Unpacking Big tech power:
A developmental literature review of IS research

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Abstract

Society is now profoundly shaped by digital platforms such as Apple, Amazon, Microsoft, Google/Alphabet, Facebook/Meta, and X. Although these "Big Tech" firms exert pervasive influence across all spheres of life, their growing power remains insufficiently theorized and critically debated within information systems (IS) research. This article systematically reviews the IS literature to examine how the concept of digital platform power has been constructed. We find that current IS research addresses Big Tech power through four interconnected themes: (1) technological power, (2) economic power, (3) societal power, and (4) associated threats and risks. Our findings highlight a fragmented literature, dominated by instrumental views and business priorities, with insufficient critical problematization. We contend that "Big Tech power" represents a missing and necessary construct within IS scholarship; accordingly, this article seeks to conceptualize its foundations and mechanisms. We advocate for the adoption of a more integrative and responsible research agenda in IS, enabling scholars and practitioners to better understand, evaluate, and shape the future governance of digital platforms—ultimately contributing to a more responsible and desirable digital society.

Keywords

Big Tech, digital platforms, power, literature review, Big Tech power, information technology

1. Introduction

In recent years, digital platforms have become integral to everyday life, shaping communication, information access, and even political, cultural, and healthcare practices through their pervasive influence. By digital platforms, we refer to large technology firms—such as those commonly grouped under GAFAM (Google, Apple, Facebook/Meta, Amazon, and Microsoft)—that develop and operate core digital infrastructures enabling interactions among multiple user groups while controlling data, access, and standards within their ecosystems. From digital assistants to recommendation algorithms, these platforms have penetrated nearly every industry and now dominate how people live, think, act, and interact. Society in general is increasingly defined by interactions with these digital giants, also known as "Big Tech" (Birch & Bronson, 2022; Lindman et al., 2023). Countless reports and books certainly deal with questions pertaining to digital platforms, their power, and foundations (e.g., Busch et al., 2021; Franck & Peitz, 2019; Moore & Tambini, 2022; Zuboff, 2019).

Yet, despite the widespread recognition of Big Tech's growing power across public discourse, political investigations, practitioner studies, and gray literature (Beard, 2022; Brancaccio & Schroeder, 2023; Bremmer, 2023; Hein, 2022) as well as films (The Social Dilemma, Agents of Chaos), and major press outlets (e.g., Financial Times[1], The Economist[2]), the nature and mechanisms of this power remain rarely problematized within information systems (IS) research. Recent IS research certainly highlights the growing influence of digital platforms—exploring how they consolidate market power, shape user behavior, and challenge regulatory frameworks (Ciriello et al., 2025; Clarke, 2022; Fast et al., 2023; Gleiss et al., 2023; Greene et al., 2023; Han et al., 2022; Kokshagina et al., 2023; Krämer & Shekhar, 2025; Lindman et al., 2023; Ngwenyama et al., 2023; Ngwenyama et al., 2024; Safadi & Watson, 2023; Sanner et al., 2025). Numerous studies have examined specific mechanisms, such as data-driven control, algorithmic governance, personalization techniques, corporate strategies, and societal impacts (Greene et al., 2023; Kokshagina et al., 2023; Fast et al., 2023; Ngwenyama et al., 2024; Lindman et al., 2023; Ciriello et al., 2025). However, existing IS studies have only partially addressed issues of digital platform governance, regulation, and the broader entanglement of technology, economic power, and political influence. Beyond public debates and media criticism, the IS field still lacks a systematic review and conceptualization of the underlying dynamics of digital platform power.

The goal of this article is therefore twofold: to highlight the insufficient conceptualization of Big Tech power in IS research, and to propose a refined conceptual framework for analyzing this phenomenon. Thus,

[1] Financial Times. (2025, October 31). Big Tech's market dominance is becoming ever more extreme. https://www.ft.com/content/ae4d7961-cf59-4369-8e64-8a9c9da956d1

[2] The Economist. (2024, May 16). Big tech's bid for power https://www.economist.com/podcasts/2024/05/16/big-techs-bid-for-power

we ask three main research questions: How has the power of digital platforms been conceptualized so far in IS research? What is missing in IS research to fully understand this power? What implications for scholarship and practice can be derived from a renewed conceptualization of such a power?

To address these questions, we undertake a literature review (Okoli, 2015; Templier & Paré, 2015) of IS research on the power exercised by digital platforms and analyze existing research through a thematic, inductive coding procedure. This process allows us to examine how the power of digital platforms is framed and understood in IS research, and to disentangle these interpretations in order to better unpack the concept itself.

Our review identifies four main perspectives through which IS scholars have examined this power—(1) technological and information-driven power, (2) economic and market power, (3) social and societal power, and, to a lesser extent, (4) the threats and risks associated with Big Tech power. While the volume of research addressing these themes continues to grow, our findings show that IS studies have typically analyzed these perspectives in isolation, leading to fragmented and dispersed insights. Thus, despite the increasing body of literature, IS research has largely under-theorized and under-problematized the notion of "*Big Tech power*" itself. In discussing our findings, we argue that "*Big Tech power*" constitutes a missing construct in IS research— reflecting a novel and insufficiently conceptualized form of power exercised by digital platforms—a gap that we address by drawing on studies that have begun to engage with this issue (Clarke, 2022; Fast et al., 2023; Gleiss et al., 2023; Greene et al., 2023; Leclercq-Vandelannoitte & Bertin, 2024; Lindman et al., 2023; Zuboff, 2015). By doing so, IS scholars can challenge the instrumental, business- oriented perspective that tends to portray digital platforms in overly positive terms.

In turn, this opens the way for a more integrative and critical conceptualization of "*Big Tech power*" that accounts for its technological, economic, and societal dimensions. Developing such a perspective seems essential for understanding the roots, dynamics, and implications of this new form of power, and for informing both academic inquiry and regulatory practice. Accordingly, we propose a research agenda for future IS scholarship that builds an integrative framework to problematize "*Big Tech power"* more holistically—enabling scholars and practitioners to better understand, govern, and mitigate its far-reaching social consequences.

2. Conceptual foundations

This section outlines how IS research currently approaches digital platform power and delineates the scope of our review—its motivation, key concepts, and boundary conditions. We explain why a closer examination is timely and situate our contribution within ongoing scholarly debates. We offer definitions of "digital platform" and clarify "digital platform power," the focal construct of this review.

Digital platforms—often referred to as "Big Tech" (Birch & Bronson, 2022; Lindman et al., 2023)—are pivotal actors in the global digital economy. Grouped under labels such as GAFAM (Google, Apple, Facebook/Meta, Amazon, Microsoft) or FAANG (Facebook/Meta, Amazon, Apple, Netflix, Google/Alphabet), these firms control digital infrastructures and ecosystems that support vast economic activity and shape social life (Gleiss et al., 2023). Characterized as "superstar firms" with significant data advantages (Fast et al., 2023), they orchestrate multi-sided interactions and innovation through modular, centrally governed systems (Bonina et al., 2021).

Defined as technologically mediated and multi-sided, digital platforms connect diverse user groups and become deeply embedded in socio-technical ecosystems, structuring exchanges in communication, commerce, mobility, and more (Bonina et al., 2021). Recent literature highlights their potential to support development, reduce market frictions, foster access, and enable locally relevant innovations, especially in the Global South (Bonina et al., 2021). Yet, their dominance also raises concerns about competition, innovation, and potential societal and ethical risks—including issues of power, equity, and democratic impact (Greene et al., 2023; Ngwenyama et al., 2023; Ciriello et al., 2023; 2024; 2025).

Despite growing attention to the societal impact of Big Tech, few IS studies comprehensively theorize *digital platform power* itself. Existing research often highlights benefits around innovation and democratization while downplaying critical questions about the structural and political ramifications of platform dominance (Lindman et al., 2023; Gleiss et al., 2023; Greene et al., 2023; Ngwenyama et al., 2023). Notable recent works have called for deeper scrutiny of how digital platforms power is consolidated and exercised, including taxonomies of platform power abuses, explorations of their influence on liberal-democratic order (Kölbel et al., 2023; Lindman et al., 2023), and examination of the subtle and pervasive mechanisms through which digital platforms exert their power (Leclercq-Vandelannoitte & Bertin, 2024).

3. Research design: in-depth IS literature review on digital platform power

This section presents the methodology for our systematic literature review on digital platforms power in IS research. We begin by outlining our methodological guidelines and article selection process, then describe our inductive thematic coding of the final article corpus to identify relevant conceptual themes.

3.1. Guidelines

Our methodological approach integrates key insights from established frameworks in IS literature review research, particularly those of Templier and Paré (2015, 2018), Okoli (2015) and Rivard (2024). Guided by Templier and Paré's (2015) literature review typology, we conducted a developmental review focused on conceptual clarity and theoretical contribution—structured through phases of problem formulation, literature search, screening, quality assessment, data extraction, and synthesis to maximize validity and

coherence. Expanding beyond existing syntheses, our review critically engages with conceptualizations of digital platform power and aims to shape theoretical discussions and future research in IS. Drawing on current approaches that emphasize literature reviews as foundations for conceptual advancement and knowledge structuring (e.g., Rivard, 2024), we identify gaps and propose research directions relevant to digital platform power. To ensure rigor, we systematically followed Okoli's (2015) procedure emphasizing explicit protocols, reproducible selection steps, comprehensive searches, and transparent synthesis. These methodological guidelines strengthen the reliability and constructive potential of our literature review.

