or acknowledging its threats to an economic system (Clarke, 2019), social equality (Cinnamon, 2017), or individual freedom (Firmino, *et al.*, 2019).

With respect to analyzed contributions engaging empirically with issues related to SC, scholars relied on interviews to study activists' attitudes and behaviors toward the practice of surveillance and resistance to it (Dencik, *et al.*, 2016). Interviews and focus groups have also been used to study everyday life experiences with smart speaker technologies, which are considered one of the most invasive tools in household spaces (Pridmore and Mols, 2020). Ethnography is another research approach used by researchers in analyzed papers. Specifically, ethnographic projects have been conducted to study practices of co-surveillance among family members (Barassi, 2020) or self-tracking on health and fitness platforms (Ochs, *et al.*, 2021). Digital approaches are present as well, with authors mapping third-party services on top EU sites, directly analyzing the most used EU Web sites (Helles and Lomborg, 2020).

As [Figure 2](#) indicates, *Scopus* contained some articles with no abstracts. Nevertheless, they were not excluded from the analysis since other metrics, such as the number of citations or date of publication, which had been previously considered, could still be informative for a general picture of the concept of interest across the literature.

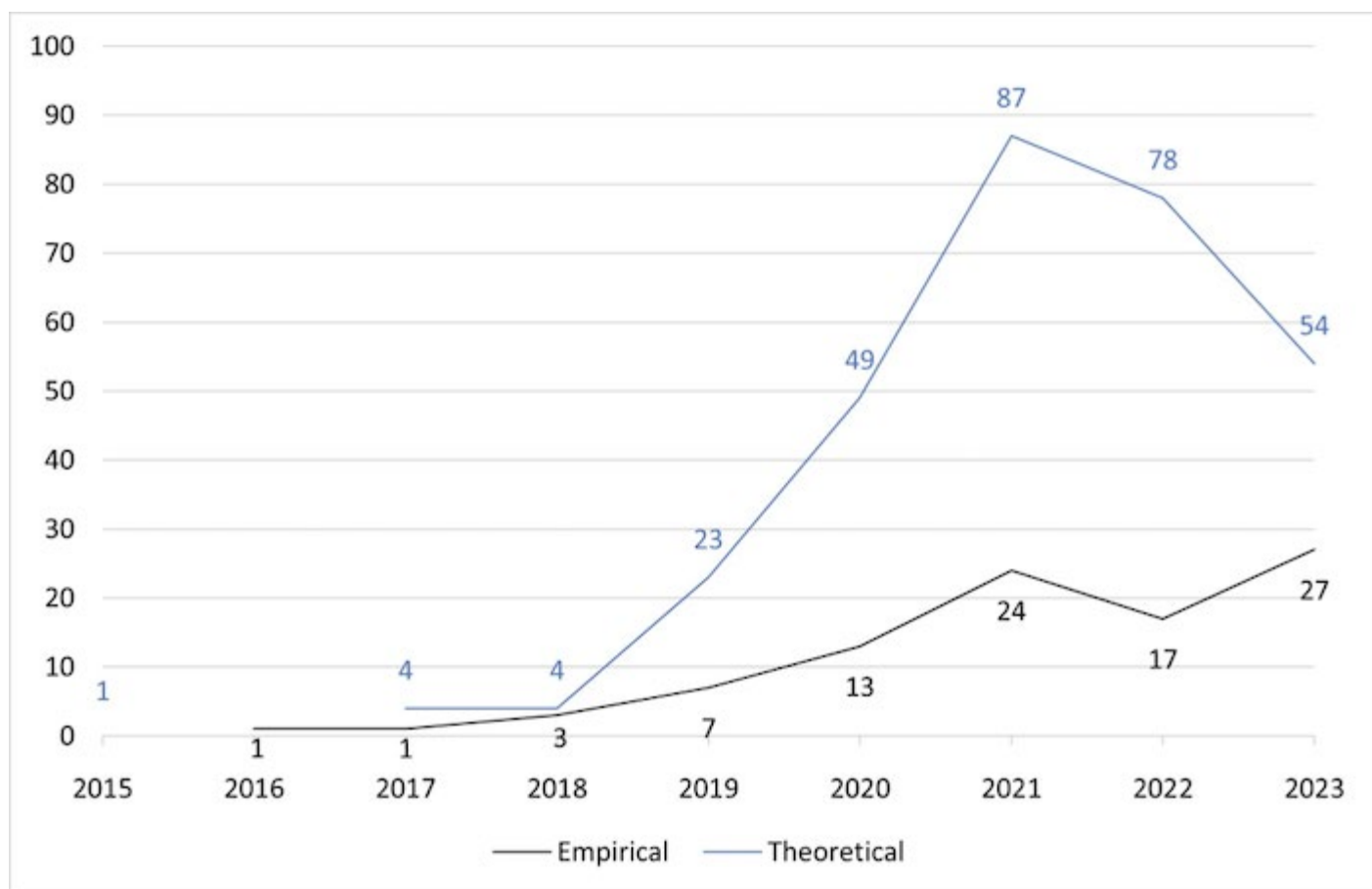
Some literature review contributions have been published as well, still not covering the concept of SC directly. The downloaded literature engage with issues such as surveillance studies in general, as already mentioned above (Galič, *et al.*, 2017), the specific topic of data brokers, namely those actors whose main business is the extraction, management, and selling of user data (Reviglio, 2022), or the assessment of threats to democracy posed by the digital (Kuehn and Salter, 2020).

