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How to cite: Zhang P, Yu Y, Fu S. Digital Surveillance in the Workplace: Trust, Discipline, and Respect. Textile & Leather Review. 2026; 9:1628-1646. <https://doi.org/10.31881/TLR.2026.1628>

How to link: <https://doi.org/10.31881/TLR.2026.1628>

Published: 25 April 2026

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Digital Surveillance in the Workplace: Trust, Discipline, and Respect

Peng Zhang^{1†}, Yao Yu^{2†}, Shuangle Fu^{2*}

¹Jiangsu Guoxin Research Institute Co., Ltd., No. 38, Hongwu Road, Qinhuai District, Nanjing 210024, Jiangsu, China

²School of Social and Behavioral Sciences, Nanjing University, No. 163, Xianlin Road, Qixia District, Nanjing 210023, Jiangsu, China

†Peng ZHANG and Yao YU contributed equally to this work, they are both first authors.

*hdsgfsl1101@126.com

Article

<https://doi.org/10.31881/TLR.2026.1628>

Published 25 April 2026

ABSTRACT

With the advancement of technology, digital surveillance in workplaces has increased in recent years. To thoroughly explore the impact of this trend on labor-intensive secondary and tertiary industries, especially its significance for the textile industry, this study analyzes the current status, causes, and impacts of digital surveillance in secondary and tertiary industries in China, such as the textile and domestic service industries, based on interview data and questionnaire survey results. The findings show that factors such as employer mistrust make digital surveillance relatively common. Company training and the growing prevalence of digital surveillance have led most employees to gradually accept it. However, the disciplinary effects of digital surveillance are not evident and may give rise to privacy protection and occupational discrimination issues. Accordingly, this paper proposes the following suggestions: employers should treat employees with respect and trust, balancing digital surveillance with the protection of employee rights; combine management practices with digital surveillance to maintain harmonious labor relations; and use digital surveillance to build an integrity platform, ensuring thorough screening and verification of employees.

KEYWORDS

digital surveillance, trust, discipline, respect, textile industry

INTRODUCTION

Monitoring has always been a fundamental aspect of the employment relationship. Advances in science and technology, combined with decreasing costs and the miniaturization of monitoring devices, have enabled an

increasing number of employers to observe and analyze employee behavior through video surveillance, website tracking, email scanning, and other methods. Consequently, the prevalence of digital monitoring in the workplace continues to rise [1].

Regarding digital surveillance in the workplace, employers generally have ample justification—such as improving productivity and work quality [2] and promptly identifying and addressing safety issues for employees and the workplace [3]—which leaves employees little room to refuse. The feedback terminals of digital surveillance function like the central watchtower of a panopticon prison; employers can observe employee behavior anytime and anywhere, fully exploiting the “panopticon” principle, while employees cannot clearly know whether they are being monitored or when monitoring occurs. When employees realize they are constantly being watched, they tend to self-manage and self-restrain—this is the disciplinary effect of digital surveillance [4].

Digital monitoring provides many conveniences and safeguards for businesses and employers, and most employees understand it and either actively or passively accept it. However, when the scope of monitoring is inappropriate, several problems arise: violations of personal privacy and freedom [5], increased stress that can lead to fatigue, burnout, or even depression [6,7], a decline in trust between employers and employees [8], a distancing of the employment relationship [9], reduced job satisfaction [10], and potential disruption of normal work processes.

The rise of digital surveillance is particularly relevant across various manufacturing and service sectors, including the textile industry, which often employs large numbers of workers in environments where monitoring is easily implemented and justified by quality control or safety concerns. Understanding the broad impact of digital surveillance is crucial for maintaining harmonious labor relations and high productivity in labor-intensive sectors. Based on interview data and questionnaire survey results, this study analyzes the current status, causes, and impacts of digital surveillance in secondary and tertiary industries in China, such as the textile and domestic service industries.

