REVIEW ARTICLE

Navigating Ethical Challenges in 6G-Enabled Smart Cities: Privacy, Equity, and Governance

Sumaria Rafique[1,*], **Sundas Iqbal**[2], **Danish Ali**[3,*] **and Farhad Khan**[4]

[1] National University of Computer and Emerging Sciences, Lahore Campus, Lahore 54700, Pakistan
[2] School of Software, Nanjing University of Information Science and Technology, Nanjing 210044, China
[3] School of Computer Science, Wuhan University, Wuhan 430072, China
[4] School of Economics and Management, Chang'an University, Xi'an 710064, China

Abstract

The rapid urbanization and technological advancements have driven the development of smart cities, envisioned as sustainable, efficient, and interconnected urban spaces. The integration of sixth-generation (6G) wireless technology in smart cities promises unprecedented opportunities in connectivity, low-latency communication, and data management, which transforms urban living. However, this evolution raises critical ethical concerns related to privacy, inclusion, transparency, accountability, and environmental sustainability. This paper explores the ethical considerations inherent in designing smart cities with 6G, emphasizing data governance, equity, and human-centric approaches. It delves into frameworks such as utilitarianism, deontological ethics, and virtue-based ethics to address issues such as algorithmic bias, data privacy, and societal inclusion. The review highlights the challenges of ensuring equitable access to technology, minimizing surveillance risks, and fostering transparent decision-making in urban governance. It also underscores the importance of sustainable practices and environmental ethics, advocating for energy-efficient systems and the principles of circular economy in 6G-enabled urban ecosystems. By examining these dimensions, the paper offers actionable recommendations for stakeholders, including policymakers, urban planners, and technology developers, to balance technological innovation with ethical responsibility. This study serves as a critical guide to ensure that the future of smart cities is not only technologically advanced but also socially equitable, sustainable, and aligned with human dignity.

Keywords: smart cities, 6G technology, ethical considerations, privacy, inclusivity, data governance.

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***Corresponding authors:**
✉ Sumaria Rafique
rsumaira80@gmail.com
✉ Danish Ali
danishalikhan545@gmail.com

1 Introduction

Rapid urbanization across the globe has driven the development of "smart cities," which leverage cutting-edge technologies such as the Internet of Things (IoT), Artificial Intelligence (AI), and advanced wireless communication networks to create efficient,

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sustainable, and interconnected urban spaces. Among these technologies, the upcoming deployment of sixth-generation (6G) wireless networks promises to further revolutionize smart cities by enabling ultra-fast data speeds, ultra-low latency communication, and massive device connectivity. However, as these technologies advance, significant ethical challenges arise, particularly in the areas of privacy, equity, and governance [1].

With the growth of urbanization, smart cities have emerged as a revolutionary solution to urban challenges [2]. These cities leverage technologies to create interconnected environments, offering the potential for greater efficiency, sustainability, and an improved quality of life for their citizens. Central to this technological evolution is the forthcoming deployment of sixth-generation (6G) wireless technology, which is expected to significantly transform urban environments [3, 4]. While 6G remains a theoretical concept, its data rates are anticipated to exceed terabits per second (Tbps) under certain conditions. Additionally, ultra-reliable low-latency communications (URLLC) and immense connectivity capacities offer the potential to enhance existing smart city use cases and introduce new ones that could revolutionize urban operations. However, the impending reality of this new level of interconnectedness raises critical ethical questions related to the design and implementation of 6G smart cities.

The data-driven nature of smart cities requires efficient and secure mechanisms for collecting and processing data from numerous IoT devices, raising concerns about both technical scalability and the ethical management of sensitive personal information. The integration of machine learning into IoT security [5] and the foundational design of IoT networks for smart cities [6] establish the technical context within which ethical challenges of data governance, privacy, and informed consent must be addressed. Such models are crucial for building scalable and sustainable smart city infrastructures, allowing real-time analytics without straining communication networks. Smart Cities offer huge promises with the tight interplay between IoT, AI, and sophisticated communication networks, but also enormous ethical questions [7]. Smart cities will become more data-driven, bringing a threat around implications like how to collect, what to do with the data, and how to manage it. The enormous amount of data connected devices produce leads to important concerns related to individual privacy, consent, and data ownership. Citizens could be unaware subjects of surveillance and have their movements, preferences, and behaviors observed and analyzed [8]. Without balance and frameworks to uphold individual rights while utilizing the power of data for the benefit of all, this data-oriented approach may strip away autonomy [9].