Just two contributions in the analyzed database were included in the “methodological” category. The first explores methodological issues in law and economics in the face of the behavioral turn in the two disciplines (Deakin, 2021). The second suggests a toolkit for evaluating mobile apps (Kuntsman, *et al.*, 2019).



**Figure 2:** Number of published contributions in each category.

A closer look at the evolution over time of the two main types of contributions, as pictured in [Figure 3](#), illustrates that the growth rate of empirical contributions has been considerably slower compared to theoretical ones.



**Figure 3:** Empirical and theoretical contributions over time.

#### 4.4. Most recurrent keywords

As a last point in the descriptive mapping of scientific contributions engaging with SC, the analysis of most recurrent keywords and their co-occurrence suggest that three main topics emerge among the others. [Table 2](#) and [Figure 4](#) show that “privacy,” “big data,” and “surveillance” are the most used terms by authors, and they constitute the center of networks of less diffused topics that connect to them. With respect to “privacy,” authors engage with its perceptions by users in several practices and related to several technologies, such as smart speakers (Pridmore and Mols, 2020), health and fitness trackers (Ochs, *et al.*, 2021), mobile apps (Kuntsman, *et al.*, 2019), and artificial intelligence (Saura, *et al.*, 2022). Other scholars also use more specific categorization of the keyword “privacy,” such as the case of “relational privacy” and the development of proper data agency in younger generations, which however is quite complicated for teachers to transfer to students (Vartiainen, *et al.*, 2022).

Table 2: Top 10 most recurrent keywords.	
Keyword	Occurrences
surveillance	42
privacy	41
big data	32



already pass the surveillance of users (Steinhoff, 2022). Nevertheless, several contributions reported the keyword “surveillance”, which is of course connected with the previous two, but especially with “big data” (Andrew and Baker, 2021). Scholars engaged with surveillance carried out by corporations like Facebook (Rider and Wood, 2019), but also by states, as revealed by Edward Snowden (Stevens and Allen-Robertson, 2021). In [Figure 4](#) “surveillance” appeared to be closely connected with the keyword “democracy”, which is not largely represented, but still very important. It had been already mentioned in the literature trying to describe the main digital threats to democracy, while offering possible solutions (Kuehn and Salter, 2020).

“Datafication” was another used term, where scholars used it in works related to digital platforms, such as AirBnB, where it was seen as a means to increase control over users (Minca and Roelofsen, 2021). Others applied it to describe practices and phenomena occurring within families and involving children, where business logic and surveillance were applied to toys and household spaces (Barassi, 2019; Mascheroni, 2020).

“Artificial intelligence” also appeared, as in Saura, *et al.*, (2022) and Steinhoff (2022). Woods (2018) engaged with this issue by critically focusing on the use of feminine voices in AI voice assistants. Finally, the presence of a cluster developing around contributions to COVID-19 seems worth mentioning (French, *et al.*, 2022; Kitchin, 2020).