In recent years, the domestic service industry has developed rapidly. However, because the work takes place in private households, higher industry standards are needed, and serious incidents have occurred—such as the arson case involving a nanny in Hangzhou and the suffocation death of an 83-year-old woman caused by a nanny. Consequently, safety has become a widely discussed issue among the public and employers.

Considering these factors, an increasing number of employers are installing cameras at home, hoping to monitor the household and domestic workers' activities through digital surveillance.

In the domestic service industry, what proportion of employers install cameras in their homes, and has digital surveillance become a common phenomenon? How do domestic workers perceive this practice by their employers? These new questions require in-depth analysis and discussion. However, current research on digital surveillance exhibits an "industry blind spot," overlooking its impact on the domestic service sector. To address the shortcomings of existing studies, this paper uses interview transcripts and questionnaire data to analyze the current state of digital surveillance in domestic services and the associated issues, and to explore the underlying reasons. Specifically, the paper focuses on the prevalence and causes of digital surveillance in domestic work settings, domestic workers' attitudes toward such monitoring, and the effects of digital surveillance on their work and personal lives.

EXPERIMENTAL

Materials and Methods

The data used in this paper come from the National Social Science Fund key project "Research on Employment Relationships of Domestic Workers in the Internet Era." The project team conducted qualitative interviews with domestic workers and domestic service agencies, as well as a 2019 questionnaire survey of domestic workers in four cities.

From July 2017 to June 2019, the research team surveyed 22 domestic service agencies in cities such as Beijing and Nanjing, as well as 26 domestic workers in locations including Nanjing (Jiangsu) and Jishou (Hunan). The investigation of agencies primarily employed face-to-face interviews and symposiums, while domestic workers were interviewed using semi-structured questionnaires. The interview duration for each participant ranged from 30 to 150 minutes. This study collected several case studies and compiled a large amount of interview material; the basic information of the interview data used in this paper is shown in Table 1. These materials are used to analyze the digital monitoring faced by domestic workers (The reason we selected these nine workers from the original pool of 26 is that only they explicitly mentioned digital monitoring; the others did not).

Table 1. Basic Information of Interviewees

No.	Name of the interviewee	Interview date	The work of the interviewee	Years of work experience	Interview duration (min)	City
1	LY	January 9, 2019	Junior management personnel of a domestic service company	9 years	50	Nanjing
2	WA	January 5, 2019	Cooking and stir-frying	5 years	120	Nanjing
3	XG	September 25, 2019	Cleaning	9 months	60	Nanjing
4	GJ	January 5, 2019	Take care of infants and young children	More than 10 years	150	Nanjing
5	ZL	January 5, 2019	Cooking and stir-frying	7 years	120	Nanjing
6	HC	January 19, 2019	Take care of newborns and postpartum women	16 years	70	Nanjing
7	TH	February 19, 2019	Cleaning	9 years	90	Jishou
8	ZS	September 25, 2019	Cleaning	6 months	70	Nanjing
9	DJ	September 25, 2019	Cleaning	1 year	50	Nanjing

The research team conducted a questionnaire survey of domestic workers in four cities—Nanjing (Jiangsu), Wuxi (Jiangsu), Guangzhou (Guangdong), and Foshan (Guangdong)—from June to August 2019 (hereafter referred to as the “2019 Domestic Workers Survey in Four Cities”). The survey employed Respondent-Driven Sampling (RDS), which effectively addressed the lack of a scientific sampling frame in domestic worker research, achieving a balanced sample that approximates a random sample. A total of 1,029 questionnaires were collected, of which 1,007 were valid, yielding a validity rate of 97.86%. The 2019 Domestic Workers Survey examined the digital surveillance faced by domestic workers. Specific issues investigated included whether cameras were installed in the primary workplace—the employer’s private household—how domestic workers perceived employers’ use of cameras for digital monitoring, and whether they felt discriminated against because of their status as domestic workers (The qualitative interview sites differ from those of the quantitative survey for two main reasons. First, the qualitative interviews were conducted before the quantitative survey, primarily in representative cities, to explore, generate concepts, and elucidate mechanisms. Second, the quantitative survey covered a much broader geographic area, allowing us to test the mechanisms on a larger scale, identify general patterns, and ensure the findings and conclusions are both

robust and generalizable. By combining the two approaches, we achieve both broad applicability of the conclusions and rich, contextualized explanations).