In addition, the principles of equity and inclusion need to be the foundations on which smart city technologies are deployed. While urban planners incorporate 6G capabilities into the systems they design, this must not result in further amplification of existing inequalities or even new disenfranchisement [10]. Whether in developed or developing cities, a lack of skills and/or infrastructure may cause historically marginalized communities to be left behind in the race to develop smart cities [11]. This raises ethical issues such as access to technology, and the digital divide as well as potential social exclusion. Universal access to smart city programs and benefits is not just the right thing to do; it is an essential component of sustainable urban development [12].

Another ethical dimension that should be taken into consideration while designing smart cities is transparency and accountability. Citizens should be aware of what is done with their data and who is in charge of protecting it as technologies are rolled out [13]. Algorithmic decision-making processes make ethical considerations difficult because they can simply reproduce and reinforce already existing biases that recreate power structures. When citizens understand how urban surveillance systems operate and who bears responsibility for data-driven decisions, they are better positioned to engage meaningfully with smart city governance, fostering the trust and institutional confidence that ethical urban management requires [14]. It is paramount to ensure that the mechanisms for ethical governance are established and play a crucial role in creating not only smart cities but also protecting the rights of their citizens in an evolving technological world that is bound to expand.

Given these considerations, this review paper introduces a holistic examination of the ethical perspectives that require specific attention in the design of smart cities using 6G [15]. By discussing relevant ethical frameworks such as utilitarianism, deontological ethics, and virtue-based ethics, the paper considers how these perspectives can inform responsible decision-making in urban governance. The paper further examines critical

issues related to privacy and data protection, drawing on analyses of ethical challenges in smart city security and data management [16], as well as reviews of the sensor systems that generate the data at the heart of these governance concerns [17]. As part of these considerations, the paper explores equity and inclusion as two intertwined dimensions of ethical smart city development, demonstrating the importance of principles that ensure all individuals—regardless of socioeconomic status, age, or digital literacy—can access and benefit from smart city technologies. The examined issues collectively demonstrate that ensuring universal access to and meaningful representation in smart city projects is not merely a policy aspiration but a fundamental ethical obligation for designers, policymakers, and urban planners alike.

This paper aims to explore the ethical implications of designing and implementing 6G-enabled smart cities, focusing on issues of privacy, inclusivity, transparency, and accountability. Specifically, it investigates how ethical frameworks can be applied to address these concerns and ensure that the potential benefits of 6G are realized in a socially equitable and environmentally sustainable manner. The potential of 6G to simultaneously enhance urban connectivity and reduce energy consumption underscores the importance of developing governance frameworks that ensure these technical advances are deployed equitably and ethically [18]. The findings of this study have important implications for policymakers, urban planners, and technology developers, ensuring that smart cities are not only technologically advanced but also just, equitable, and sustainable.

The paper employs a literature review methodology, analyzing existing ethical frameworks such as utilitarianism, deontological ethics, and virtue ethics in the context of 6G-enabled smart cities. Case studies and examples from current smart city projects will also be explored to illustrate these ethical principles in practice. The paper makes a unique contribution by integrating ethical analysis into the discourse on 6G smart cities. By focusing on privacy, equity, and transparency, this research provides valuable insights into how 6G can be deployed ethically to benefit society as a whole.

Also, the review paper considers the opportunities that the deployment of smart cities' technologies creates in terms of ensuring the necessity of maintaining more transparency as a reflection of more accountability in the city government issues [19]. In this way, the paper discusses the ethical implications and issues to consider in terms of considering acceptable and unethical security measures as they relate to the issue of individual rights in the considerations of the specifically assigned 6G network [20]. The paper also considers some of the most critical problems and points of discussions that are raised as the principles of sustainability and environmental ethics and, among these issues, proposes the idea of how 6G can and should ensure that the emerging technology will contribute to the options of eco-friendly urban design. With proper regard to the ethical dimensions of the problems of developing smart cities, the final section introduces recommendations for stakeholders, policymakers, and design companies in terms of framing their approaches to creating viable urban environments. As a result, it becomes possible to make the starting point of the reflection on the issues of designing smart cities that the present globe should act responsibly and that their decisions and choices taken now will be shaping the destiny of the cities of tomorrow [21]. It is indispensable to remember that the devotion to stimulate technological progress should, in this way, be mitigated by the same level of responsibility reflecting an ongoing responsible reflection on the ethical implications of the smart city projects [22]. Therefore, the life in the future, powered by the 6G network is in our hands and as alternative visions for future digital urban environments emerge, the choices made today in designing 6G-enabled smart cities will determine whether these spaces reinforce or challenge existing social inequalities [23].