3.2. Selection process

We performed a systematic IS literature review of academic articles published in the "Senior Scholars' List of Premier Journals in IS[3]": *Decision Support Systems*, *European Journal of Information Systems*, *Information & Management*, *Information and Organization*, *Information Systems Journal*, *Information Systems Research*, *Journal of the Association for Information Systems*, *Journal of Information Technology*, *Journal of Management Information Systems*, *Journal of Strategic Information Systems*, and *MIS Quarterly*.

We first searched in the databases of these journals for all the articles dealing with digital platforms' power published between 2010 and 2025. In these databases, we first queried the words "digital platform(s)," "tech companies," "Big Tech," "GAFAM," "digital ecosystems," "digital giants," "platform ecosystems," "digital platform ecosystem," "digital platform capability," "digital platform regulation," "FANGS," "GAFA," "NATU," or "BATX" and then searched across articles' text, titles, abstracts, and keywords. We also queried the specific names of digital platforms such as "Apple," "Amazon," "Microsoft," "Google/Alphabet," and "Facebook/Meta," to identify research focusing on specific case studies. We extended our search to underlying topics, including "big data," "algorithms," and "social networks."

We found 1362 articles, on which we performed Boolean requests by using keywords such as "power," "domination," or "monopoly" to further filter the results; we were left with 701 articles. As we screened these articles, we determined that most did not pertain explicitly to digital platforms and their power. After screening the title, keywords, and general relevance of each article for our research objective, we selected 307 articles. We then analyzed the articles' abstracts, introductions, and conclusions and excluded those that mentioned the power of these digital giants only superficially. This process left 179 articles related to both Big Tech and issues of power. We read and analyzed the full texts of these remaining articles and observed that some were developed from quite different angles or subject areas, thus leading to their

[3] https://aisnet.org/page/SeniorScholarListofPremierJournals.

exclusion. With this filtering process and exclusion criteria, only 106 articles referring to the power of digital platforms remained (Figure 1).

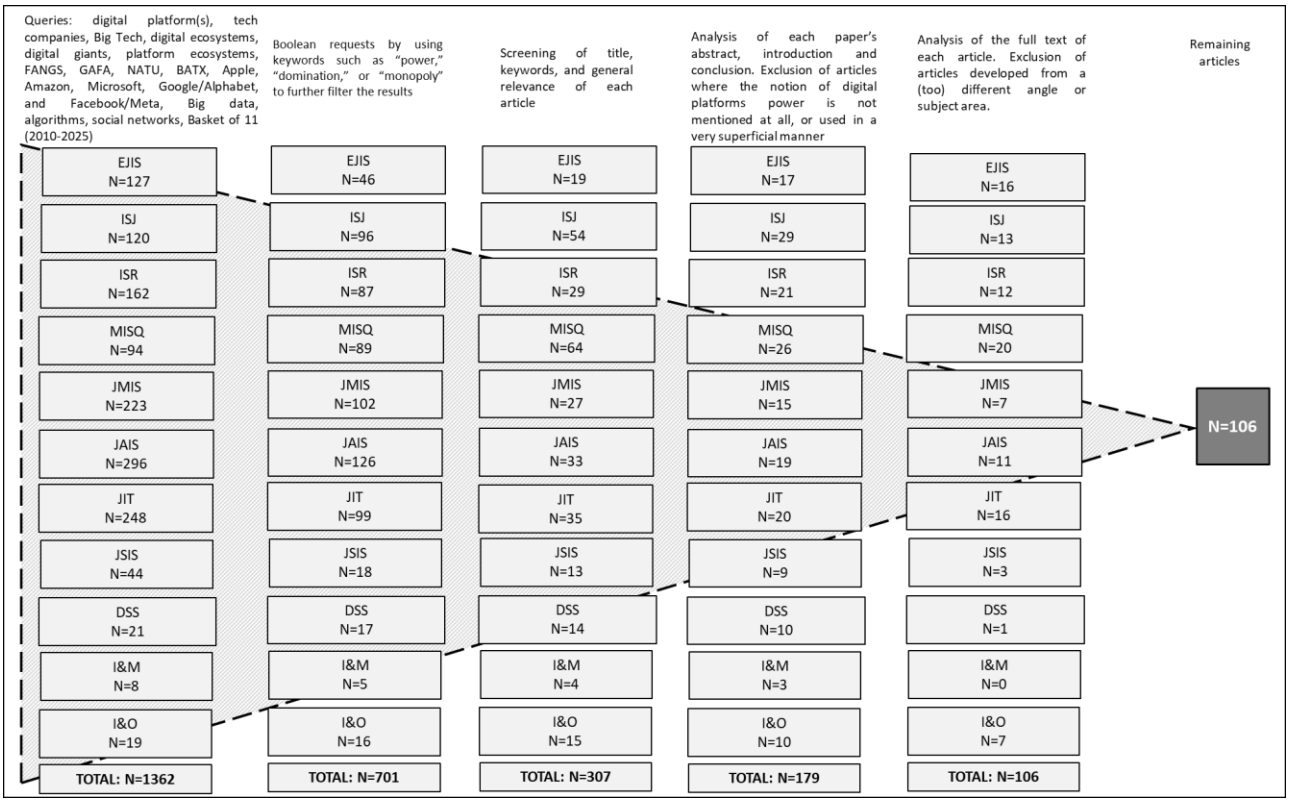

Figure 1 – Filtering process

3.3. Thematic coding

We analyzed the content of the selected articles following a thematic analysis process composed of three main steps: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Saldana, 2009). First, during open coding, we engaged in a detailed examination, assigning initial codes to significant extracts and identifying recurring patterns and lexicon related to digital platforms power within IS research. Next, in the axial coding phase, we grouped these initial codes into broader categories, exploring the relationships between them and clarifying how different aspects of digital platform power are articulated in the literature. This process allowed us to identify various dimensions and clarify overlaps. This step enabled us to interpret our codes and to critically engage with the conceptual understandings of the power of digital platforms in IS research. Finally, through selective coding, we integrated and refined these categories into an overarching analytical framework, resulting in four main themes: (1) technological and information-driven power, (2) economic and market power, (3) social and societal power, and (4) the threats and risks posed by Big Tech's power (category four emerged not as a siloed domain but as a transversal theme intersecting the other dimensions). This analytical framework was developed inductively (Appendix 1), based on

established principles of thematic coding, ensuring the validity and depth of our findings while clarifying the origins and structure of our categories (Hillmann & Guenther, 2021; Saldana, 2009).

4. Big Tech power: fragmented insights in IS research

Our literature review reveals four overarching themes through which digital platforms power has been examined. These themes reflect the diverse ways IS scholars have approached the influence of digital platforms, from their technological infrastructures and market dominance to their social impact and the growing body of critical work.

4.1. Technological and information-driven power (Theme 1)

The first theme we identified is related to the IT-driven mechanisms of the power digital platforms wields—that is, all the technologies and IS at the heart of their operations. Digital platforms rely on the efficient use of data and digital technologies to control resources and interactions, effectively orchestrating platform agents and their transactions (Gleiss et al., 2023). Much of IS research on this theme concurs that digital platforms rely on ever-expanding digital ecosystems that provide the digital infrastructure on which people rely to live their lives.

4.1.1. Advanced technological infrastructure

This theme highlights, in particular, how the growth of digital infrastructures, coupled with mobile devices and services, and the massive development of social networking are at the heart of the rapid transformation of interactions among users, service providers, customers, employees, and suppliers (Alaimo et al., 2020; Gal-Or et al., 2018; Gleiss et al., 2023; Logue et al., 2025; Oinas-Kukkonen et al., 2010; Rai et al., 2019; Tilson et al., 2010). Emphasizing the short history of digital platforms and the power they have gained in only a few years, Big Tech success is explained by the development of specific technological infrastructures and architectures (Constantinides et al., 2018), device interconnectivity (Pérez et al., 2017), governance (Tilson et al., 2010), and capabilities in terms of IS and network competition (Tan et al., 2015) that have supported the development of a powerful innovation ecosystem (Constantinides et al., 2018).

IS research shows that Big Tech firms, through their platformization process, have been particularly successful at building strong techno-economic configurations, combining notions of scalability and modularity in ways that enable them to retain control of such ecosystems. They have developed myriad technological interfaces (such as application programming interfaces [APIs], software development kits, and plug-ins), together with technoscientific devices (for instance, smartphones and augmented/virtual reality headsets), in order to attract diverse social actors into their ecosystems and ensure these actors' ongoing participation and reliance on their platforms. These technological resources are described as "boundary assets" or "boundary resources" (Nieborg & Helmond, 2019), as they enable Big Tech to enroll

more and more users in their ecosystem (Birch et al., 2021). Thus, the critical role of IS capabilities in supporting the growth and orchestration of multi-sided platforms has been well documented in the IS literature. Studies show that robust digital ecosystem strategies often rely on sophisticated IS infrastructure and capabilities to foster innovation, facilitate connectivity among diverse actors, and enable rapid platform expansion (Henfridsson et al., 2018; Tan et al., 2015).

4.1.2. Technological disruptions and business opportunities

Beyond their mastery of these specific technologies (Rai et al., 2019), Big Tech firms have managed to efficiently embrace significant technological disruptions, from which they derive their power, such as big data and analytics. A great deal of IS research has focused on the benefits that Big Tech can derive from big-data business strategies (Woerner & Wixom, 2015) and data-driven business models (Hu et al., 2019; Wiener et al., 2020). IS research, for example, highlights the rich and various technologically driven business opportunities and the wealth of possibilities these large corporations can offer through big data and analytics (Agarwal & Dhar, 2014), enabled by the development of algorithms housed in a global network of owned servers (Yoo, 2015). Big data has developed into a broad narrative that promises many benefits, such as the development of new products and markets; innovative services based on social, user-generated, and transaction data (provided by Big Tech) (Yoo, 2015); better marketing and greater profitability (Constantiou & Kallinikos, 2014); and predictions and value creation (Lycett, 2013). Big Tech firms' powerful algorithms are at the core of their business models, determining and controlling the content displayed to users (Kokshagina et al., 2023), thereby enabling them to find what they believe to need (Gleiss et al., 2023).