RESULTS

Present Situation of Digital Surveillance and Employee Attitudes

Present Situation: Relatively Common

The manager of a housekeeping company said, “Most clients’ homes have cameras installed... (based on what I know) about 90% of employers’ houses have cameras” (No. 1). A domestic worker also noted, “Many clients (i.e., employers) have cameras at home” (No. 8). However, a few workers reported, “Some people do install cameras at home, but it’s quite rare” (No. 7). These statements show a large discrepancy in the perceived proportion of employers who install cameras, according to workers and managers. What is the actual prevalence of camera installation in employers’ homes? Are there regional differences? Table 2 presents the overall digital monitoring situation in Nanjing, Wuxi, Guangzhou, and Foshan, as well as the details for each city.

Table 2. Digital Surveillance Situation (F/%)

Ctiy	Installing Cameras in the Employer’s Home		
	Yes	No	Not Clear
Total (N=1,005)	258 (25.67)	643 (63.98)	104 (10.35)
Nanjing (N=302)	86 (28.48)	188 (62.25)	28 (9.27)
Wuxi (N=183)	50 (27.32)	113 (61.75)	20 (10.93)
Guangzhou (N=314)	50 (27.32)	230 (73.25)	29 (9.24)
Foshan (N=206)	67 (32.52)	112 (54.37)	27 (13.11)

Note: Two domestic workers did not answer this question, so the sample size included in the analysis was 1,005; the chi-square test results indicated significant urban differences in digital surveillance ($p < 0.001$).

It is clear that more than one-quarter of domestic workers have employers who install surveillance cameras in their homes, while about 10% are uncertain whether their employers’ residences are equipped with

cameras. The city with the highest installation rate is Foshan, where nearly one-third of households have cameras, 15 percentage points higher than the lowest rate in Guangzhou. This indicates that digital monitoring through camera installation is relatively common in employers' homes, but there are marked differences across cities.

Causes: Distrust

Some domestic workers have reported, "Nowadays, almost every employer who has children at home also has a camera installed" (No. 9). This indicates that the presence of infants, toddlers, or elderly individuals in need of care is a major reason why employers install surveillance devices. However, it also reveals a deeper issue: the problem of trust inherent in the domestic service industry. Earlier, a staff member from a housekeeping company even remarked, "The cameras in clients' homes actually stem from a lack of trust" (No. 1).

In the workplace, close monitoring and surveillance are carried out because people in positions of authority do not trust their employees [11-13]. In the domestic service industry, employers choose to install cameras at home primarily because the household owners and domestic workers are relatively unfamiliar with each other and have not yet built sufficient trust. Moreover, reports of severe incidents such as abuse of the elderly and children make employers uneasy about entrusting their children, elders, or even the entire household to a domestic worker. Consequently, they seek to supervise the worker's performance virtually, hoping to detect any abusive behavior toward the elderly or children in a timely manner.

As a domestic service company manager put it:

"Although the employer says, 'I trust you,' we install cameras just to see what's happening at home. He says it that way, but deep down he's still worried that the worker might not treat the children well." (No. 1)

A domestic worker expressed a similar view:

"I had an employer who installed several cameras at his house. Later he sent me a video on WeChat showing an aunt in the elevator scolding and hitting a baby. She said, 'I'm sending this to you so you don't take it the wrong way.' I didn't overthink it; I hadn't done anything wrong, so why should he discriminate against me? I told him the same. When he sent me the video, it felt like a subtle hint." (No. 2)

Employee Attitude: Acceptable

The views of domestic workers on employers' digital surveillance through installed cameras vary (see Table 3).