The design and implementation of smart cities will have significant long-term impacts on the lives of millions of people. It is essential to ensure that smart cities are developed in a manner that provides tangible value to society. In addressing the complexities of this issue, it is crucial to recognize the ethical responsibility to current and future generations who will inhabit these urban environments. This review paper aims to serve as a foundational reference for a critical examination of the ethical considerations surrounding urban technological innovation. It emphasizes the need for creating smart cities that are not only technologically advanced but also just, equitable, and sustainable [24].

1.1 Challenges in 6G-Enabled Smart Cities

As the deployment of 6G technology in smart cities progresses, several ethical challenges emerge,

necessitating careful consideration. The ultra-fast connectivity, massive data collection, and AI-driven automation embedded in these urban ecosystems introduce significant concerns regarding privacy, digital inclusion, governance, and sustainability. Addressing these ethical dilemmas is critical to ensuring that technological advancements benefit all citizens equitably and do not exacerbate existing societal disparities. Without appropriate frameworks, the deployment of 6G smart cities could lead to unintended consequences, such as increased surveillance, algorithmic discrimination, and digital marginalization. Moreover, the governance of such vast interconnected networks requires a transparent and accountable approach to mitigate risks related to biased decision-making, data breaches, and environmental degradation. Below are some of the key ethical challenges that must be addressed:

- The extensive use of AI and IoT devices in smart cities generates vast amounts of data, raising concerns about personal privacy, consent, and the potential misuse of sensitive information. Unchecked surveillance mechanisms could infringe on citizens' rights, leading to ethical dilemmas regarding autonomy and security.
- AI-driven decision-making in smart cities, including facial recognition and automated resource allocation, may unintentionally reinforce biases. Such biases can lead to discrimination against marginalized communities, exacerbating the digital divide and creating barriers to equitable access.
- The governance of 6G-enabled smart cities involves complex decision-making processes where algorithmic transparency is essential. Lack of clear accountability mechanisms could result in opaque governance structures, making it difficult for citizens to understand and challenge decisions affecting their lives.
- The deployment of 6G infrastructure requires significant energy consumption and resource allocation. Without sustainable practices, smart city technologies could contribute to environmental degradation, contradicting the goal of creating eco-friendly urban environments.
- As cities become more interconnected, the risk of cyberattacks on critical infrastructure increases. Safeguarding sensitive information from breaches and ensuring robust cybersecurity measures are crucial to maintaining trust in smart city initiatives.

Addressing these challenges requires a multidimensional ethical framework that integrates privacy safeguards, equitable access, and sustainable governance models. By acknowledging and mitigating these risks, 6G-enabled smart cities can be developed in a manner that prioritizes human rights, social equity, and environmental sustainability.

Contributions

- Integrates ethical frameworks (utilitarianism, deontology, virtue ethics) to address challenges in 6G-enabled smart cities, offering a balanced approach to technology and ethics.
- Highlights privacy, equity, and governance issues in smart cities, proposing solutions to ensure fairness, transparency, and inclusivity.
- Explores sustainability and environmental ethics in 6G urban designs, advocating for eco-friendly practices and circular economy principles.
- Provides actionable recommendations for policymakers, urban planners, and technology developers to build ethically responsible smart cities.
- Uses case studies to demonstrate practical applications of ethical principles in existing smart city projects.
- Identifies research gaps and suggests future directions for ethical governance, algorithmic fairness, and inclusive smart city development.

Through this understanding, we can facilitate the ethical development of smart cities and provide more human-centered urban spaces. Realizing the potential capabilities of 6G on smart city design is a journey that requires us to pay close attention, practice consistent dedication, and focus on ethics as we process through an ever-connected world.