4.1.3. Data practices

The economic success of digital platforms is presented as largely due to their highly differentiated access to data, which appears as the basis of contemporary economies (Rai et al., 2019), through data generation, collection, aggregation, use, and breakdown to support and materialize a great deal of services. Digital platforms succeed by collecting and using user data across various services (Alaimo et al., 2020; Johnson et al., 2019; Lyytinen & Grover, 2017; March, 2019; Yoo, 2015), allowing them to gain insights from their main markets and leverage them for advantage in other markets (Krämer & Shekhar, 2025). Thus, they create "knowledge monopolies" by controlling data (Safadi & Watson, 2023).

In a context in which social media has brought the voluntary disclosure of personal data to the mainstream (Xu & Bélanger, 2013), data are central to the dynamics of Big Tech firms and essential to understanding their ongoing transition to platform ecosystems (Alaimo et al., 2020). Data capture, data sharing (Lyytinen & Grover, 2017), and the growing use of consumer data are described as mechanisms at the heart of platform innovation logics (Yoo, 2015) and improved performance (March, 2019). Furthermore, platforms

are presented as particularly successful because they allow different types of stakeholders to share a significant amount of data, even though they do not share the same goals (e.g., Lyytinen & Grover, 2017). This data-centric logic is reflected in IS privacy research itself, which has largely adopted a business-oriented, instrumental stance (Culnan, 2019; Gal-Or et al., 2018; Lin & Armstrong, 2019; Teubner & Flath, 2019), focusing primarily on how platforms can manage privacy risks to maintain user trust and business viability.

4.1.4. Efficient services

The convenience offered by the myriad services provided by Big Tech is presented as justification for data sharing and extraction logics, with the claim that these actions are for the user's benefit (Galliers et al., 2017). They are described as offering free services that improve various aspects of users' lives (e.g., Google). Platform competition usually centers on the efficiency, convenience, and attributes of the primary services they offer (Clarke, 2019; Gal-Or et al., 2018). People are "easily attracted to adopt and use [them]" (Clarke, 2019, p. 66), because they can benefit from them in a variety of ways, due to the provision of hedonic (e.g., entertainment, enjoyment, amusement, fun – Krasnova et al., 2010), functional (e.g., information, efficiency, convenience, time-savings – Clarke, 2019), social (e.g., communication, relationship, involvement, trust – Xu & Bélanger, 2013), and psychological (e.g., affiliation, belonging, identification – Whitley et al., 2014) assets. These appeals have led to the rapid normalization of uses of the services offered by Big Tech.

4.1.5. Underlying technological and psychological mechanisms

To grasp how benefits are obtained, IS research has also explored the underlying technological and psychological mechanisms of technology use, highlighting, for example, the strength of specific online retailing practices in combination with technology (e.g., integration of social media platforms with the sales experience) (Heimbach & Hinz, 2018; Li & Wu, 2018). Some studies emphasize the strength of online sharing mechanisms (i.e., social plug-ins), such as Facebook's "like" button (Ding et al., 2017; Heimbach & Hinz, 2018), leading to implicit social media endorsement (Li & Wu, 2018). Other studies explore how recent social media changes—hiding the number of "likes" and adding a "dislike" button—influence user behavior (Turel & Qahri-Saremi, 2024). These studies help content providers substantially increase content sharing, by demonstrating how to properly design sharing mechanisms (Heimbach & Hinz, 2018) or analyzing the effects of online ratings and reviews on sales performance, with the goal to develop implications for platforms (Lee et al., 2015). IS research highlights that platforms frequently rely on mechanisms such as user reviews and reputation scores to signal trustworthiness and guide participant interactions. The credibility of these reviews is especially critical for safeguarding against manipulation and preserving the integrity of the platform ecosystem (Jabr, 2021). Some research also specifically

examines how shifts in user behavior—shaped by platform design or technological affordances—can influence the evolution of business models and drive new forms of value creation (Claussen et al., 2013; Maier et al., 2015a/b; Chen et al., 2014; Hu et al., 2019).

In addition, some studies emphasize the links among technical mechanisms, design interface, and psychological drivers (Kunst et al., 2022), noting that technologies are constructed by platforms in ways that eventually affect users' minds, motivations, and behaviors (Chen et al., 2014; Matook et al., 2015). Other studies explore the microlevel mechanisms through which participants' behavior is aligned with the platform's interest, emphasizing the roles of algorithmic content curation, echo chambers, and user interactions (Ens et al., 2023). Still other studies shed light on the hedonistic motivations of users (e.g., the search for social endorsement), inducing them to use the services offered by platforms (Whitley et al., 2014). Studies also investigate the technologically driven psychological mechanisms (e.g., positive reinforcement, enjoyment) behind technology use, noting that by fostering satisfaction, pleasure, and engagement, these platforms manage to make people (insidiously) desire them (Turel & Serenko, 2012).

Further, recent IS research has examined the rise of the attention economy, demonstrating how digital platforms strategically deploy technological and algorithmic mechanisms to capture and retain user attention (Ngwenyama et al., 2024; Hinz et al., 2020; Brynjolfsson et al., 2024). This body of work highlights the ways in which algorithms leverage data-driven personalization and reinforcement techniques to shape user preferences and behaviors, often in adaptive and individualized ways (Greene et al., 2023). In particular, reinforcement learning-based personalization enables platforms to dynamically adjust content and recommendations, thereby exerting unprecedented control on users' engagement patterns and actions. Recent studies also analyze the algorithmic processes that platforms use to determine and control which content is shown to users (Kokshagina et al., 2023), while investigating how consumer decisions are shaped by the visibility of others' behaviors and individual social needs (Jia et al., 2024). Together, this research underscores the growing sophistication and influence of platforms in actively steering user experiences and behaviors.

4.1.6. Technological advances and expected growing power

By and large, IS research concurs on platforms' growing influence over people's technological uses and online actions, due to technological advances (e.g., increasing competence in artificial intelligence [AI]; Dwivedi et al., 2023) that offer new possibilities for the relationship between humans and machines to perform tasks on digital platforms (Rai et al., 2019). More recently, Logue et al. (2025) highlighted how digital platforms, in a digitally connected world comprising technologies such as AI, machine learning, web APIs, and modular digital infrastructures, enable rapid global scaling, reshape business models, and

facilitate social innovation. Technology is not merely an enabler but a central driver reshaping how platforms innovate, organize, compete, and expand internationally.

4.2. Economic and market power of Big Tech (Theme 2)

The second theme we identified in our systematic IS literature review refers to the economic and market power of digital platforms. These platforms expand across sectors, build ecosystems, and exercise domination over both consumers and market participants.

4.2.1. Economic size and scale

Digital platform firms, once considered tools for decentralization and economic democratization, have instead become inevitable and powerful intermediaries that increasingly dominate and restructure traditional industries to extract value. Far from leveling the playing field, platforms have expanded their influence across the economy over the past two decades (Kölbel et al., 2023). Digital platforms are known to exploit both platform-related issues (stemming from exploitative behaviors or regulatory gaps) and monopoly-related issues (stemming from dominant market positions that enable anti-competitive practices) to assert themselves and exploit their central position in multi-sided markets (Gleiss et al., 2023; Kölbel et al., 2023). IS research indeed also conceptualizes the dominance of digital platforms in economic terms, emphasizing their unprecedented scale and structural centrality in the global economy. This scale is not merely a matter of revenue or reach but is structurally significant, producing a range of reinforcing effects that strengthen their market positions (Kölbel et al., 2023) in three ways: *network effects*, in which increased usage enhances value for users, thereby accelerating platform growth; *winner-take-all dynamics*, in which access to massive datasets and advanced analytics tools creates high entry barriers for potential competitors; and *financial leverage*, allowing these platforms to access capital more cheaply and invest more aggressively than smaller rivals.

The market power of Big Tech is framed as stemming from their sustained competitive advantages derived from exclusive and exploitative access to big user data, which enables them to leverage economies of scale, network effects, and high switching costs—ultimately creating market dominance that challenges competition and innovation (Fast et al., 2023). In particular, six factors play a key role in this market power, in ways that prevent market entrants and competitors from imitating their data resources: exclusive and exploitative access to data, economies of scale in analytics, integration across digital services (economies of scope), network effects from platform models, and high user switching costs (Fast et al., 2023). They thus exhibit high vertical and horizontal integration and assume “gatekeeper roles” in digital infrastructure and data ownership (Gleiss et al., 2023).

These structural dynamics are clearly reflected in the extraordinary market valuations and brand dominance of GAFAM. All five firms are consistently ranked among the world's top 10 firms by market capitalization, and in terms of brand value, they occupy similarly dominant positions (Lindman et al., 2023). In 2020, Apple led global brand rankings, followed by Google, Microsoft, Amazon, and Facebook, with a collective brand valuation exceeding $800 billion (Swant, 2020). By early 2024, the combined market capitalization of Apple, Alphabet, Amazon, and Meta Platforms had reached approximately $8.9 trillion, according to Nasdaq-backed data. Notably, the COVID-19 pandemic did not hinder their ascent; rather, it amplified their strategic centrality, as lockdowns and digital dependency enhanced demand for their products and services.

In addition to their internal scaling mechanisms, these firms are uniquely positioned to engage in vertical and horizontal integration through strategic mergers and acquisitions. Their capacity to absorb emerging competitors and innovative start-ups not only accelerates their own technological development but also contributes to an increasing concentration of wealth and market power. Recent research has further illuminated how digital platforms' economic affordances contribute to monopolistic tendencies. Gleiss et al. (2023) argue that the very affordances enabling digital coordination and scalability are simultaneously the conditions for market concentration and monopolistic dominance (see also Butler et al., 2023).