Table 3. Employees' Opinions on Employers' Digital Surveillance (N=258)

Description Item	F (%)	
How do you view the installation of cameras in employers' homes	Hard to accept	4 (1.55)
	Not quite acceptable	10 (3.88)
	It doesn't matter	91 (35.27)
	Can be accepted	99 (38.37)
	Very acceptable	54 (20.93)

As shown in Table 3, nearly 60% of domestic workers indicate they accept it (including "can be accepted" and "very acceptable"), more than one-fifth say they are very acceptable, and only about 5% find it difficult to accept or are not very acceptable. Overall, domestic workers hold a positive attitude toward the presence of cameras in employers' homes, suggesting that their perception of digital monitoring is relatively modern and open-minded.

Interview data reveal that domestic workers' openness to employers' digital surveillance is closely linked to four key factors:

- (1) The phenomenon of employers installing surveillance cameras at home is gradually increasing. If domestic workers do not accept digital monitoring, they may lose many job opportunities:

"Domestic workers probably realize that most clients (employers) now have these cameras installed. If you refuse, you simply won't be able to get any assignments." (No. 1)
- (2) The employer proactively informs the domestic worker about the presence and exact location of digital monitoring:

"If a client installs camera at home, they will usually tell you... they will let me know where the camera is placed and exactly where it's installed." (No. 6)
- (3) The employer gives a certain reason, such as:

"We installed cameras just to keep an eye on the house... In case everyone is away, we could at least catch a burglar." (No. 1)

The domestic worker had no sufficient grounds to refute this.

(4) The training provided by the housekeeping agency gradually helps domestic workers understand and accept their employers' digital monitoring:

"Some workers ask, 'Why are we installing cameras?' We explain that the cameras are mainly installed to keep an eye on the home and check on the baby. We gently guide them in this way. Eventually, the auntie (the worker) came to accept it." (No. 1)

Overall, due to the widespread presence of digital surveillance and the employer's ample justification, domestic workers lack sufficient grounds to contest it. In order to obtain or retain their jobs, they choose to accept the cameras and gradually become accustomed to this form of digital monitoring. This finding aligns with existing research [9] and corroborates the concept of "participatory surveillance [14]."

Effect: Discipline, Privacy, and Discrimination

Work: Inconspicuous Disciplinary Effect

Existing research indicates that digital surveillance exhibits a "panoptic" characteristic, exerting a disciplining effect on employees. Consequently, does digital surveillance have the same impact on domestic workers in the home service industry?

The manager of the housekeeping company voiced the common sentiment among most domestic workers:

"You can install cameras all you want; I'll just go about my business as usual. I don't steal anything from your home, nor do I hit your children. What do I have to be afraid of?" (No. 1)

The domestic worker also believes that clean hands and feet are a basic professional requirement:

"Since you have chosen this occupation, you must keep your hands and feet clean. Whether the client has installed a camera or not, you should not take anything from the client's premises." (No. 3)

Even when the children under their care throw tantrums at the domestic worker, the worker remains patient and gentle; there is never any slapping or beating of the children:

"The baby won't get up when he's wearing socks and pants. He keeps shouting and screaming, and you (the domestic worker) can only speak to him in a low, submissive tone: 'Come on, get up, Auntie's going to be late. It's already 8:30, you'll be late...' You have to keep your voice soft, coax him slowly, as if he were ordering you, as if he were your master. Honestly, what can you do? You can't scold him, right? There's no camera in this house, so I

can only try to soothe him gently. Hurry up, get up. Look, it's already time; we'll be late for dinner." (No. 2)

Through interviews, it was found that whether the employer's home has installed cameras does not have a significant impact on domestic workers' job performance, and the disciplinary effect of digital surveillance is not evident.