2 Material and Methods

We used a modified systematic review methodology to explore the ethical challenges in designing and implementing 6G-enabled smart cities, with a particular focus on issues of privacy, equity, governance, and sustainability.

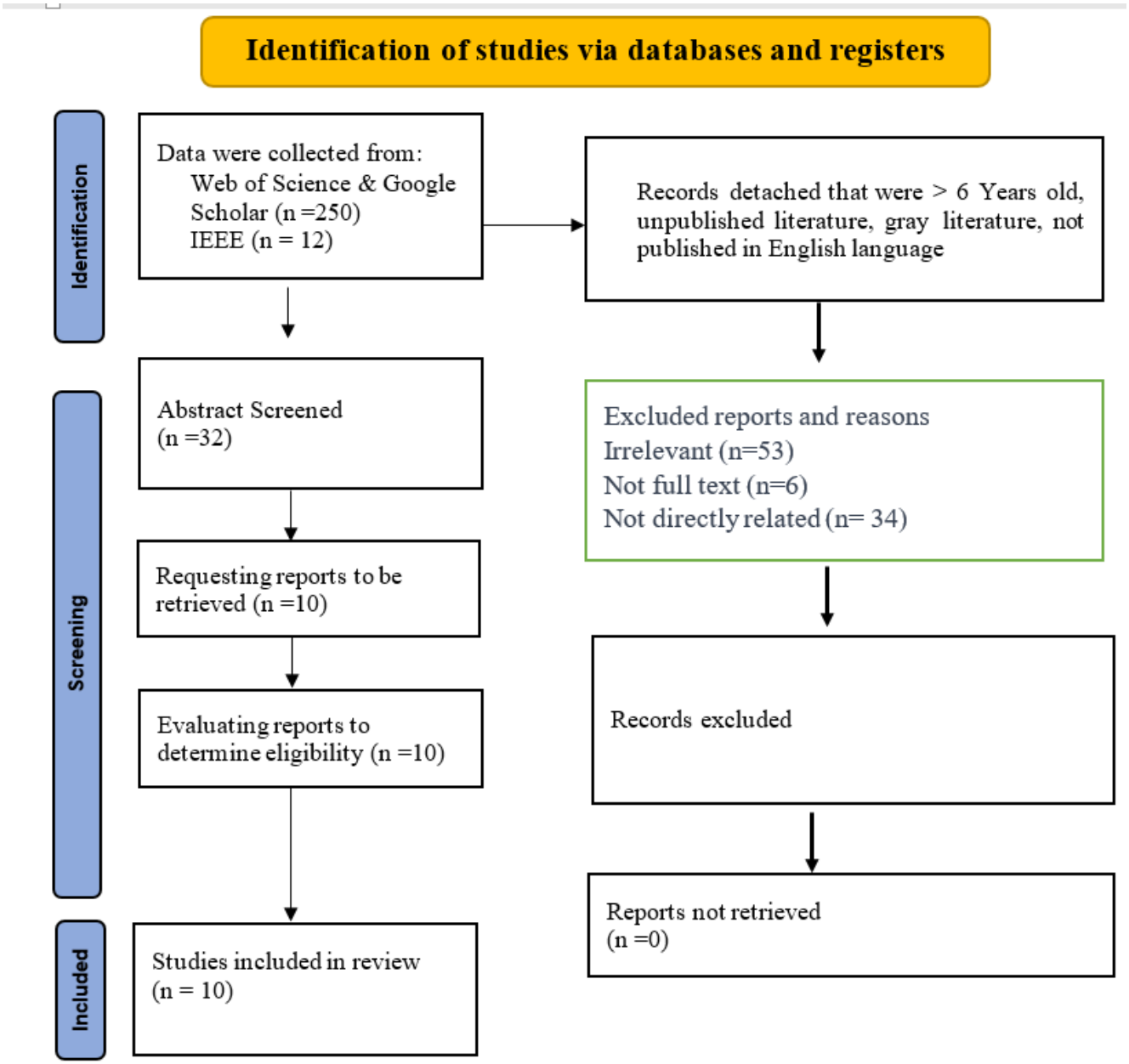


Figure 1. The study selection process is depicted in the PRISMA flow diagram.