A crucial keyword seems to be missing — “value”. In fact, the whole SC system is explicitly designed for extracting economic value from user data — a value that is rarely redistributed within society (Arvidsson, 2020). SC is composed of and functions thanks to an inextricable network of business partners (van der Vlist and Helmond, 2021) for whom data have different utilities and value. Finally, SC falls in a social context made by a set of heterogeneous actors (public institutions, legislators, political parties, activities, consumers) for which data have very different meanings, and, consequently, value(s). Therefore, it would be of great importance to know more about the economic processes of data valorization as well as the societal understanding of them.



## 5. Discussion

This systematic literature review demonstrates that the concept of SC has been explored by a significant number of contributions over the past decade. Shoshana Zuboff and her writings led this research. Interestingly, most of the contributions published so far have been oriented toward theoretical contributions, leaving empirical inquiries related to SC quite reduced. Since its first introduction, the concept seems theoretically mature and in need of further empirical exploration. Therefore, we advocate for an increased number of empirical studies on SC in the future.

Earlier we explored the main analyzed issues in studies dealing with SC. Through an analysis of keywords, three main topics stand out, namely privacy, big data, and surveillance. We will now delve further into these, considering how they are framed by existing literature, not necessarily related to SC. We will suggest possible empirical paths to further explore them and strengthen the knowledge of SC. In addition to these three topics, we will introduce a fourth one, which did not emerge directly from the analysis of keywords but is valuable in achieving the same aim.

### 5.1. Privacy and beyond

Many scholars consider privacy a relevant topic of research and analysis when dealing with issues related to SC (Helm and Seubert, 2020; Huey, 2012; Hulsey and Reeves, 2014; Liu, 2011; Luther and Radovic, 2012; Marwick and boyd, 2018). Scholars have stressed how privacy has become a sort of currency within the contemporary datafied environment (Hulsey and Reeves, 2014; West, 2019). However, privacy protection is no easy task for a single user experiencing the digital environment. Therefore, many users decide to

surrender their personal data online, a phenomenon that has been widely described as “fatigue” (Choi, *et al.*, 2018), “helplessness” (Cho, 2022), “realism” (Dencik and Cable, 2017), “cynicism” (Hoffmann, *et al.*, 2016; Lutz, *et al.*, 2020), “apathy” (Hargittai and Marwick, 2016), or “resignation” (Draper and Turow, 2019).

In general, the significant attention that scholars have dedicated to privacy has contributed to the development of a perspective about it. Initially, it was considered as a largely individual matter, mainly related to personal control over one’s own information, building on the liberal tradition of individualism (Helm and Seubert, 2020). More recently, scholars have introduced the notion that privacy should be viewed as a collective matter due to its broader effects (Helm and Seubert, 2020; Huey, 2012; Margulis and Marx, 2012; McStay, 2020; Pizzul, 2023). As a result, they proposed a variety of concepts such as “big data ethics” (Mittelstadt and Floridi, 2016), “data justice” (Dencik, *et al.*, 2016), and “group privacy” (Helm, 2016).

Privacy is a central issue when dealing with SC. However, there are other significant dimensions of user relationships within the logics of personal data extraction and exploitation. We envisage two possible paths to address two considerably neglected issues in this area, that is: a) public awareness of processes of value creation; and, b) the broader social impact of data appropriation. The former could be effectively tackled through survey research, in order to elaborate “innovative” questions useful to measure user perceptions of SC in general, rather than privacy specifically. For example, *ad hoc* questions on attitudes toward targeted advertising or conducive to self-assess the economic value of personal data could be of use. Instead, the latter could be addressed by drawing on the large corpus of articles — mainly in the area of data journalism and investigative digital journalism — that explain how mass tracking and the trade of personal data can cause significant harms to certain social groups as well as society at large (Taylor, 2016), including discriminatory targeting, targeting of vulnerable people, commodification of human life for commercial gain (Angwin, *et al.*, 2017; Amnesty International, 2021; Perrigo, 2023). The research challenge here is not so much about gathering evidence, but rather systematizing this large corpus of data through analysis — computational thematic analysis (Nelson, 2020), algorithmic content analysis (Lewis, *et al.*, 2013), and coherent social theorizations.

