Her cycle, its logic: Information practices and gendered governance in MCT apps

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Abstract

Introduction. This study examines menstrual cycle tracking (MCT) apps as information systems that organise bodily knowledge, highlighting tensions of empowerment, discipline and information justice.

Method. Data included 1,300 Douyin comments mined on 10 June 2025 and 15 semi-structured interviews conducted from June to August 2025. Comments were clustered, modelled and sentiment-analysed; interviews were anonymised and coded through directed content analysis.

Analysis. Quantitative techniques identified thematic patterns and sentiment distributions in user comments, while qualitative coding yielded axial categories: technological dependence, data discipline, fragile trust, privacy illusion, gendered presumptions and everyday resistance.

Results. Apps enhanced bodily awareness but reinforced algorithmic optimisation, reproductive defaults and commercial opacity. Users moved between reliance and resistance, experiencing empowerment and regulation simultaneously.

Conclusion(s). MCT apps illustrate how information systems discipline under the guise of care. Justice-oriented practices such as participatory design, transparent governance and inclusive infrastructures are needed to reframe FemTech as a space of equity and information fairness.

Introduction

Issues of gender have become a prominent focus in Library and Information Science (LIS), reflecting the field's commitment to access, equity and justice. Early studies exposed inequalities in authorship, impact and career progression (Lund & Shamsi, 2023; Shah et al., 2025), while later work expanded to thematic and methodological debates, highlighting gendered differentiation and diverse practices (Zhang et al., 2025). Digital health technologies now provide a key site where gender, information and power intersect. Menstrual cycle tracking apps (MCT apps) exemplify this intersection, as datafication and algorithmic governance translate embodied practice into informational categories. Research has noted both motivations and benefits (Hong et al., 2024) and risks around privacy and data governance (Hammond & Burdon, 2024). Such technologies are deeply ambivalent: they enhance access and self-management but also reproduce exclusions rooted in heteronormativity and reproductive norms.

MCT apps are not only health tools but also sites of information production and negotiation. Menstruation, as both a biological rhythm and a socially mediated experience (Hendl & Jansky, 2022), has in China been shaped by Confucian traditions of modesty and restraint, producing long-standing silences around women's bodies (Wu & Dong, 2019). In digital health, it is recast as data points such as cycle length, symptoms and hormonal indicators, which are collected, compared and acted upon. Algorithms and labelling translate bodily rhythms into categories of 'normal' and 'abnormal,' reshaping perception (Erickson et al., 2022). Online communities amplify these dynamics, as women share and critique experiences, foregrounding questions of visibility, trust and information justice in digital environments (Lin & Wang, 2020).

Despite growing global research on FemTech, the experiences of Chinese women remain under-examined. Their use of MCT apps unfolds within persistent menstrual stigma and social discipline, yet also offers new possibilities for visibility and health agency. Feminist perspectives in LIS have long underscored how information systems reproduce or resist power and inequality (Allard et al., 2023). Building on this tradition, examining MCT apps through feminist and information justice lenses highlights how digital health shapes bodily perception, gender identity and privacy boundaries, while exposing tensions between empowerment, regulation and equity. Against this backdrop, the study asks:

- RQ1: How do digital health technologies simultaneously generate empowerment and discipline as a dual logic?

- RQ2: How do the design logics of MCT apps shape women's bodily perception, gender identity and privacy boundaries?

- RQ3: How does FemTech produce tensions between health empowerment and bodily discipline, and what ethical insights does this offer for digital health?

Theoretical framework

Foucault argued that modern power operates less through coercion than through micro-level disciplines embedded in everyday practices, which individuals internalise and reproduce (Foucault, 1977; Longhofer & Winchester, 2016). With digital technologies, these mechanisms extend into data and algorithms, producing more invisible forms of discipline (Capodivacca & Giacomini, 2024). Deleuze's notion of the '*society of control*' builds on this, shifting attention from enclosed institutions to open systems and continuous monitoring, where power modulates behaviour in real time and reduces individuals to calculable data flows (Deleuze, 2006; Freund, 2025).

This logic is evident in digital health. MCT apps use prediction, reminders and labelling not as neutral tools but as mechanisms of routinised control, constructing models of '*normal*' and '*abnormal*' that reshape women's experiences (Gongor & Tutsoy, 2025). What appear as

autonomous practices of recording cycles in fact embed users in algorithmic distinctions, while data sharing produces informal information communities where recognition and support coexist with conformity pressures (Lin et al., 2024).