Life: Privacy Protection Issues

Although most domestic workers understand and accept employers' installation of cameras, some, influenced by the norms and regulations of domestic service agencies, view it as a form of protection:

"If a dispute arises, the evidence can speak for itself... so we don't have to argue about who said what or whose belongings went missing. I'm also afraid... I would even suggest that the employers install cameras." (No. 5)

Nevertheless, they have their own concerns—whether personal privacy can be effectively safeguarded.

A domestic helper recounted a personal experience that left the deepest impression on her since she started working in household services:

"(One time) I just entered the bathroom, finished taking off my clothes and showering. My hair got drenched, and I was soaked all over, making it hard to get dressed. The baby started crying, so I ran out without any clothes on. Your camera was still on—could it have filmed me? I was terrified at that moment, you know? I thought, if I'm still inside, the family will see me and it would be a huge embarrassment." (No. 4)

The domestic worker further illustrates this experience. To protect her privacy, she also set a clear boundary regarding the installation of cameras in the employer's home:

"Domestic workers cannot stay in a room that has a camera, especially not the bathroom. For example, once there was a camera in a room, and the domestic workers immediately quit." (No. 1)

Occupation: Social Discrimination

Apart from privacy concerns, the installation of digital surveillance in an employer's home may affect the employment relationship. Although most domestic workers accept the presence of cameras and claim it does not impact their performance, several interviewees repeatedly mentioned digital monitoring, revealing more candid thoughts in their remarks. One worker said:

“I tell my son to study hard. Look at the work your mother does; there are several cameras in the house where I work. He sometimes doesn’t understand, but actually those cameras are also watching you.” (No. 2)

While this worker did not explicitly state a dislike for the employer’s cameras, her comments imply that she perceives the cameras as a means of surveillance—an indication of distrust and a lack of respect toward her. This shows that, although domestic workers understand their employers’ installation of cameras for digital monitoring, they may feel disrespected and mistrusted, even perceiving discrimination. They regard the domestic service profession as having low social status, which leads to dissatisfaction with their occupational standing. Survey data also indicate that digital monitoring is significantly associated with domestic workers’ sense of occupational discrimination and job satisfaction ($p < 0.05$). See Tables 4 and 5.

Table 4. Digital Surveillance and Perceived Occupational Discrimination (N = 1,005)

Installing cameras in the employer’s home	Sense of occupational discrimination		Total
	No	Yes	
Yes	142 (55.04)	116 (44.96)	258 (100.00)
No	418 (65.11)	224 (34.89)	643 (100.00)
Not clear	59 (56.73)	45 (43.27)	104 (100.00)
Chi-square test		9.0834*	

Note: * $p < 0.05$

The interaction analysis results of digital surveillance and perceived occupational discrimination are reported in Table 4. As shown in Table 4, the highest proportion of domestic workers who perceive occupational discrimination—44.96%—are those who are clearly aware that cameras are installed in their employer’s home. The next highest proportion, 43.27%, comes from workers who are uncertain whether cameras are present; this figure is slightly lower than that of workers who know cameras are installed, yet it is nearly 9% higher than the proportion for workers who are certain that no cameras are installed. These results indicate a significant association between digital surveillance and domestic workers’ sense of occupational discrimination ($p < 0.05$).

Table 5. Digital Surveillance and Job Satisfaction (N = 1,005)

Installing cameras in the employer's home	Satisfaction with occupational status		Total
	No	Yes	
Yes	102 (39.53)	156 (60.47)	258 (100.00)
No	200 (31.30)	443 (68.90)	643 (100.00)
Not clear	31 (29.81)	73 (70.19)	104 (100.00)
Chi-square test		6.4862*	

Note: * p < 0.05

The interaction analysis results of digital surveillance and occupational status satisfaction are presented in Table 5. As shown in Table 5, the presence of cameras in the employer's home is significantly associated with domestic workers' satisfaction with their occupational status (p < 0.05). Among domestic workers who are clearly aware that cameras are installed in the employer's home, the proportion who are dissatisfied with their occupational status is the highest at 39.53%, which is markedly higher—by 8 to 10 percentage points—than the proportions for those who know that no cameras are installed or who are uncertain whether cameras are present.