## **5.2. Big data and their relation to digital platforms**

There has been a “turn to data” (Couldry, 2018; Milan and van ver Velden, 2016), a radical transformation affecting business, politics, social life, and the social sciences. The phrase “big data” quickly became widely known and adopted but its definition is not easy to establish. In general, scholars tend to agree that big data have four main characteristics: volume, velocity, variety, and veracity. These four features, colloquially known as “4 Vs”, indicate large amounts of information, their speed of production and flow, different types of materials (numerical data, images, audio, video), and the utility that comes with big data (Favaretto, *et al.*, 2019; Matzner, 2016; Tufekci, 2014).

In business, marketing was directly influenced by big data (Pridmore and Zwick, 2011). Historically, marketing has always aimed at understanding consumer wants and needs, in order to shape more effective strategies (Manzerolle and Smeltzer, 2011). Due to the development of digital technologies and the rise of big data, this task became more detailed and pervasive (Arvidsson, 2004; Pridmore and Zwick, 2011). Progressively, big data extraction has been also performed to articulate domains of the online world, such as understanding human emotional life (McStay, 2020), and moderating user generated content (Rieder and Skop, 2021). Furthermore, the turn to data reached offline fields, largely due to the pressure of firms eager to influence customers as comprehensively as possible, such as in households through smart speaker technologies (Burdon and Cohen, 2021; Pridmore, *et al.*, 2019; Pridmore and Mols, 2020; West, 2019), fitness and health through wearable devices (Gidaris, 2019), or in-store shopping behavior through Wi-Fi and Bluetooth (Levy and Barocas, 2018). Within an economy largely based on the exploitation of sources of information, power is in the hands of those who can manage this information effectively (Arvidsson, 2016; Beer, 2018; Hintz, *et al.*, 2017). Digital platform have emerged as quite significant as a result. Platforms have features of both firms and markets, working as intermediaries for digital activities,

collecting, producing, and accumulating data (Helm and Seubert, 2020; Spiekermann, 2019; van Dijck, *et al.*, 2019; West, 2019).

Usually, scholars have identified five platforms: Alphabet-Google, Amazon, Meta-Facebook, Apple, and Microsoft (Helm and Seubert, 2020; van Dijck, *et al.*, 2019). The power of those big five has become so pervasive that van Dijck and colleagues proposed new paradigms for their analysis not simply focusing on their economic impact. Platforms should be considered as part of a larger ecosystem that goes beyond a given firm with effects not only on consumers, but on a broader citizenship. The highly tailored products and services that platforms are able to offer through data exploitation make citizens and societies increasingly dependent on activities of platforms, granting them significant power accumulation, from economic, social, and political points of view (van Dijck, *et al.*, 2019).

We suggest that, to extend knowledge on big data and SC, a connection should be built with the rich literature on digital platforms (Helm and Seubert, 2020; Spiekermann, 2019; van Dijck, *et al.*, 2019; West, 2019). Reflecting on the relationship between these actors and big data is a valuable path forward to consider the value that big data has in the current economy and society. A reasonable empirical solution to explore these issues is to analyze how big data analysis and big data value is framed in official documents, media interviews, posts, and other outlets by digital platforms, mainly through document analysis. Van der Vlist and Helmond (2021) took this sort of approach, by combining digital methods and document analysis, mapped (and made visible) the intricate infrastructure of business intermediaries (such as platforms, data brokers, data vendors, data suppliers, data analysts, developers, marketers, advertising agencies) that collaborate in valorizing user data for the digital advertising industry. Remaining in the domain of digital methods, there has been very promising work done by the App Studies Initiative [6] (Dieter, *et al.*, 2019; Gerlitz, *et al.*, 2019), and particularly their ‘critical technical practice’ (CTP) approach (Chao, *et al.*, 2024). By inspecting the ‘distributed infrastructure of apps’ source codes’, CTP identifies, with a high degree of detail, the kind of data that platforms extract from mobile devices (*e.g.*, sensory data acquired from accelerometers or gyroscopes on smartphones), thus, going beyond the information available on official documentation (*e.g.*, AppManifests). In this same line of research, it is also worth mentioning Alaimo and Kallinikos’ (2018) description of the programmatic advertising ecosystem, based on document analysis and industry expert interviews as well as Reviglio’s (2022) systematic account of data brokers activities and business goals, also based on document analysis.