Accordingly, this study employs the society of control as its main analytical lens, complemented by the concept of the '*surveillant assemblage*' (Haggerty & Ericson, 2003) and scholarship on self-tracking. From this perspective, MCT apps are seen as governance mechanisms that afford autonomy through recording and sharing while reinforcing discipline through algorithmic logics, normalised models and gendered expectations (Baker, 2020).

Method

A mixed-methods design combined social media analysis to capture discursive patterns with interviews to explore experiential depth.

Step 1: Social media text mining: capturing discursive trends from Douyin

Comments data collection and processing

On 10 June 2025, comments were collected from Douyin, China's mainstream short-video platform (the Chinese version of TikTok) (Kaye et al., 2021). The platform's user base predominantly comprises young women who frequently share daily health insights and app usage experiences. Using Playwright, 1,300 valid comments were retrieved with keywords such as '*menstrual recording*' and '*menstrual cycle monitoring*'. After preprocessing and anonymisation, texts were vectorised with TF-IDF and clustered using K-means, producing six clusters with representative keywords and comments (see Figure 1).
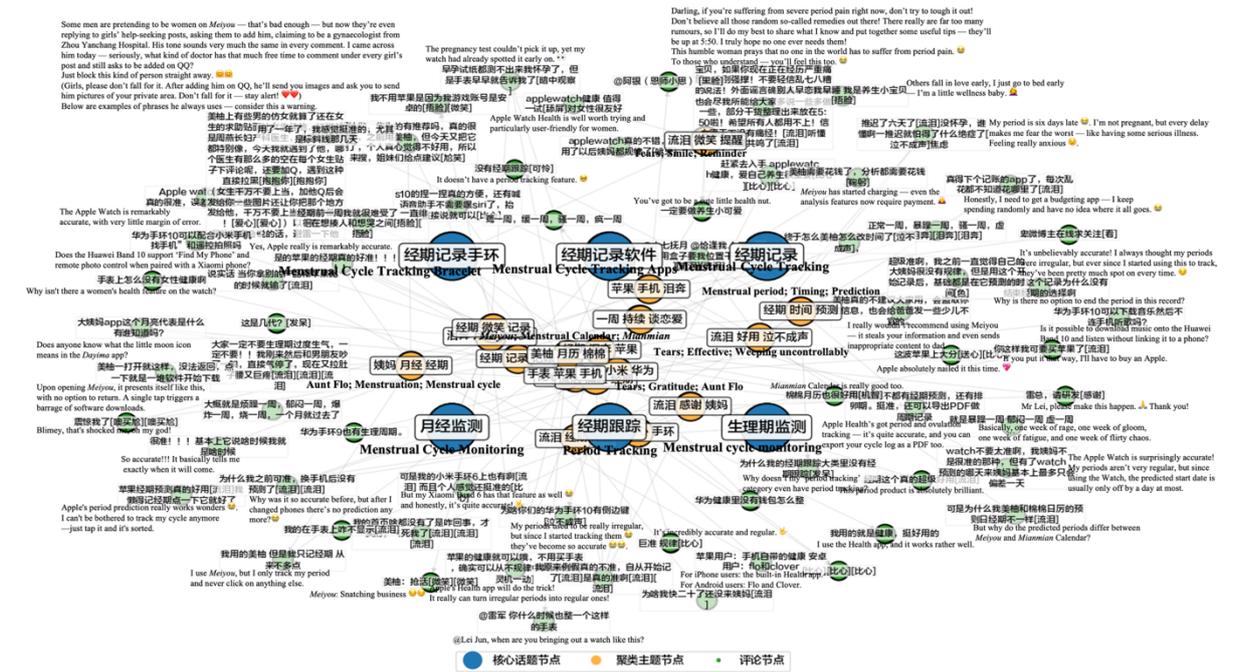

Figure 1. Distribution of comment texts.

Latent Dirichlet allocation identified five latent themes, and sentiment analysis showed 28.5% positive, 34.9% neutral and 36.6% negative responses (see Table 1).

Theme	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Representative Keywords
Intelligent cycle monitoring	43.50%	31.80%	24.70%	accuracy, prediction, useful, recommendation, algorithm
Platform usage preferences	27.20%	28.70%	44.10%	Android, iOS, adverts, recommendation, mode
Privacy concerns	23.30%	50.50%	26.10%	how it knows, data theft, fear, deletion
Usage difficulties	13.10%	34.20%	52.70%	detection failure, false alerts, adverts, useless
Long-term reliance	56.60%	31.50%	11.80%	over a decade, calendar, useful, habit

Table 1. Topic clusters and sentiment analysis of comments.