The digital surveillance carried out by employers can increase domestic workers' sense of insecurity, aside from occupational discrimination. Table 6 presents the interaction analysis between digital surveillance and perceived job security. Among the 1,005 domestic workers surveyed, both those who were certain that cameras were installed in the employer's home and those who were unsure whether cameras were present reported feeling unsafe at work at rates exceeding one-fifth—5 to 6 percentage points higher than the workers who knew that no cameras were installed. A chi-square test indicates that digital surveillance and domestic workers' sense of job security are significantly related at the 0.01 level.

Table 6. Digital Surveillance and Job Security (N=1,005)

Installing cameras in the employer's home	Job security		Total
	No	Yes	
Yes	58 (22.48)	200 (77.52)	258 (100.00)
No	104 (16.17)	539 (83.83)	643 (100.00)
Not clear	22 (21.15)	82 (78.85)	104 (100.00)
Chi-square test		5.5240+	

Note: + p < 0.01

Whether it is a sense of job insecurity, dissatisfaction with professional status, or occupational discrimination, any of these factors can lead to a distancing of the relationship between domestic workers and their employers, reduce the domestic workers' satisfaction with the employment relationship, and hinder the maintenance of a stable working partnership. Table 7 presents the interaction analysis results between digital monitoring and domestic workers' satisfaction with the employment relationship.

Table 7. Digital Monitoring and Satisfaction with Employment Relationship (N=1,005)

Installing cameras in the employer's home	Satisfaction with employment Relationship		Total
	No	Yes	
Yes	35 (13.57)	223 (86.43)	258 (100.00)
No	61 (9.49)	582 (90.51)	643 (100.00)
Not clear	16 (15.38)	88 (84.62)	104 (100.00)
Chi-square test		5.2002 ⁺	

Note: + $p < 0.01$

The data analysis shows that workplace digital surveillance is significantly correlated with domestic workers' satisfaction with the employment relationship at the 0.1 level. As shown in Table 7, domestic workers who are certain that their employer's home does not have cameras have the lowest dissatisfaction rate—less than 10%—which is markedly lower than that of workers who are unsure whether cameras are installed (15.38%) and those who know cameras are present (13.57%).

DISCUSSION

The article identifies three issues that deserve attention.

First, the disciplinary effect of digital surveillance may be limited in the domestic service sector. This may be due to several factors: (1) One primary reason employers install cameras is to monitor whether domestic workers commit elder or child abuse. However, most domestic workers are docile and obedient. According to the 2019 Domestic Workers Survey in Four Cities, 91.36% (920 respondents) displayed rational-friendly or compliant-capable personality traits (the S or C types in the DISC model). Consequently, the vast majority of

domestic workers are highly obedient and can handle various situations calmly and rationally when dealing with their employers. Moreover, extreme cases of abuse are generally rare. (2) Most domestic workers have received professional training and possess strong professional ethics. As they often note, clean hands and feet are basic professional requirements. Such ethics enable them to perform well regardless of the presence of digital monitoring. (3) The workplace of domestic workers is a private home, and they are accustomed to working under close supervision by their employers. Therefore, future research on the disciplinary effects of digital surveillance should consider the particularities of this industry.