### ***5.3. Surveillance and the culture of surveillance***

Surveillance studies have a long tradition in social science dating at least to the 1980s. Initially, scholars were interested largely in state and workplace surveillance. In the 1990s surveillance practices, once the domain of specific actors, seemed to reach the whole society, paralleling the progressive diffusion of the Internet (Lyon, 2015). Lyon’s research examined different cultures of surveillance, suggesting that there were multiple ways of considering this issue. For example, Lyon (2019) reflected on how we experience surveillance in everyday life as well as changing attitudes towards surveillance based on different life situations or environments. It could be the case, as an example, of smart speakers raising surveillance concerns (Pridmore, *et al.*, 2019), or the practices of counter-surveillance aimed at specific groups (Dencik, *et al.*, 2016; Milan and van ver Velden, 2016; van der Vlist, 2017).

Lyon (2017) argued that the idea of an agent of surveillance, often pictured in the past as the surveillance state, was not adequate for the present, labeled as digital modernity. Lyon suggested that we should focus on surveillance *imaginaries* and *practices*, to study how surveillance is conceived by different groups and in different contexts, and consequently, is accepted, negotiated, or rejected. Furthermore, Lyon (2019) encouraged researchers to employ a (more) cultural approach in their studies on SC, in order to better understand its effects on everyday life. Some empirical studies have followed his suggestions (Duffy and Chan, 2019; Lupton, 2021; Sörum and Fuentes, 2023). We suggest a double empirical path to further develop this sub-topic; the former more suitable to map imaginaries of SC, the latter its practices. At the macro level, studies of digital methods seem promising for exploring macro-discourses on SC within digital environments. For example, researchers could follow *ad hoc* keywords related to specific devices of

consumer surveillance (such as #Ads, #algorithms, #cookies) on social media, in order to map different communities aggregating around them as well as the various “imaginaries” that they articulate. At the micro level, qualitative and ethnographic studies on surveillance artifacts in everyday life (Seaver, 2017), such as smart speakers or wearable devices, could be successful research strategies in order to better observe the actual practices of compliance, negotiation, and resistance by individuals. To this purpose, particularly useful (and innovative) are post-phenomenological interviews (Adams and Thompson, 2011; Mardon, *et al.*, 2023) and walkthrough methods (Light, *et al.*, 2018; Sörum and Fuentes, 2023). The former entail a protocol of interview that is explicitly designed to trigger participant imagination, proposing stimuli like: ‘imagine writing a letter to your favorite platform and express your feelings to it; and/or imagine the opposite’. The latter allows researchers to experience and observe directly the user journey within a given app or platform, across different key phases — installation, use, manipulation, uninstallation (see also Martinek, *et al.*, 2023).

Valuable suggestions have been derived from empirical studies on algorithmic imaginaries. For instance, Bucher (2017) studied the Facebook algorithm imaginaries among users, guided by these research questions: “In what situations do people become aware of algorithms? How do they experience and make sense of these algorithms, given their hidden and invisible nature?” [7]. She relied on a qualitative approach based on the recruitment of participants via Twitter and written e-mail interviews. Instead, regarding the sphere of practices more specifically, literature on “algorithmic resistance” (Bonini and Treré, 2023) — mostly based on qualitative interviews and/or ethnographic observations — seems to offer interesting insights on how people encounter mechanisms of SC in different everyday contexts as well as about the different mundane strategies that they develop to manage it (Airoldi and Rokka, 2022), ranging from individual (Ruckenstein and Granroth, 2020), artistic (Velkova and Kaun, 2021), to political (Bonini, *et al.*, 2023).