Step 2: In-depth interviews: extending experiential insights

Interview data collection and processing

To complement these findings, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 MCT app users recruited between June and August 2025 through purposive snowball sampling, targeting participants with prior app-use experience and relevant reflections on gendered disciplining and privacy or trust concerns. All participants provided informed consent and were told of their right to withdraw. Interviews (30–50 minutes) were conducted face-to-face or via Tencent Meeting, audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim with identifiers removed. This process produced transcripts totalling 150,996 Chinese characters. Table 2 provides an overview of participant demographics and app usage.

No.	Age	Software used & duration	frequency
P01	26	Meiyou, 6 months; Mianmian Calendar, 1 year	Irregular
P02	26	Meiyou, 3 months; WeChat Mini Programme, 3 months	Irregular
P03	20	Apple Health, 2 years	10 months
P04	22	Apple Health, 3 years	Monthly
P05	20	Apple Health, 2 months	Once
P06	21	Apple Health, 3 years	Monthly
P07	21	Meiyou, 6 months; Calendar, 4 months	Monthly
P08	26	Huawei Health, 3 years	Monthly
P09	21	Apple Health, 2 years; Meiyou, 8 years	Monthly
P10	26	Apple Health, 2 months	Monthly
P11	20	Clue, 2 years; Apple Health, 3years	Monthly
P12	37	Meiyou, 1 year; Apple Health, 3 years	Monthly
P13	21	Huawei Health, 6 months; Apple Health, 2 months	Irregular
P14	21	Meiyou, 2 months; Apple Health, 2 years	Monthly
P15	27	Meiyou, 2 months; Apple Health, 2 years	Monthly

Table 2. Background information of interview participants.

Coding and analytical strategy

The interview data were analysed using directed content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) in three stages: (1) developing an initial coding scheme based on the theory of the society of control, (2) applying the scheme in NVivo 14 while remaining open to emergent themes, and (3) refining categories by integrating pre-defined and new codes until saturation was reached (Kim et al., 2024). To ensure robustness, the first three transcripts (20% of the dataset) were re-coded, with no discrepancies identified, confirming consistency (Wagner, 2024).

The final coding framework consolidated open codes into five axial categories: technological dependence, data discipline, privacy boundaries, the evolution of trust, and gendered norms, as shown in Table 3.

Category	Code	Sources	References
The technological dependence of body management	Empowerment and the construction of order	9	18
	Behavioural dependence and cognitive offloading	9	17
The emotional experience of data discipline	Self-attribution in predictive failures	12	18
	Bodily anxiety induced by standardisation	13	40
	Emotional labour driven by labelling	12	30
The dynamic evolution of technological trust	Establishment of instrumental trust	13	21
	Algorithmic opacity and emerging suspicion	11	15
	Contradictory habitual dependence	6	12
The cognitive illusion of privacy control	Embodied perception of technological surveillance	9	18
	Passive surrender and the illusion of consent	14	31
	Ambiguity of data ownership	14	24
	Data altruism and voluntary surrender	3	5
The normative architecture of gendered systems	Heteronormativity and reproductive centrality	13	34
	Functional misalignment across life stages	7	16
The political agency of everyday resistance	Strategic data input	11	16
	Selective ignorance and functional reinvention	14	30
	Cross-platform or offline verification	11	13
	Self-critique and limits of resistance	11	24
	Users' definition of platform responsibility	8	13

Table 3. Coding framework of interview data.

Findings

The technological dependence of body management

Users rely on MCT apps both as empowering tools for bodily order and as crutches for cognitive offloading, reflecting a dual dynamic of autonomy and dependence.

Initially, empowerment arises from the certainty provided by quantified recording, predictive accuracy and timely reminders. Douyin comments under the '*intelligent cycle monitoring*' theme frequently praised predictive precision: '*It's so accurate!!! Basically, whenever it says my period will come, it does.*' High positive sentiment in the '*long-term reliance*' cluster (56.6%) further demonstrates the trust secured through order and predictability. Interviews echo this: P04 valued the sense of safety from bringing pads in advance, P06 and P12 appreciated monitoring regularity and lifestyle impacts, while P03 described a deeper understanding of hormonal cycles. For P09, data feedback even bolstered self-esteem, with a perfect '*score*' producing sustained emotional satisfaction.