Second, 10% of domestic workers are unsure whether their employers' homes are equipped with digital surveillance cameras, and more than 40% of these workers perceive occupational discrimination—a proportion that is almost identical to the share who are certain that cameras have been installed. Why does this occur? First, there are three reasons why a domestic worker may not know whether a camera is present in the employer's home: (1) The worker does not pay attention to looking for cameras. (2) No cameras are visible to the naked eye in the home. (3) The employer does not inform the worker about the presence of cameras, yet the worker becomes aware that the employer monitors their performance. In general, domestic workers need to assess the external conditions of their employers' homes in order to work effectively, so the likelihood of the first scenario is relatively low. Consequently, the latter two reasons are the primary factors. This suggests that employers often lack trust and respect for domestic workers, which can easily lead workers to feel discriminated against. Second, when employers install video surveillance at home, domestic workers experience stronger occupational discrimination. Even when workers are uncertain about being monitored, they report a similar sense of discrimination. Possible explanations include: (1) Digital surveillance itself signals a lack of trust from the employer. Even without explicit notification, the mere suspicion of surveillance can be interpreted by workers as a denial of their professional identity, fostering feelings of discrimination. (2) Uncertainty about surveillance creates a perceived loss of control; workers worry about being observed at any moment, which heightens the sense of discrimination. (3) Ambiguity tends to generate more suspicion than known surveillance because workers cannot discern the employer's motives. Research shows that unpredictable digital monitoring—or the perception that surveillance aims to catch inappropriate behavior—leads to negative emotional attitudes [15] and reduced fairness perceptions [16]. (4) Surveillance intrudes on private space. Even the possibility of intrusion can make workers expect privacy violations, producing

negative emotions comparable to those caused by actual monitoring. Thus, both uncertainty about monitoring and explicit monitoring share similar psychological mechanisms: they trigger perceptions of mistrust, privacy invasion, and professional discrimination. The anxiety in the former stems from a lack of information, whereas the anxiety in the latter arises from clear information. Both ultimately undermine job satisfaction and mental health. In fact, one of the main functions of digital surveillance is deterrence: employers hope to detect and curb undesirable behavior through cameras and other means. Accordingly, employers could openly inform domestic workers about the existence of surveillance, which would reduce—or even eliminate—instances of abuse, theft, and other misconduct. Conversely, when workers are unaware of surveillance yet sense that employers are monitoring and controlling their behavior, they are likely to feel disrespected or discriminated against, jeopardizing the employment relationship.

Third, in the domestic service sector, digital surveillance can easily give rise to job insecurity and occupational discrimination—issues that deserve close attention. First, whether in China or elsewhere, domestic work is often labeled as “feminized,” “low-skilled,” “non-professional,” and even described as a “3D” occupation—dangerous, dirty, and difficult. Such labeling lowers workers’ social status, erodes professional identity, and heightens job insecurity, which in turn fuels occupational discrimination. The presence of digital surveillance may exacerbate these problems. Second, digital monitoring typically begins the moment a domestic worker steps into the employer’s home, meaning the worker is observed throughout the entire shift. Research shows that digital monitoring is significantly linked to job discrimination, dissatisfaction with job status, job insecurity, and overall dissatisfaction with the employment relationship among domestic workers. Prior studies also indicate that prolonged, high-intensity monitoring intensifies feelings of intrusion and privacy violation. When invasiveness becomes excessive, digital monitoring fails to improve performance; instead, it can trigger anxiety, diminish job satisfaction and performance, and even provoke counterproductive behaviors. In summary, digital surveillance can generate a range of negative emotions for domestic workers, potentially prompting them to leave their employers or exit the domestic service industry altogether. This outcome runs counter to employers’ goals of ensuring work quality, curbing inappropriate behavior, and identifying satisfactory workers. Therefore, the use of digital monitoring in domestic service should adhere to the principle of moderation. If the scope and duration of monitoring cannot be reasonably controlled, or

if communication between employers and workers is poor, digital surveillance may not achieve its intended objectives and could produce adverse consequences.