4.2.2. Revolution of digital platforms: new generative dynamics

The market power of digital platforms is usually described in terms of "disruption": Big Tech now relies on the constitution of giant platforms (Constantinides et al., 2018; de Reuver et al., 2018), representing a "historic shift" and a major economic disruption (Agarwal & Dhar, 2014), often associated with the idea of "revolution" in the economic landscape. They have quickly moved from simple computer manufacturers to digital platforms, leading to the "Big Technification" of everything. The platforms on which Big Tech relies represent "digital resources—including services and content" (Constantinides et al., 2018, p. 381)—that enable new types of value-creating interactions among external producers, consumers, and third-party actors. These tech giants, which have experienced considerable growth in the past decade (Teubner & Flath, 2019), are thus generally presented as innovators that have "broken" traditional modes of organizing, reshaped markets and industries, and created radically new business models (Constantinides et al., 2018). Research indeed shows how this development has disrupted classic industries, as epitomized by the development of different types of platforms (e.g., social media platforms, operating systems platforms, peer-to-peer digital platforms, payment platforms) (de Reuver et al., 2018); as such, these companies have quickly become "complex and operationally diversified business actors," expanding their "commercial operations and industry involvement" (Alaimo et al., 2020, p. 25) and spearheading the emergence of "new generative dynamics" (Brynjolfsson & Saunders, 2009, p. 751), according to which individuals, groups, and organizations co-create a hitherto unimaginable variety of new data-intensive services, applications,

and content (Gal-Or et al., 2018; Tilson et al., 2010). Research explains that a growing number of economic and social transactions have thus moved online at a rapid pace (Agarwal & Dhar, 2014), expanding these digital platforms' diverse business activities (Tiwana, 2015) and involvement within a larger business ecosystem of services (Alaimo et al., 2020), often beyond their initial scope (Clemons & Madhani, 2010) and into the "territory" of rival platforms (Bar-Gill, 2019). Such evolutions have contributed to the rapid economic development of these platforms, providing them with alternative revenue sources while diversifying the flows of data on the basis of which they operate (Alaimo et al., 2020).

4.2.3. Reshaping of the whole ecosystem

Platform competition has thus increasingly centered on fostering generative activities rather than merely controlling the traditional organizational value chain (de Reuver et al., 2018). In IS research, "generativity" has been identified as a key concept, referring to the capacity of digital platforms and infrastructures to enable unprompted, diverse, and ongoing innovation by a wide range of external actors—even beyond the original intentions of the platform owner (Yoo, 2010; Ghazawneh & Henfridsson, 2015; Henfridsson et al., 2018; Yoo et al., 2013; Yoo et al., 2024). As such, generativity is widely seen as a distinctive and highly desirable innovation driver, providing the basis for continuous creation, recombination, and evolution of services and applications. In line with the literature on open innovation (Parker et al., 2017), recent IS research has investigated the influence of digital platforms on their broader ecosystems (Hurni et al., 2022; Karhu et al., 2018, 2020; Kim et al., 2018; Leong et al., 2019; Tilson et al., 2010; Tiwana, 2015), describing the emergence of new forms of control, strategic exploitation, power dynamics, and struggles within these systems. Such evolutions affect who controls the creation and offering of these new information-based services and contribute to "new forms of social and institutional order" (Tilson et al., 2010, p. 751), blurring the boundaries between traditional industries.

Such evolutions also transform the classic way of organizing, turning "command-and-control" logics into "connect-and-coordinate" ones and replacing the ownership and control of physical assets with control over access and behaviors in applications and services (Tilson et al., 2010, p. 751). Research thus highlights the emergence of a "new ecology" of devices, content, applications, users, and developers, in which the locus of value creation moves from inside the firm to an ever-growing complex network of outside actors (Parker et al., 2017). This process is orchestrated by platforms in order to exercise strategic control and coordination over these ecosystems (Leong et al., 2019).

Lindman et al. (2023) further emphasize that leading platform firms have constructed and mastered entire operational ecosystems that allow them to match buyers and suppliers or connect vendors with customers, thereby guaranteeing an extensive and self-reinforcing reach. These firms' operational chains are not isolated; rather, they constitute integrated service environments that enable continuous value capture and

lock-in effects. In doing so, platforms are not merely participants in markets—they are actively constructing the rules of engagement, shaping competitive dynamics, consumption patterns, and even regulatory discourses. Recent IS research further highlights how platforms act as "orchestrators," increasingly setting market rules in their own interest and using power abuse tactics, such as manipulative user interfaces, covert data collection, algorithmic bias, pricing discrimination, and anti-competitive behaviors (e.g., market exclusion, product tying) (Kölbel et al., 2023).

Furthermore, despite digital platforms' relatively short history, these new logics are often described as a powerful and efficient way of organizing, as inspiring models shaping traditional companies that increasingly strive to adopt their way of organizing and thinking (Agarwal & Dhar, 2014; Constantinides et al., 2018). In IS research, their capacity to innovate and transform entire sectors is frequently framed in positive terms—described as agile, disruptive, and forward-looking. In this context, Big Tech has moved quickly from single-purpose platforms (e.g., online search engines) to not only larger service ecosystems (Alaimo et al., 2020) but also multinational digital giant corporations acting as monopolies of concentrated wealth (Constantinides et al., 2018) that are able to take advantage of their power to further shape national and international policies in ways that enable them to increase their profitability. As Lindman et al. (2023, p. 149) note, these companies "act instrumentally to influence public policy, political authorities and institutions so as to advance particular economic interests." Through lobbying, standard-setting, and regulatory capture, platforms are increasingly shaping the institutional conditions under which they operate, often reinforcing their dominance at the expense of market fairness and public accountability.

IS research has highlighted the new "controlling force of digital infrastructures" (Constantinides et al., 2018, p. 389), showing how the centralized model (of data extraction) on which these platforms rely has led to domination and monopoly (Teubner & Flath, 2019), market concentration (Rai et al., 2019), and platform "imperialism" (Bar-Gill, 2019). Such phenomena are likely to be reinforced in the near future (Teubner & Flath, 2019) given Big Tech's mastery over more sophisticated technologies and resources, enabling them to develop competitive advantages against smaller rivals. Because of the rapid grip of digital platforms on a growing number of social activities (Gal-Or et al., 2018), their power has also been expressed in societal terms, as revealed by our identification of Theme 3 in our literature review.

4.3. Social and societal power (Theme 3)

A third theme emerges from our literature review: beyond the market power of digital platforms, some studies focus on their "social and societal power," referring to their social and political impact that is vast and unprecedented.

4.3.1. Disruptive social potential

This social and societal power that digital platforms wield is typically framed in IS research as a force for "progress" and "advances" (Benbya et al., 2020). The "Californian ideology"—centered on personal freedom from societal and institutional boundaries—alongside business school–driven ideals of disruptive innovation, has contributed to the widespread perception of Big Tech firms as inherently forward-thinking and progressive actors (Lindman et al., 2023).

Building on this, numerous IS studies highlight the social disruptive potential of platforms, stressing their role in simplifying, enhancing, and expanding various facets of daily life (Gal-Or et al., 2018). IS research increasingly recognizes that, beyond convenience and efficiency, digital platforms exert a transformational impact on the very practices and experiences that define modern existence. Through their omnipresence, platforms influence not only how people interact and consume information but also how they work, socialize, and form communities. Scholars emphasize that these firms act as providers of services that profoundly transform ways of living (Benbya et al., 2020) and working—for instance, by enabling novel forms of labor such as crowdwork (Deng et al., 2016) and reshaping professional relationships and career trajectories.

Moreover, the pervasiveness of digital platforms means they are woven into a growing variety of social activities (de Reuver et al., 2018). From communication and mobility to education and leisure, platforms are radically altering both work and private life, as well as broader social relationships (Gleiss et al., 2023). This radical reshaping extends to enabling new digital communities, altering patterns of collaboration and exchange, and even redefining civic engagement in the digital era.

Significantly, IS research has also explored the capacity of platforms to promote responsible innovation and tackle grand societal challenges—including the needs of marginalized communities (Ahuja et al., 2023). For example, some studies show how platforms foster new business models that generate socio-environmental value (Böttcher et al., 2024; Sanner et al., 2025), contribute to sustainable development (Gawer & Bonina, 2024), and advance broader social welfare goals (Hillebrand et al., 2023). Thus, digital platforms' disruptive social potential is not only about convenience or efficiency, but about structurally transforming the conditions of social, economic, and civic life on a global scale.

4.3.2. Change in socialization patterns

In particular, social media platforms are involved in new socialization patterns by changing the way people communicate, interact, share experiences, and associate with one another (de Reuver et al., 2018; James et al., 2017). Digital platforms have a transformative influence on people's identity and sense of self (Whitley et al., 2014); they help them experiment with their self in various ways (e.g., by enacting a professional identity), transcend the physical constraints of their body, and engage in more flexible social interactions across time and space.

IS research also hints at the growing influence of digital platforms on people's lives, through the use of data in ways that orient their actions and aim to predict their behaviors (Agarwal & Dhar, 2014; Lycett, 2013). They already create detailed profiles of customers and citizens by collecting and analyzing data from both their online and offline activities. Their growing influence comes from manipulating consumers' perceptions (Clarke, 2019), potentially leading to herding behavior (Li & Wu, 2018), or from the contagion of emotions (Agarwal & Dhar, 2014) and mood on platforms such as Facebook. In this vein, humans are increasingly considered artifacts shaped and used by the technology (Demetis & Lee, 2018) owned by Big Tech, rather than vice versa, such that society is increasingly "governed" by technological systems and the organizations that master them. These evolutions have led to a redefinition of the roles of users, such that these roles and "the functions of digital technologies […] are perpetually defined and redefined by each other" (Benbya et al., 2020, p. 3).