As trust consolidated, empowerment turned into behavioural and cognitive dependence. Apps became external referents for planning daily life, diet and travel. P09 admitted trusting her watch more than her own memory and used its '*emotional list*' to interpret moods, illustrating technology as both monitor and emotional decoder. In contrast, P15 treated the app as replaceable with chat logs, showing that dependence varies by lifestyle, personality and tolerance for bodily uncertainty.

The emotional experience of data discipline

While offering convenience, these apps impose data-driven standards that trigger bodily anxiety, self-attribution and emotional labour.

Algorithms define '*normal*' cycles, and deviation triggers dissatisfaction, as seen in Douyin complaints about '*false reports*' or '*useless predictions*', where negative sentiment reached 52.7%.

Interviews revealed similar anxieties: P04 worried when predictions mismatched her cycle; P05 linked delays to possible disorders; P13 equated deviations with poor health. Achievement systems further reinforced anxiety, as users internalised algorithmic standards as personal benchmarks.

When predictions failed, users often blamed themselves rather than the technology. P15 checked her sleep and diet, P06 linked errors to emotional fluctuations, and P09 assumed *'there's a problem with my body.'* Such self-attribution exemplifies Foucauldian discipline, where external norms are internalised into self-surveillance.

Labelling features also imposed emotional labour. P13 felt long lists *'exacerbated my anxiety'*, while others noted that limited mood options erased nuanced experiences. In information terms, the reduction of complex states into rigid categories not only burdens users but also narrows the representation of female embodiment, reproducing forms of information inequality.

The dynamic evolution of technological trust

Trust in menstrual apps shifts from initial confidence in predictive accuracy to erosion through commercialisation and opacity, before being partially reconstructed in new platform contexts.

Trust is first built on predictive accuracy, as users experienced *'epiphanies of accuracy'* echoed in comments praising algorithms as 'super accurate.' Yet this trust erodes with awareness of the *'black box'* and intrusive commercialisation. Negative sentiment around ads and recommendations (44.1% and 52.7%) illustrates widespread discontent, corroborated by interviewees who abandoned apps over advertising, paywalls or exaggerated promotions.

Rather than abandoning tracking altogether, many migrated to platforms perceived as more trustworthy. P04 and P12 shifted to Apple Health, citing its built-in nature and lack of overt commercialisation. Still, contradictions persisted. P09 described a *'love-hate'* relationship, anxious both with and without alerts, while P15 resignedly accepted data collection with *'no choice.'* Trust thus became a fragile, paradoxical dependence shaped by platform ecosystems.

The cognitive illusion of privacy control

Users recognise constant surveillance but experience powerlessness over data ownership, producing an illusory sense of privacy control.

In Douyin comments, neutral sentiment (50.5%) dominated *'privacy concerns'*, yet keywords like *'data theft'* and *'scared'* revealed unease beneath apparent detachment. Interviews clarified this state: P14 admitted, *'I do care, I'm just powerless to change it.'* Most users confessed to skipping privacy agreements, framing consent as compulsory. P07 summarised, *'I don't have time to read it… I feel like I can't prevent [data collection] anyway.'*

Ambiguity over data ownership reinforced this helplessness. P05 doubted deletion claims, suspecting, *'You delete it on your end, but has the platform?'* Such scepticism reflects uncertainty about backend operations. Interfaces that offer *'delete'* or *'deactivate'* options foster a false sense of agency while users suspect data persists. This mismatch between perception and reality constitutes the cognitive illusion of privacy control.

The normative architecture of gendered systems

App design embeds heteronormative and reproductive assumptions, producing an idealised user profile that excludes diversity and enacts technological governance.

Comments frequently resisted this *'compulsory reproductive futurism.'* One noted: *'People are here to track their periods, not primarily to track pregnancy.'* Interviews echoed such frustration: P08 criticised the term *'fertility window'*, P13 felt pressured, and P14 bluntly stated, *'Not everyone is heterosexual.'* These critiques reveal how assumptions marginalise women who are child-free, single, non-heterosexual or otherwise outside reproductive scripts.

By centring reproduction, MCT apps discipline users into narrow life trajectories, framing a normative definition of womanhood as empowerment. Although their features and community spaces offer Chinese women avenues to resist stigma and pursue active health management, the underlying mechanisms remain shaped by patriarchal structures, underscoring the ethical paradox of FemTech as both enabler and regulator.

The political agency of everyday resistance

Despite systemic constraints, users practise everyday resistance through adaptation, selective engagement and cross-platform verification, while demanding greater responsibility from platforms.