Based on these points, the paper puts forward the following recommendations: (1) Employers may implement digital monitoring, but must proactively inform employees of its purpose and scope, striking a balance between surveillance and employee rights protection. For example, cameras may be installed in public areas, but not in restrooms, bathrooms, or private rooms where domestic workers live. (2) Avoid falling into the trap of “technology-only” thinking. Employers should fully recognize both the advantages and disadvantages of digital monitoring, and combine sound management practices with technological tools. Only then can the employment relationship become more harmonious and sustainable. (3) Digital monitoring should go beyond a mere work-supervision tool and serve as a mechanism for moral and integrity oversight. Currently, digital monitoring in the domestic service sector is mainly used by employers to supervise workers after work has begun. While this can help detect misconduct and mitigate losses, it is often delayed and risky—for instance, abuse of the elderly or children may only be discovered after the harm has already occurred. Therefore, this article recommends fully leveraging technical solutions such as industry integrity platforms. Specifically: (1) For most domestic workers, household service is not their first occupation; they often have prior experience in sectors like manufacturing or catering. When they transition into the housekeeping industry, companies and industry associations can verify any misconduct or criminal activity by reviewing their previous work videos. For example, governments or industry bodies could establish national or regional housekeeping integrity platforms that link worker and company data with public security systems, enabling thorough integrity and ethics screening before entry. This can reduce or even eliminate risks at the source. (2) After workers join the domestic service sector, their performance—especially actions that could jeopardize an employer’s personal safety or property—is recorded on the Housekeeping Integrity Platform. If abusive behavior or tendencies are detected, they should be promptly halted, and, depending on the circumstances, the worker may be suspended or permanently barred from domestic service work. These measures can mitigate trust issues stemming from information asymmetry between employers and employees, foster healthier employer-employee relationships, promote the sustainable development of the domestic service industry, and help maintain social stability and harmony.

The present study has several limitations. First, all the data were drawn from the domestic service sector,

which has unique characteristics—its workplaces are private households, markedly different from other service industries such as large retail establishments. Consequently, the findings may not be generalizable to broader service or industrial contexts. Second, a deeper examination of the causal links between digital surveillance and occupational discrimination would likely require more advanced econometric models; we intend to pursue this line of inquiry in future research.

CONCLUSION

Digital monitoring is profoundly reshaping the society we live in and influencing the attitudes and behaviors of both employers and employees. This paper, drawing on interview transcripts and questionnaire data, examines the current state and causes of digital monitoring in domestic service workplaces, workers' attitudes, and the impact of such monitoring on domestic workers. The study finds that more than one-quarter of domestic workers are clearly aware that their employers employ digital monitoring, and nearly 60% say they can accept its presence. The primary driver of digital monitoring is employers' distrust of employees and concerns that domestic workers might mistreat or neglect those under their care. Digital monitoring does not have a significant effect on workers' performance, yet it readily triggers a cascade of issues: domestic workers worry about privacy breaches, may develop a sense of occupational discrimination, experience reduced satisfaction with their professional status and employment relationship, feel less safe at work, and ultimately see the stability of their work relationships jeopardized. The results indicate that employer distrust and related factors make workplace digital monitoring relatively common; most employees can tolerate it; and its disciplinary effect is weak, potentially giving rise to privacy protection and occupational discrimination problems. These findings, derived from the domestic service and textile industries, offer critical insights into the broader implications of digital human resource management across various sectors. The issues of trust, disciplinary effectiveness, privacy concerns, and occupational discrimination highlighted in this study are not unique to household work but are increasingly pertinent in any industry utilizing digital surveillance, including the textile industry.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization – ZHANG, YU and FU; methodology – FU; formal analysis – ZHANG, YU and FU; investigation – YU and FU; resources – ZHANG; writing-original draft preparation – ZHANG and YU; writing-review and editing – ZHANG and YU; visualization – YU and FU; supervision – FU. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript. †These authors have contributed equally to this work and share first authorship.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Funding

This research was funded by the Major Research Project of Philosophy and Social Sciences of the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, grant number 23JZD028.

Human Research Subjects

All participants have provided informed consent, and their personal identities or sensitive information have been anonymized. According to the "Ethical Review Measures for Life Science and Medical Research Involving Human Subjects" issued by China in 2023, the study can exempt from further ethical review. This study was conducted in strict accordance with the 'Declaration of Helsinki'.

Acknowledgements

Not applicable.

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