4.3.3. Constituent of society

Digital platforms ecosystems appear not only as omnipresent in society (Parker et al., 2016; Tiwana, 2015) but also as increasingly and fundamentally constitutive of it (Loebbecke & Picot, 2015). While Tilson et al. (2010, p. 750) emphasize "the inseparability of digital infrastructures from new forms of social infrastructure," several studies put forth the enduring consequences of digital platforms on society and social science in general (Yoo, 2015) (testifying to the depth of their power) and highlight their growing role as intermediaries between technology use and societal outcomes (Deng et al., 2016).

Digital platforms today exert a growing influence that extends far beyond market dynamics, increasingly shaping everyday life. For instance, by early 2022, Amazon had become the largest employer in the tech sector, with over 1.3 million employees worldwide (Amazon 10-K, annreports.com, February 14, 2022). This remarkable scope highlights their involvement in a wide range of major societal challenges (Majchrzak et al., 2016), spanning fields such as strategy and industrial economics (de Reuver et al., 2018), employment structures and health (Loebbecke & Picot, 2015; Majchrzak et al., 2016), and even politics and democracy (Constantinides et al., 2018). The expanding societal impact of such platforms reflects what Lindman et al. (2023, p.149) describe as "paternalistic power," wherein digital platforms extend their reach beyond markets to shape the everyday circumstances of citizens (Leclercq-Vandelannoitte, 2021).

For example, Amazon, with more than 1.3 million employees globally as of early 2022, had become the largest employer in the tech sector (Amazon 10-K, retrieved from annreports.com, February 14, 2022). This concentration of control reflects a broader shift in which corporations increasingly manage the delivery of fundamental needs, such as employment, housing, healthcare, and education, effectively shaping the conditions under which basic aspects of life are fulfilled (Lindman et al., 2023). In this context, people increasingly take their computed experiences for granted, driven by algorithms owned by platforms (e.g.,

their choice of a restaurant, a doctor, or a hotel), such that the digital not only reflects reality but also increasingly shapes it (Baskerville et al., 2020).

4.3.4. Institutional influence

In addition, digital platforms, particularly GAFAM, are increasingly recognized not only as economic entities but also as influential political actors. They have acquired quasi-regulatory power, influencing rules, access, and governance (Gleiss et al., 2023). Scholars challenge the conventional view that these firms operate solely within the economic domain and argue that such companies occupy a unique position, actively engaging both public and private spheres and navigating societal values and institutional frameworks (Lindman et al., 2023). This dual role enables them to make decisions that can fundamentally shape democratic principles, such as privacy, freedom of expression, national security, and the right to political association.

Beyond mere market dominance, digital platforms have become central actors in domestic and global political arenas. Their services are now the primary channels through which people obtain political information, express opinions, and engage in civic debates. This growing centrality gives them substantial power to structure public discourse, set the boundaries of acceptable speech, and even influence who can participate in political life. Notably, social media platforms can either facilitate the diversification of viewpoints or, conversely, reinforce partisan divides and misinformation through echo chambers and filter bubbles—mechanisms that limit users' exposure to differing perspectives and can amplify false or misleading content (Kitchens, Johnson, & Gray, 2020). As such, their impact on the quality and inclusiveness of democratic deliberation is immense.

Their influence is reinforced by their ability to transform economic resources into political power, through expert lobbying and other institutional strategies. These strategies extend beyond conventional lobbying to encompass practices such as bribery and “agency capture”—a phenomenon where regulatory bodies become unduly influenced or controlled by the very firms they are tasked to oversee, often through the strategic sharing of information, personnel moves, or other less transparent means (Hawley, 2021; Butler et al., 2023). Such maneuvers make it possible for digital platforms not only to resist unwelcome regulation but, in some instances, to shape entire policies in their favor, deepening their already substantial control over the digital and societal landscape.

4.4. Threats and risks raised by Big Tech power (Theme 4)

Though not mainstream, some IS research has begun highlighting critical issues regarding the development of new power dynamics embedded in the way digital platforms operate (Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2019; Gleiss et al., 2023; Greene et al., 2023; Lindman et al., 2023; Someh et al., 2019; Zuboff, 2015, 2019). Following

the scandals related to the US presidential election, Brexit, and Cambridge Analytica (Zuboff, 2019), some IS studies have indeed evaluated the power of digital platforms by examining the threats and risks it poses to individuals, societies, and polities (Clarke, 2019). Most IS research continues to emphasize the technological, economic, and societal benefits of digital platforms, but a minority of studies have begun to critically assess the broader societal risks they pose. Some scholars have drawn attention to the power asymmetries and political challenges emerging from platform governance, including the potential erosion of democratic institutions and public accountability (Gleiss et al., 2023; Lindman et al., 2023). This critical strand of research is gradually expanding, with contributions that highlight the shifting power dynamics embedded in platform operations and the rise of surveillance capitalism (Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2019; Someh et al., 2019; Zuboff, 2015).

4.4.1. Exploitation of personal data and privacy risks

IS research has shown that digital platforms, as they constitute knowledge monopolies, gain unfair advantages in ways that stifle innovation. These monopolies exploit data from users to maintain dominance through information asymmetry (Safadi & Watson, 2023). Furthermore, the practice of constructing profiles of individuals based on their online and offline behaviors has sparked ethical concerns about various dimensions of privacy and security (Lindman et al., 2023; Martin, 2015). IS research on privacy (for reviews, see Bélanger & Crossler, 2011; Bélanger & Xu, 2015; Dinev, 2014) notably considers the implications of information privacy in data collection practices of private firms and public agencies, as revealed by recent scandals on government surveillance (e.g., Cambridge Analytica; Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2019). IS research on privacy also raises issues of data ownership (Constantinides et al., 2018), exploitation (Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2019), expropriation (Clarke, 2019), and the "undeniable privacy risks" (Bélanger & Xu, 2015, p. 573) that come with the unprecedented benefits offered by the advent of big data. With the increasing use of digital devices and the pervasiveness of predetermined algorithms, research highlights how digital platforms are capable of observing, storing, and monitoring the minutiae of people's everyday lives (Bélanger & Xu, 2015; Newell & Marabelli, 2015); they can digitally score, rank, and segment individuals (Lindman et al., 2023), showing the limitations of largely centralized models of data guardianship (Rai et al., 2019). Other studies highlight the risks of worker exploitation, dependence, and marginalization in a platform-based economy, in which digitally conveyed control comes at the cost of decreased human trust (Deng et al., 2016; Jiang et al., 2021). In this context, recent research has examined the impacts of regulatory approaches that address the competitive advantages gained by dominant digital platforms through the extensive exploitation of user data across their services (e.g., data siloing, mandated data sharing) (Krämer & Shekhar, 2025).

4.4.2. Surveillance and institutionalization of practices of surveillance

This context has also led some IS scholars to analyze the issue of surveillance raised by the widespread diffusion of multi-sided digital platforms and their digital capabilities in a regime of techno-scientific capitalism (de Reuver et al., 2018). Zuboff (2015) notably conceptualizes the surveillance society as "surveillance capitalism" to refer to the pursuit of people's inner desires and wishes in an effort to better control them. This new type of capitalism is based on a logic of accumulation geared toward predicting and modifying human behavior, with the ultimate goal being to generate profit and control markets. It relies on a new architecture of surveillance based on "unexpected and often illegible mechanisms of extraction, commodification, and control that effectively exile persons from their own behavior while producing new markets of behavioral prediction and modification" (Zuboff, 2015, p. 75). Arguing against the logics of surveillance embedded in the business model of platform capitalism (Constantinides et al., 2018; Parker et al., 2017), IS research contends that Big Tech's goal is to sell access to the real-time flow of people's daily lives to directly influence and modify their behavior for profit. This new form of surveillance has changed power structures, in that platforms hold both power and knowledge from their domination.

4.4.3. Risks to citizenship rights and civic society

Lindman et al. (2023) examine the growing concentration of power among Big Tech firms and consider how such consolidation may undermine the foundations of liberal-democratic governance. Their study highlights the dangers associated with surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2015) and critically assesses the expanding political influence of digital platforms. Such influence presents "a serious challenge in regulating their business and societal activities and the ways they use and leverage IT artefacts to achieve their business objectives at the expense of consumers and citizens" (Butler et al., 2023, p. 89). Lindman et al. (2023) argue that digital platforms are increasingly functioning as political actors, posing potential threats to civic rights, public life, and the broader mechanisms of democratic accountability.

Lindman et al. (2023) also highlight the role of the tech lobby in shaping regulatory discourse, noting that its primary objective is to persuade both policymakers and the public that privacy concerns tied to data exploitation are best managed through corporate-led self-regulation, thereby minimizing the perceived need for formal legislative oversight. In addition, their work identifies other high-priority policy areas influenced by tech lobbying efforts, including taxation, intellectual property rights, immigration policy, digital advertising, cybersecurity, and antitrust regulation.