#### **5.4. Platformization of consumer culture**

This last possible path of future research does not directly emerge from the previous analysis. It could be an interesting one, since it can provide some useful insights into the impact of SC on culture in digital societies. Consider also that this path inserts itself in the fast-growing strand of research on platformization (Poell, *et al.*, 2022, 2019). We previously argued that the largest share of power in datafied activities occurring online is held by those who gather, manage, and analyze user personal data, which are usually digital platforms (Arvidsson, 2016; Beer, 2018; Hintz, *et al.*, 2017). Therefore, even though consumers are a source of this valuable asset, consumer power is decreasing (Andrejevic, 2011; Draper, 2012). Even some activities that seem to empower users, such as opportunities to create content and express opinions, result in opportunities for corporate entities to browse large sources of information, exploiting user-generated content, and turn it into valuable assets (Andrejevic, 2011). In this scenario, basic principles that guided free-market economics so far, namely customer sovereignty and autonomy, seem to vanish in a pervasive use of data (Darmody and Zwick, 2020; Manzerolle and Smeltzer, 2011).

These elements connect to one of the elements of Zuboff’s analysis on SC that in turn put them into another perspective. Zuboff showed that the goal of surveillance capitalists is not just monitoring and exploiting user and consumer behaviors, but also trying to manipulate and orient them towards standardization so their behaviors would be easier to anticipate (Zuboff, 2019). Some recent contributions precisely demonstrated that consumer culture, especially on social media platforms and due to their affordances, is oriented towards increased standardization (Caliandro and Anselmi, 2021; Zhang, 2021). A recent special issue on platformization of consumer culture (Caliandro, *et al.*, 2024) pointed out how content production by consumers on digital platforms is characterized by a particular tension between ephemerality and standardization: user posts (about brands, products, services) tend to assume a “contingent” format, where users attach repetitive expressive forms. See, for example, fast-paced short clips on TikTok that consumers use for memetic challenges (Zulli and Zulli, 2020; Verdú and Aguaded, 2022). Since this peculiar cultural production propagates through “cultural modules” (Agre, 1997) — that is, through specific platform grammars (Gerlitz and Rieder, 2018) and vernaculars (Gibbs, *et al.*, 2015), which are by definition traceable (Bounegru, 2023) — it becomes possible to measure not only if and to what extent consumer

expressions become “data-ready.” It also is possible to test for global cultural trends of resistance to platformization. If these cultural modules are heterogeneous, fragmented, and changing over time, they are less amenable to conversion into “prediction products” (Zuboff, 2019). An understanding of the evolution of the roles of consumers is still largely unexplored. It is a potentially another research path that we would like to propose as a result of this study. Empirically, we suggest exploring this issue mainly through digital and computational methods (Rogers, 2019; Rieder, 2023).

<b>Table 3: Synthesis of the aims and empirical strategies for four new research paths.</b>		
<b>Subtopic</b>	<b>Aim</b>	<b>Empirical research strategies</b>
Privacy and beyond	Explore other significant dimensions of user relationships with the logics of data extraction and exploitation beyond privacy, by focusing on: a) public awareness of processes of value creation; b) the broader social impact of data appropriation.	Survey research measuring user perceptions of SC in general, rather than privacy.  Qualitative analysis of large corpus of journalistic articles showing how surveillance cause significant harms to certain social groups.
Big data and digital platforms	Consider the value big data have in the nowadays economy and society by reflecting on how digital platforms engage with it.	Document analysis on official documents, media interviews, posts, other outlets by digital platforms to explore how big data value is framed.  CTP approach.
Surveillance and the culture of surveillance	Focus on surveillance imaginaries and practices, to study how surveillance is conceived by different groups and in different contexts.	To study imaginaries: digital methods projects, focusing, for example, on <i>ad hoc</i> keywords related to specific devices of consumer surveillance on social media.  Post-phenomenological interviews on how platforms are perceived.  To study practices:

		qualitative and ethnographic studies on surveillance artifacts in everyday life.  Walkthrough method.
Platformization of consumer culture	Assess the impact of SC on culture in digital societies by focusing specifically on pushes towards standardization.	Digital and computational methods, focusing on the evolution of consumer roles online.