2.1 Search Strategy and Inclusion Criteria

The data for this study was collected from several electronic databases, including IEEE Xplore, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. The search covered literature published between 2018 and 2024. The search terms included "6G technology," "smart cities," "privacy in smart cities," "data governance," "algorithmic bias," and "equity in urban planning." We included research articles that addressed ethical issues in the design, deployment, and governance of smart cities using 6G technology. Articles published before 2018 or those that were not directly related to 6G in smart cities or ethical considerations were excluded from this study as shown in Figure 1.

2.2 Data Extraction and Quality Assessment

Data was extracted from relevant studies to identify key ethical challenges associated with 6G-enabled smart cities. The extracted data included study design, research focus (privacy, equity, governance, sustainability), findings related to ethical implications, and proposed solutions.

2.3 Search Outcomes

In this study, 262 research articles were initially identified through the search of multiple databases, including IEEE Xplore, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. Articles were screened for relevance based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria, which focused

on the ethical implications of 6G technology in smart cities. After abstract screening (n = 32) and full-text eligibility evaluation (n = 10), a total of **10** key studies were selected for final inclusion in this review. These articles included empirical studies, systematic reviews, and theoretical papers discussing privacy concerns, equity, transparency, and governance in 6G-enabled urban environments. The final selection was based on relevance to the topic of ethical issues in smart city design and the potential implications for stakeholders involved in the planning and implementation of 6G technologies.

2.4 Quality of Data Collection

A comprehensive search was conducted in multiple databases to identify studies published between 2018 and 2024 that focus on the ethical aspects of 6G technology in smart cities. The search strategy included terms such as "6G ethics," "data privacy in smart cities," "algorithmic decision-making," and "inclusive urban planning." Articles related to general technological advancements or those without a direct focus on ethical challenges were excluded.

3 Understanding Smart Cities

Smart cities are developed urban areas that use various types of electronic data collection and communication to create data-driven environments for improving infrastructure, services, and sustainable living conditions [25]. They utilize data-centric solutions and automated systems for better handling of transportation, healthcare, energy, and public services [26]. Smart cities are known for building sustainability, they emphasize innovative methods that discard waste and inefficient consumption of resources and reduce environmental effects. With this level of connectivity, information can flow freely and capture the real-time status providing a responsive ecosystem where urban challenges can be addressed rapidly.

Skubis et al. [27] conducted a study on AI and Human-Centric Approach in Smart Cities Management: Case Studies from Silesian and Lesser Poland Voivodships. They explore the extent to which Artificial Intelligence (AI) is facilitating smart city management. The study aims to compare the local/regional AI strategies in two urban agglomeration areas: Silesian and Lesser Poland Voivodships, on matters of efficiency, sustainability and quality of life. From a methodological perspective, the study is built on case studies to compare AI usage in different fields, ranging from traffic management and healthcare to environmental management. The results highlight that data-driven decision processes in smart city management can embed systemic biases, disproportionately affecting certain communities and undermining equitable service delivery [28]. The research emphasizes a human-centered approach to smart city development, demonstrating through spatial analysis of Cyprus that placing citizens' lived experiences at the centre of urban planning processes is a practical pathway to achieving the ethical transparency and inclusivity that equitable smart city governance demands [29]. In conclusion, the authors suggest directions for future research that explores socio-technical dynamics in implementation of AI use-cases in urban management to distribute benefits equitably and to develop more sustainable cities. The concept of smart cities with 6G Network is shown in Figure 2.

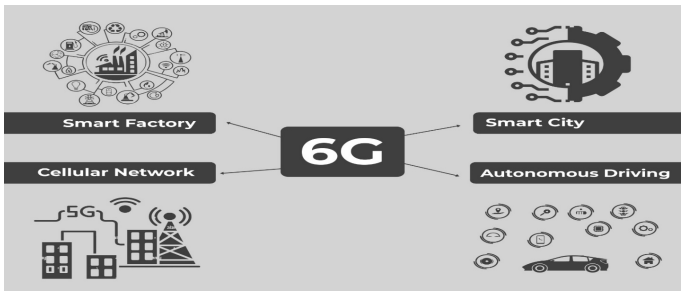


Figure 2. A concept of smart cities with 6G network.