4.4.4. Manipulation, determinism, lack of choice, and loss of human agency

Zuboff (2015, p. 85) stresses an "overwhelming sense of inevitability" in these logics, as IT is a necessary resource, constitutive of individuals' lives, with "networks, apps, platforms, and media as requirements for social participation." This new logic of accumulation and surveillance has quickly become institutionalized and normalized (Leclercq-Vandelannoitte & Aroles, 2020), revealing a privacy paradox (Pavlou, 2011) and

giving birth to a "powerful program of action that has established itself as inevitable, unstoppable, and justified" (Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2019, p. 82). Digital platforms therefore epitomize a new form of data-driven business model—commercial surveillance embedded in so-called data capitalism and marketization of personal data (Beauvisage & Mellet, 2020)—that aims to "manipulate consumer behavior" by, for example, targeting advertisements and pricing products and services at the highest level acceptable by individuals (Clarke, 2019, p. 59). Ironically, the data that people willingly share online are used to manipulate their behavior and achieve commercial, social, or political ends (see March, 2019), converting them into a commodity, such that "their interests have almost no impact" and "can be largely ignored" (Clarke, 2019, p. 59). A possible loss of human agency thus results, emphasizing the dangers of determinism and lack of choice in the age of surveillance capitalism, when many applications of digitalization are being *imposed* on society, not offered as a choice (Clarke, 2019). The monitoring of individuals' daily lives by Big Tech often leads to decisions without further human intervention. Processes of quantification and automation of decision-making are increasingly unmoderated by people, such that detecting and correcting unreasonable and wrong decisions has become almost impossible (Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2019; Clarke, 2019).

4.4.5. Lack of transparency

These risks are pernicious in that Big Tech increasingly acts as "a new kind of invisible hand" (Zuboff, 2015, p. 82) through complex and often invisible processes (Clarke, 2019). Despite the potential for algorithmic transparency, digital platforms indeed frequently obscure their operational processes to mitigate the risk of legal challenges (Butler et al., 2023). One rare study highlights the "absence of transparency" that characterizes the way platforms operate at all stages, from data acquisition to their analysis and exploitation (Newell & Marabelli, 2015). Such a lack of transparency applies to analytical tools themselves, such as unknown algorithms housed in an unknown global network of servers (Yoo, 2015). Some research emphasizes Big Tech firms' "obscure manners," the "opacity" of their process, and the "clandestinity of their operations," which are "largely obscured from public view" without users' knowledge and consent (Clarke, 2019, p. 66), generating a lack of understanding about the ways they affect every realm of society (Galliers et al., 2017; March, 2019; Newell & Marabelli, 2015). Similarly, asymmetries of information, knowledge, and power are part of surveillance capitalism, deliberately constructed by digital platforms, and lead to inevitably detrimental outcomes (Lightfoot & Wisniewski, 2014; Safadi & Watson, 2023).

4.4.6. Extension of digital surveillance to public governance

Thus, although the dangers of monopoly market power have long been recognized in the fields of economics or strategy (especially in the case of manufacturing giants), such issues have been made more complex in the case of innovative digital business models (Clemons & Madhani, 2010; Zuboff, 2019), all the more so

as Big Tech firms often act as technoscientific and political-economic "gatekeepers" to constantly enhance their essential digital infrastructure. Some IS studies show that digital platforms rely on innovative business models that overwhelm current regulatory frameworks, such that an extension of regulatory policies and stronger programs of action (Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2019; Clarke, 2019; Kokshagina et al., 2023) seem necessary to provide socially desirable outcomes (Clemons & Madhani, 2010). Digital platforms convert big data into valuable, proprietary assets that generate monopoly-like returns (Fast et al., 2023). Although these advantages are framed in technical terms, they contribute to exploitative market behaviors and broader societal harms, such as consumer exploitation, restricted market access, and entrenched inequality (Butler et al., 2023). The significant informational and economic asymmetries held by these firms also enable them to pursue aggressive growth strategies, often through the acquisition of emerging competitors and the strategic use of mergers to eliminate potential threats. This continual centralization of data, infrastructure, and capital deepens economic concentration and thus arouses pressing regulatory concerns about the impact of platform capitalism on market competition and democratic oversight.

As a result of the lack of transparency in Big Tech's operations and the institutionalization of its surveillance practices, leading to growing power differentials between Big Tech using data and people whose data are used (Greene et al., 2023), some IS studies note the extreme difficulty, and even impossibility, of resisting and counteracting these actions (Clarke; 2019; Cecez-Kecmanovic; 2019; Leclercq-Vandelannoitte & Bertin, 2024; Rowe & Markus, 2022). Clarke (2019) and Cecez-Kecmanovic (2019) notably argue that the development of the digital surveillance economy has not been met with serious resistance—from citizens, civil society, or public authorities—and they call for more critical research to help frame the nature and implications of digital platform power. Greene et al. (2023) further highlight how reinforcement learning-based personalization amplifies these concerns, embedding opaque algorithms into governance and undermining autonomy. These developments underscore the need for ethically aware research and stronger policy frameworks that prioritize individual rights and democratic control.

5. Discussion: understanding Big Tech power, a research imperative for IS research

In this section, we discuss our findings by questioning the predominance of a positive framing on digital platforms power in IS research. We then address the lack of an integrative critical perspective on Big Tech power, which, we specify, is a new form of global power. Last, we present a research agenda in an effort to unpack the multifaceted power of Big Tech and its implications for IS research.

5.1. Laudatory logics: the predominance of positive framing on digital platforms in IS research

As Rowe and Markus (2022) note, mainstream IS research tends to frame digital platforms positively—even while other fields, such as critical social sciences, offer far more critical perspectives. For example, Amazon is typically depicted in IS research as "technologically savvy and strategically successful," with

little attention paid to potential unfair practices or broader societal consequences (Rowe & Markus, 2022, p.437). As explained by Rowe & Markus (2022), despite ongoing debates about the controversial implications of digital platform power, IS literature often emphasizes societal and organizational benefits, portraying these companies as exemplars of digital innovation and efficiency (Ahuja et al., 2023; Jabr, 2021; Karhu et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2018).

Even as public concerns and political scrutiny around the power of digital platforms have intensified, our literature review shows that the IS field largely retains an instrumental and managerial perspective. Many studies mirror the priorities and viewpoints of digital companies, focusing primarily on how platforms can drive strategic advantages, economic value, and technological progress (Tan et al., 2024). Rather than critically interrogating underlying power structures or social risks, IS research typically seeks to provide actionable guidance for platform management or explores regulatory approaches mainly aimed at supporting further innovation and market expansion (Krämer & Shekhar, 2025). As a result, the potential downsides and broader societal consequences of digital platformization often remain in the background, with critical or cautionary voices still underrepresented compared to the overall corpus.

Our review thus highlights a persistent imbalance: while a growing number of IS studies have recently begun to address issues of platform power, control, and negative externalities (see section 4.4), the positive, performance-oriented framing continues to dominate mainstream IS discourse (see section 4.1, 4.2 and 4.3). This predominant orientation is evident in the way IS research consistently foregrounds the consumer and business benefits associated with platforms: dominant IS discourses tend for example to highlight the consumer benefits of platforms—often available at low or no direct cost (de Reuver et al., 2018)—rather than engaging in a deep, critical analysis of platform power. Instead, IS studies typically aim to inform practice and deliver recommendations directly useful to digital platforms (Tiwana, 2015). Most research foregrounds firms' perspectives, addressing strategy development, innovation (Henfridsson et al., 2018), market opportunities, increased sales, network effects, and user participation (e.g., Chen et al., 2014; Li & Wu, 2018; Matook et al., 2015). Some studies even analyze how changes in user behavior might affect business models and value creation (Claussen et al., 2013; Maier et al., 2015a/b; Chen et al., 2014; Hu et al., 2019). Privacy research in IS, as shown in the results, similarly adopts a business-oriented, instrumental stance (Culnan, 2019; Gal-Or et al., 2018; Lin & Armstrong, 2019; Teubner & Flath, 2019). Many studies focus on how to help companies address privacy risks and enhance viability in privacy-sensitive contexts (Krasnova et al., 2010). The business goal of connecting people appears to legitimize privacy breaches, contributing to the "normalization" of surveillance capitalism (Leclercq-Vandelannoitte & Aroles, 2020).

Overall, "unbridled euphoria" around big data and analytics continues to pervade both IS scholarship and professional business literature (Clarke, 2016), which focus heavily on opportunities while underplaying

threats. Although Big Tech scandals increasingly occupy public and policy debates (Rai et al., 2019), IS research tends to report platform power primarily as economic or societal success stories, seldom analyzing its deeper mechanisms or negative social consequences (Alaimo et al., 2020). In contrast to other fields highlighting risks on a massive scale (Zuboff, 2015, 2019), calls for vigilance and critical action within IS scholarship remain scarce. Recent articles have started explicitly addressing these issues (e.g., Cameron et al., 2023; Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2019; Gleiss et al., 2023; Greene et al., 2023; Lindman et al., 2023; Leclercq-Vandelannoitte & Bertin, 2024; Ngwenyama et al., 2023; Rowe & Markus, 2022; Shim et al., 2019).

In other words, although recognition of risks is slowly gaining ground in the field, as shown by our literature review, the prevailing tendency is still to emphasize business value and practical benefits for platforms. This underscores the need for IS research to continue moving beyond an instrumental focus and to more systematically engage with the complexities and controversies surrounding digital platform proliferation.

5.2. A lack of an integrative critical perspective on Big Tech power

Furthermore, our literature review shows that, although thematic categories of "*Big Tech power*" are inherently interconnected, IS research rarely examines them together through an integrative, critical lens. This fragmentation limits understanding of the nature and full ramifications of digital platform power within the field. Surprisingly, this phenomenon is seldom addressed explicitly in IS literature which is yet uniquely positioned to critically examine the intersection of technology, business, and society; it is more often explored in parallel disciplines such as critical international business studies, science and technology studies, and law (e.g., Pasquale, 2015; Zuboff, 2019).