## 6. Conclusion

“Surveillance capitalism” represents a new logic of accumulation of contemporary businesses framed by Zuboff (2015). Despite being a relatively recent perspective, it has garnered relevant attention in academic literature. The concept is promising in identifying an approach to business, predominantly executed by platforms, where customer data is gathered and analyzed to predict behaviors for commercial purposes. Furthermore, it describes the aims of platforms to manipulate and guide consumer behaviors towards standardization, which would additionally increase and facilitate a variety of extractive purposes (Zuboff, 2019).


A comprehensive mapping of available contributions on the concept is still lacking. We addressed this gap by analyzing 486 papers mentioning SC, downloaded from *Scopus* and *Web of Science*. Our findings indicate a consistent growth in contributions since 2018, with theoretical contributions being significantly more prevalent than empirical ones. We argue that, 10 years after the concept’s introduction, empirical inquiries should be favored to explore SC in different social contexts.

Additionally, our analysis of the most used keywords in the literature suggests that contributions covering SC most often relate it to the concepts of surveillance, privacy, and big data. Artificial intelligence and datafication are also significantly present topics. Notably absent are reflections on the value related to SC’s extractive activities. In our opinion this is a notable gap, since the very logic of SC hinges on the extraction, monopolization, and exploitation of economic value embedded in digital data of individuals (Sadowski, 2019). Furthermore, there exists a complex network of heterogeneous stakeholders (such as public institutions, legislators, marketing agents, data brokers, activists, and consumers), gravitating around the surveillance capitalism system, for which data has different meanings and, consequently, value(s).

It must be acknowledged that our analytical approach had some limitations. First, as demonstrated, the topic of interest is highly complex and multifaceted. Our literature review revealed that it spans diverse academic territories, including communication studies, Internet studies, algorithmic studies, platform studies, digital economy, and marketing, among others. Consequently, detecting relevant literature solely through simple keyword searches such as “surveillance capitalism” may leave much behind. To address this limitation, future studies should adopt an iterative keyword selection process, ideally in at least two stages. Initially, a first pool of articles could be identified using basic keyword searches. Then, this initial literature set could be analyzed to extract additional, more refined keywords for a second round of literature collection. Additionally, expanding the analysis by incorporating further databases beyond the two used here could

enhance the study. Future research may also consider including grey literature — such as reports and media coverage — which was excluded from this study.

Despite these limitations, our analysis highlights critical gaps in the existing literature, most notably the scarcity of empirical studies. To address this, we have proposed four potential research directions to inspire further contributions on surveillance capitalism and to advance the concept by integrating findings and methodologies from various disciplines. First, we propose focusing on the widely diffused issue of privacy and moving beyond it, expanding to consider additional dimensions of people's awareness of surveillance capitalism, including public awareness of processes of value creation and the broader social impact of data appropriation. For the former aim, we recommend renewing some inputs in standard survey research, while for the latter, we suggest relying on digital methods projects, drawing, for instance, on the large corpus of journalistic articles. Second, by focusing on the role that digital platforms have in extracting, managing, and using big data, we suggested empirically investigating, through document analysis, how they perceive their value. Third, we discuss surveillance imaginaries and practices and how they can be studied through macro digital methods projects or qualitative and ethnographic studies at the micro level. Lastly, we cover the platformization of consumer culture as an additional research direction that, by leveraging digital methods, could focus on an additional dimension of SC, which is often less considered — namely, that capitalists aim not only to monitor and exploit user and consumer behaviors but also to manipulate and steer them towards standardization, making their behaviors more predictable (Zuboff, 2019).

These four research paths could be valuable solutions to further develop a concept that has been very useful in analyzing contemporary business logics but needs constant updating to keep up with the fast transformations in the digital domain. Elaborating empirically grounded reflections on SC, in our opinion, is the best way to move forward positively. Furthermore, we believe that building bridges between the different disciplines that have been analyzing the many facets of the digital domain is an essential step for trying to navigate its complexity. 

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## Notes

[1](#) Lyon, 2007, p. 14.

[2](#) Galič, *et al.*, 2017, p. 24.

3. Zuboff, 2015, p. 75.

4. *Ibid.*

5. Zuboff, 2015, p. 85.

6. See <http://appstudies.org/>.

7. Bucher, 2017, p. 31.

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