The Internet of Things (IoT) is an important part of smart city design as it allows for networks of sensors and devices to communicate with one another in real-time by collecting and transmitting data [30]. With the advent of 6G, it is expected that this technology will maximally enhance the abilities of IoT devices by providing ultra-fast data speeds, low latency and communication with a large number of connected devices. This advanced communication technology will enable applications such as self-driving cars, interactive AR devices, and proactive health care systems that require faster response times, making cities even smarter and more responsive [31]. Juvenile Ehwi et al. [32] examine how ethical considerations are embedded in Smart City governance decisions. Using the Smart Cambridge programme as a case study, they reveal that city officials prioritise legal compliance in decision-making but are less aware of the normative and value-based ethical principles—such as transparency and accountability—that equally underpin urban governance. Their findings demonstrate that ethical frameworks, including utilitarianism and deontology,

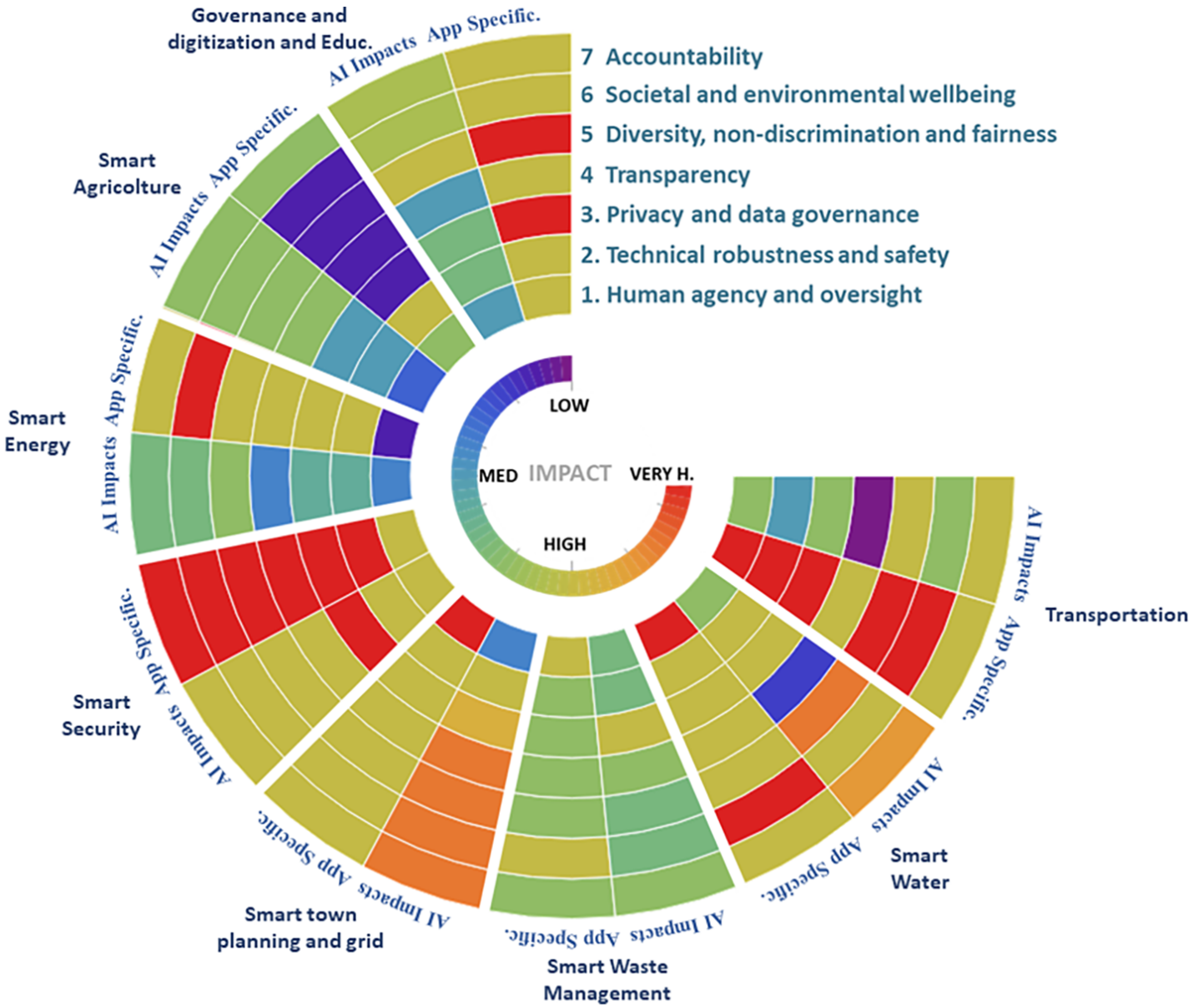
are implicitly present in smart city decisions even when they are not explicitly acknowledged, underscoring the need for structured ethical reflection in 6G-enabled urban governance. Recent advances in privacy-preserving AI frameworks, such as federated learning integrated with digital twins, demonstrate that resilient and privacy-respecting urban data management can be achieved without centralizing sensitive citizen information [33]. Future research directions in this area include developing federated learning architectures that simultaneously address scalability, energy efficiency, and data privacy across heterogeneous smart city IoT deployments [34].