In IS, insights into platform power are typically drawn indirectly—through studies on platform ecosystems, big data, algorithms, privacy issues, surveillance, or monopoly—rather than through focused, dedicated analysis. Most IS research approaches this topic via specific streams, such as business value from data (Chen et al., 2014), competitive advantage (Grover et al., 2018), governance (Jacobides et al., 2018), algorithmic regulation (Kokshagina et al., 2023), or data access (Van Alstyne et al., 2021). As a result, IS scholarship offers fragmented and dispersed insights, often taking digital platform power as a given, a "black box," or a form of evidence broadly associated with domination or risk, without precision on underlying mechanisms or multidimensionality.

Consequently, due to both an instrumental mainstream perspective and this analytical fragmentation, our review highlights a lack of criticality in IS research regarding the power of these digital giants. There is limited problematization or deep critical assessment; "*Big Tech power*" is seldom investigated, theorized, or discussed as a distinct construct. Despite the societal significance and far-reaching impact of platform power, only a handful of studies (Fast et al., 2023; Lindman et al., 2023; Rowe & Markus, 2022; Zuboff, 2015, 2019) adopt a critical and integrative perspective. As a result, the various links among technological,

economic, and societal dimensions of Big Tech power remain insufficiently understood. IS scholarship thus lacks the "big picture" needed for a comprehensive assessment of both the positive and negative implications of platform domination (Cameron et al., 2023). For example, ethical consequences associated with this power are rarely discussed integratively, preventing a thorough understanding of foundational issues and implications. We argue, therefore, that "*Big Tech power" represents a missing, yet essential, construct in IS research*: its absence as a clearly defined object hampers the field's capacity to capture the influence of platforms on markets, organizations, and society.

By not systematically naming and examining this phenomenon, IS research risks overlooking the critical dynamics at the core of digital platform capitalism. This omission constrains theoretical advancement and practical relevance in an era of platform hegemony. While related issues such as governance, algorithmic control, or datafication are discussed, these contributions remain largely isolated rather than unified within an overarching conceptual framework.

We propose that these fragmented insights be integrated into a broader, conceptualization of Big Tech power, providing a coherent foundation for future academic inquiry in IS. Such an approach would allow for theorizing the multifaceted ways in which digital platforms exercise influence across technological, economic, organizational, and societal domains. Our goal is to foreground "*Big Tech power*" as a central research object and encourage deeper critical engagement in IS. In the next section, we define the contours of Big Tech power and specify its distinctive, urgent character as an area of study.

5.3. "*Big Tech power*": Conceptualizing a New Model of Global Power

To lay the groundwork for our conceptualization of "*Big Tech power*", we adopt a Foucauldian, relational perspective of power, conceiving power not as possession or overt domination, but as the dynamic capacity to shape and structure the choices, actions, and constraints of others (Foucault, 1982; Leclercq-Vandelannoitte & Bertin, 2024). Rather than acting directly through force or coercion, platform power operates by organizing the possible field of action for users, influencing behaviors within digitally mediated environments. Building on this foundation, the multifaceted dimensions of "*Big Tech power*" reveal a historically unprecedented form of global power, sustained by a self-reinforcing cycle of technological, economic, and societal influence. Furthermore, what distinguishes this power is not only its global scope, but also its grounding in the liberal ideal of freedom.

5.3.1. Three reinforcing pillars

Mapping the four themes identified in our literature review reveals that "*Big Tech power*" can be specified along these dimensions, which are constantly reinforcing one another. First, far from appearing as a visible, constraining, and violent form of power, our findings reveal that Big Tech relies on a technological and

information-driven power that is eminently disincarnated and embedded in people's daily integrated uses of technologies. Second, Big Tech is characterized by economic and market power, embedded in successful and innovative business models that are difficult for users to contest and for potential competitors to match. Third, because of the permeation of Big Tech in people's lives, these digital giants exert a social and societal power associated with a source of services that provides flexibility, emancipation, and even freedom (to access almost anything in one click). In the end, this power is almost invisible while deeply impinging, as it subtly transforms users' lives thanks to their technological usages in which they voluntarily engage. Fourth, because of these dimensions and the subtlety of this unprecedented form of power, identifying, recognizing, and fighting the threats and risks Big Tech poses to societies are extremely difficult. These dimensions are closely interrelated and follow a reinforcing cycle, as technical power, derived from the mastery of specific technologies, leads to the constitution of an economic power, coupled with and sustained by a societal power. Societal power then further reinforces the source of Big Tech economic power, which in turn enhances Big Tech technological power through massive investments in research and development (R&D) or acquisitions of tech start-ups. The technological resources mastered by digital platform firms are thus eminently political-economic in that, through their ownership of these assets, these firms can enroll and integrate other social actors and value the capitalization of future earnings derived from the users within and of their ecosystems (see Appendix 2 – Empirical Vignette).

5.3.2. Freedom and user empowerment as vectors of Big Tech power

While the reinforcing cycle of these three pillars (technological, economic, and societal) observed in Big Tech firms is striking, it is not entirely without precedent. Historical cases such as industrial paternalism in the late 19th century, agribusiness conglomerates in the 20th century (e.g., seed and phytosanitary product companies), and the Japanese automobile industry illustrate how corporate power has long rested on a triadic interplay of technological innovation, market dominance, and social embeddedness. In each instance, firms leveraged technological advancements to achieve economic scale and influence societal norms, offering stability, convenience, or even well-being to secure public trust and regulatory legitimacy.

However, what sets digital platforms apart is not merely the combination and reinforcement of these pillars, but the distinctive way in which they operate—through mechanisms of user empowerment, perceived freedom, and voluntary participation (see Figure 2). Unlike earlier models of industrial or corporate power, which often relied on visible control or material dependence (e.g., employer-provided housing, long-term employment contracts), Big Tech exert power through disincarnated, seamless, and integrated digital experiences that users actively embrace. The allure of flexibility, hyper-accessibility, and self-determination—hallmarks of the digital platform economy—is not a byproduct but a central vector of its power. As Lindman et al. (2023, p. 145) note, Big Tech are shaped by liberal ideals founded on the

principles of individual political, personal, and economic freedom—yet it is precisely this notion of freedom that has become a key mechanism through which "*Big Tech power*" is exercised. What appears as empowerment becomes a subtle means of governance, as users willingly submit to data capture, algorithmic curation, and platform dependency in pursuit of autonomy and efficiency.

This paradox thus reveals a more subtle and insidious form of power—one that does not merely constrain, but seduces; not only governs, but emancipates in appearance. It complicates traditional conceptions of power as coercive or disciplinary, pointing instead to a form of infrastructural and affective governance rooted in personalization, convenience, and emotional resonance. While institutionalist theories and economic models have long acknowledged path dependency and structural reinforcement, they often fall short in capturing this *paradox of voluntary submission through technological empowerment*. The novelty of "Big Tech power", then, lies not in the existence of a reinforcing triad per se, but in the mechanisms—framed by liberal ideals of freedom and user agency—through which Big Tech sustains and expands its power. Understanding this dynamic is critical to grasping both the resilience and the risks of digital platform dominance.

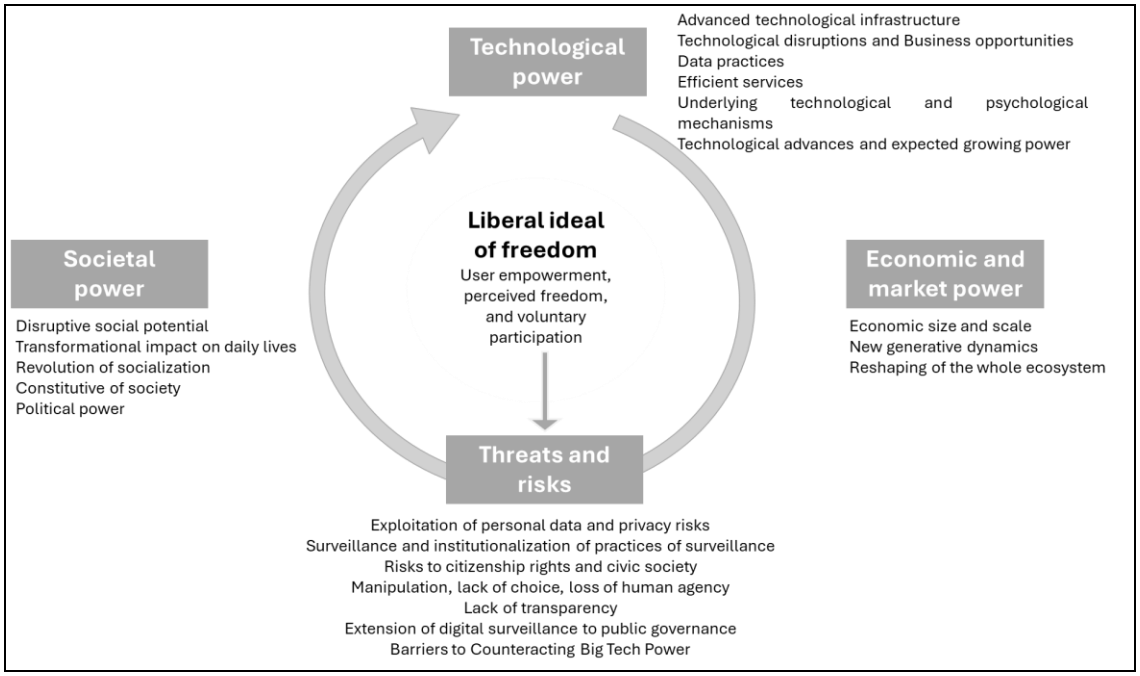

Figure 2: Integrative Conceptual Model of "*Big Tech Power*"

6. Implications for research and practice

This section sets out an agenda for IS scholars and practitioners, emphasizing the urgent need for a holistic framework to examine the technological, economic, and societal dimensions of Big Tech power. It advocates for interdisciplinary approaches to address its complexities and associated risks.