Some strategically input or withhold data: P14 refused permissions, P08 masked her name, and P13 backfilled logs for aesthetic completeness. Many ignored ancillary features, reshaping apps into minimalist tracking tools. Others privileged embodied experience over algorithmic authority, with P13 asserting, '*I would be more inclined to trust my own perception*', while P09 cross-checked advice with academic literature.

Yet resistance remained limited. P02 noted that user agreements still forced compliance, and P09 confessed, '*Without them, I don't know how to define my own health.*' Nevertheless, participants articulated demands for broader platform responsibility. P14 envisioned social responsibility beyond reproduction, suggesting workplace knowledge and empowerment. Such expectations signal a call for FemTech grounded in feminist care, not technological regulation.

Discussion

When design disciplines: algorithms, bodies, and the narrowing of choice

Findings reveal how rigid standards, predictive errors and narrow labelling foster anxiety and self-blame, showing how MCT apps privilege algorithmic optimisation and reproductive defaults that marginalise diverse users. These patterns challenge the inclusivity that LIS scholarship has long emphasised. Value-sensitive design, which embeds ethics and stakeholder values from the outset (Friedman et al., 2013), resonates with this tradition by highlighting equity as central to system design. Yet FemTech often departs from such principles, commodifying intimate data and scripting narrow forms of womanhood. Addressing these tensions requires design strategies that move beyond technical efficiency, emphasising inclusive labels, flexible personalisation and transparent visualisation (Jacobs & Evers, 2023). By integrating feminist principles into HCI and system design, we can help confront structural asymmetries and dominant ideologies, guiding FemTech towards ethically grounded products that embody inclusivity and gain broader recognition among women (Croon, 2022; Giaccardi et al., 2025).

Her data, their script: the paradox of empowerment in FemTech

A paradox sits at the centre of FemTech: MCT apps enhance bodily awareness and support health management, yet they also encode patriarchal discourses (Chen, 2025), most notably compulsory reproductive futurism, which channels women into predetermined life scripts. Feminist technoscience reminds us that technology is never neutral but always infused with social values and hierarchies (Floegel & Costello, 2022; Foxman, 2025). Genuine empowerment therefore lies not in individualised '*data awareness*' but in the collective capacity to question, resist and reshape systems (Caswell, 2021). This requires stronger participation and sustained voices from women and marginalised communities, challenging male-dominated design cultures and expanding the possibilities of what FemTech can be (Saifuddin et al., 2022).

Towards justice in practice: reimagining care, power, and information

Algorithms not only mirror patriarchal assumptions but also intensify them through the capture, circulation and presentation of embodied data. Information justice reminds us that fairness

extends across distributive, recognitive and participatory dimensions (Mathiesen, 2015) and demands attention to the risks created when technologies privilege dominant norms and elite interests (Freelon, 2023; Griffy-Brown et al., 2018). When the perspectives of marginalised groups are absent, or the voices of those most affected are silenced, systems inevitably reproduce domination (Caswell, 2021). The non-neutrality of MCT apps is a vivid example. Realising justice requires moving from tokenistic diversity towards genuinely community-led design, embedding users within design and governance so that questions and goals emerge from lived pain points. Practically, this implies embedding user representatives in product governance committees; implementing transparent data deletion mechanisms that users can visually confirm rather than trusting opaque backend claims; and co-designing labelling systems with diverse user groups to ensure symptom categories reflect lived experiences rather than clinical defaults. Such practices ground FemTech in what users most need—informed agency and trust—rather than researcher or market assumptions (Floegel & Costello, 2022).

Conclusion

MCT apps illustrate how care and control are inseparably entwined. They promise certainty and self-knowledge, yet also commodify intimacy, enforce reproductive scripts and inscribe algorithmic norms onto the body. Empowerment shades into dependence, trust falters under opacity, and resistance remains partial within entrenched structures. Achieving justice therefore means more than widening access; it requires centring lived experience in design, redistributing informational power and unsettling the logics of discipline. Reimagined through feminist principles and community-led practice, FemTech can become less a tool of governance and more a space of equity, solidarity and care.

The primary limitation of this study is its focus on a predominantly younger cohort (centred on those aged 20–27), which limits the generalizability of findings to women navigating other life stages (e.g., perimenopause). Future research must expand recruitment to examine how the dual logic of empowerment and discipline evolves across the full female life course, particularly among older users whose information needs and privacy concerns may differ significantly.

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