6.1. Reassessing the role of IS research in the age of Big Tech power

This review invites reflection on the role and responsibilities of IS research in an era marked by the growing power of digital platforms. The current literature skews toward celebratory accounts of Big Tech innovations, raising the critical question: why are there more laudatory than critical studies in IS research? All scholars must reconsider the purpose of their disciplines and acknowledge the urgent need to engage with the broader societal and political consequences of platform power. Positioned to scrutinize the rise of multinational digital giants, the IS field has an ethical imperative to act "before it gets too late" (Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2019, p. 81). Echoing recent critical research in IS research (Ologeanu-Taddei, 2025) and adjacent fields, we call for more integrative and critical assessments of Big Tech power.

IS research should strive to measure and theorize this new form of power and its effects, ultimately informing transformative collective practices. Our aim extends beyond mere critique: we seek to expose how prevailing beliefs sustain divisive structures of domination and to deepen understanding of the mechanisms and harms associated with Big Tech. In line with calls for tempered enthusiasm (Clarke, 2019) and for power-based approaches to platforms (Tilson et al., 2010), we argue that IS scholars have a moral and ethical responsibility to critically assess Big Tech power (Clarke, 2016, 2019; de Reuver et al., 2018). We thus propose a critical research agenda to advance conceptual and theoretical understanding of digital platforms power (see Table 1 below) (de Reuver et al., 2018; Lindman et al., 2023).

6.2. Towards a responsible research agenda

The proposed research agenda foregrounds ethical imperatives and humanistic values, urging a shift beyond instrumental or profit-oriented perspectives towards research that interrogates the broader societal impacts of Big Tech (Ologeanu-Taddei, 2025; Sarker et al., 2019; Walsham, 2012). IS research should foster prudence, reflection, and social welfare, shifting from business efficiency toward promoting ethical data use and exposing the harms of digital surveillance (Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2019; Someh et al., 2019). Such a shift may lead to new criteria for assessing the social value of Big Tech innovations within responsible global capitalism and help confront the structural power imbalances and information asymmetries inherent in Big Tech ecosystems (Ngwenyama et al., 2023). In this perspective, IS scholars must adopt a critical stance towards platform power, actively advancing openness and transparency in the regulation of algorithms and platform governance (Lindman et al., 2023; Mikalef et al., 2021), and engaging more robustly in regulatory debates (Lindman et al., 2023).

Second, this agenda emphasizes theory development and the generation of socially relevant knowledge to address the complexity of Big Tech power. We encourage interdisciplinary, pluralistic collaboration spanning IS, organizational studies, international business, and science and technology research (Cameron et al., 2023; Ciriello et al., 2025; Loebbecke & Picot, 2015; March, 2019; Markus, 2015; Markus &

Saunders, 2006; Mingers & Willcocks, 2004; Rowe, 2018; Walsham, 2012). Exploring philosophy, and especially critical philosophical approaches, offers untapped heuristic potential for understanding new forms of technological domination (Ciriello, 2025; Hassan, 2017; Leclercq-Vandelannoitte & Bertin, 2024; Ngwenyama et al., 2023; Rowe, 2018).

Third, we call for an integrative, critical framework articulating the technological, economic, and societal dimensions of Big Tech power, attentive to both risks and countermeasures. This includes analyzing new forms and models of platform power—such as the "*Big Tech raj*" (Leclercq-Vandelannoitte & Bertin, 2024)—and mapping the mechanisms that sustain it (Butler et al., 2023; Lindman et al., 2023). Each dimension requires specific focus:

- Technological power: Investigate centralization, data control, infrastructure transparency, and sovereignty issues (Johnson et al., 2019).
- Economic power: Address monopolistic behaviors, business models built on personal data exploitation, and regulatory possibilities such as compensation for data use or increased user control (Lindman et al., 2023; Fast et al., 2023).
- Societal power: Examine user data capture, surveillance, algorithmic influence on behaviors, and the historic role of elite institutions in shaping tech ecosystems.

We thus invite IS researchers to pursue multidisciplinary studies—linking technology, business, and society—to inform practical policy, recognize resistance strategies, and reveal how Big Tech adapts to regulatory and societal pressures (Gleiss et al., 2023; Kokshagina et al., 2023; Rowe & Markus, 2022). New governance mechanisms are crucial but must be complemented by a more critical and collective societal awareness of "*Big Tech power*" (Doctorow, 2020; Flyverbom et al., 2019; Gorwa, 2019; Moore & Tambini, 2022; Edwards, 2018). Ultimately, this critical agenda aims to support policymakers and education—empowering new generations to critically engage with and challenge "*Big Tech power*".

As Big Tech's influence deepens with the integration of advanced technologies into everyday life, individual and collective responsibility become urgent. All stakeholders—including users, firms, policymakers, and citizens—must critically engage, share responsibility, and actively question the growing power of digital platforms to help build a more responsible and equitable digital future (Ciriello et al., 2024; de Vaujany et al., 2025; Ngwenyama et al., 2023; Kane et al., 2021; Grimshaw, 2018). To operationalize this call for action and provide concrete directions for IS scholarship, we propose below a summary table outlining the key themes of the proposed research agenda, associated actions, and illustrative research questions to guide future investigations into "*Big Tech power*".

Themes	Main Actions	Research Questions
Technological and information-driven power	- Analyze the centralization of Big Tech's infrastructure and assess risks of data leakage. - Examine sovereignty challenges from private control over vital tech. - Advance research on digital infrastructure for regulatory measures on interoperability, sharing, and transparency.	- How does the centralization of infrastructures impact data security and control? - In what ways does private control over key technologies challenge public sovereignty? - What infrastructure measures can regulators implement to enhance transparency and interoperability?
Economic and market power	- Evaluate monopolistic behaviors and potential abuses by digital giants. - Critique exploitation of personal data and propose equitable models (e.g., royalties). - Promote standardized agreements balancing economic and social interests.	- Which regulatory approaches are most effective in addressing Big Tech's monopolistic practices? - How can new models for data sharing ensure fair compensation for individuals? - What are the impacts of standardized data agreements on business models and societal outcomes?
Social and societal power	- Investigate mechanisms of user data capture (nudges, dark patterns) and links to surveillance/national security. - Conduct interdisciplinary studies on behavioral impact and social change through algorithms. - Uncover historical, political, and social factors enabling Big Tech's rise, via case studies.	- How do Big Tech firms influence societal behaviors through digital artifacts and algorithms? - What are the societal consequences of pervasive surveillance enabled by digital platforms? - How have historical and political decisions facilitated the concentration of Big Tech power?
Threats and risks	- Explore resistance strategies at individual and policy levels. - Recommend new governance mechanisms and foster collective awareness. - Encourage critical reflection on responsibility among all actors (firms, users, policymakers, citizens).	- What mechanisms can individuals and institutions employ to resist Big Tech power? - What governance models can proactively manage societal risks related to Big Tech power? - How can responsibility for digital harms be shared among users, firms, and policymakers?

Table 1: Research agenda

7. Conclusion

To advance knowledge on the societal and scholarly significance of "*Big Tech power*", this article was guided by three central research questions: How has the power of digital platforms been conceptualized so far in IS research? What is missing in IS research to fully understand this power? What implications for scholarship and practice can be derived from a renewed conceptualization of such power?

Big Tech now exerts far-reaching influence over economies, societies, and politics. This article sheds light on the significance of Big Tech in society, a phenomenon that remains, surprisingly, underexplored in IS research (Clarke, 2022; Gleiss et al., 2023; Lindman et al., 2023). Given the accelerating scale and complexity of Big Tech's impact, it is urgent for IS scholars to critically investigate what constitutes "*Big Tech power*" and why it is so unique. This study aims to provide timely conceptual tools and insights to guide future research and policy debates in this fast-evolving field.

Addressing our first research question, we find that IS research has thus far described "*Big Tech power*" in fragmented terms. Our second research question highlights the need for a comprehensive, critical

framework to unify and interrogate these perspectives. In response to our third research question, we argue that recognizing this gap underscores the need for further analysis of Big Tech's global power and urges IS scholars and practitioners to respond proactively to its emerging risks and challenges.

This article faces two main limitations: our literature review was limited to a few journals, and our focus largely was on five Big Tech giants, which may not capture the full diversity of digital platforms. Nevertheless, we argue that these companies illustrate a broader trend—shared strategies and a technological shift in value creation and societal impact observed across many digital platforms like Airbnb, Uber, Twitter, and Netflix.

This article highlights several key questions for future research: How should "*Big Tech power*" be conceptualized, measured, and legitimated? What frameworks can balance social benefits and harms of platform power, and who should decide? Do users seek emancipation from platforms, or are new strategies needed to foster digital awareness and alternatives? Further, how should IS as a discipline engage with and respond to Big Tech's expanding power? Our work offers a synthesis and research agenda for future inquiry, urging IS researchers to critically reassess their role, challenge dominant paradigms, and actively shape more just and equitable digital futures. While this reflection remains open-ended, it is essential to ensure the field's continued relevance.

This article indeed questions the core purpose and positioning of IS research amid the rise of Big Tech. It calls for a critical reassessment of how the field engages with these companies, moving beyond conventional perspectives to interrogate their roles, responsibilities, and influence. Are Big Tech unstoppable? Can their power be managed or redirected—and are they now a new form of governance? To what extent do they generate social value? These questions are central for the IS discipline. Our work thus both synthesizes current knowledge and proposes a foundation for future inquiry (Templier & Paré, 2015), urging the IS community to rethink its role, challenge prevailing paradigms, and explore new pathways toward a more just digital society.

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