Smart cities bring advantages on many fronts, from operational efficiency to sustainability and citizen wellness [35]. Smart traffic systems have the ability to alleviate congestion and reduce air pollution, while smart grids can facilitate better energy distribution: all of this translates into huge cost savings and advantages for the environment. Furthermore, 6G will enable better connectivity and help deliver more inclusive public services to citizens accessing health, education and other essential services remotely. In summary, the goals of smart cities are to achieve an optimal balance between technological innovation, sustainability, and human-centered urban development—a balance that requires embedding principles of human dignity, social cohesion, and well-being into the design and governance of urban systems [36, 37] to provide a foundation for communities ready for the changes of tomorrow. Colding et al. [38] highlight that smart city development, while offering climate-proofing and efficiency benefits, risks reinforcing social exclusion through digital divides. Applying Amartya Sen's capability approach, they identify three levels of digital inequality—access, skills and participation, and differential benefits from ICT use—that disproportionately affect marginalized groups such as the elderly, low-income populations, and people with disabilities. Their work underscores that bridging these divides is a prerequisite for achieving socially sustainable and equitable smart cities. Comparative analyses of smart cities worldwide confirm that truly human-centred development requires locally grounded approaches that prioritize citizen well-being and sustainability metrics over purely technological indicators [39].

4 Ethical Frameworks for Smart City Design

As advanced technologies continue to be integrated into urban systems, establishing comprehensive frameworks that balance innovation with social and ethical responsibility becomes increasingly critical for smart city development [40]. For instance, utilitarianism focuses on maximizing overall good and pushes city planners to make choices that benefit the most people. In the smart city context, this may include implementing technologies that optimize public service delivery and resource allocation in ways that serve the greatest number of citizens [41, 42]. Malek et al. [41] demonstrate that evaluating smart city initiatives through social inclusion indicators—rather than purely technical or economic metrics—helps ensure that the utilitarian goal of maximizing collective welfare does not inadvertently obscure inequities experienced by specific communities. Bibri et al. [42] further show that the convergence of AI, IoT, and big data in environmentally sustainable smart cities creates measurable efficiency gains, but also raises ethical concerns regarding the equitable distribution of environmental benefits and the risk that economic interests may overshadow social and ecological priorities. Although this utilitarian approach of maximizing global benefits is compelling, it may come at the expense of treating members of potential minority groups unfairly due to their lack of representation in these calculations. It might also violate their rights by prioritizing the greater good over those needs, so legal frameworks based on concepts other than utility need to address that issue. They are critical of the technocratic nature of many smart city initiatives and call for participatory design with those whose voices are often excluded: migrants, refugees, older adults, children, neurodiverse individuals and people with low income. The current tendency towards developing and implementing smart solutions within the urban setting has driven the literature on smart cities as technological archetypes. The inclusion of these diverse stakeholders promotes an inner urban setting that is non-technocratic, inclusive, well-being enhancing and sustainable. The study highlights that resilient smart city planning must integrate ecological sustainability alongside social equity, arguing that long-term urban resilience depends on simultaneously addressing environmental degradation and the needs of vulnerable communities [43]. This fruitful approach yields the sustainable and integrated smart city model for all citizens with great attention to vulnerable groups [44]. The visual model for ethical impacts framework is shown in Figure 3.

Deontological ethics is rule-based and action-determined, stating that some actions are



Source: Authors' own creation

Figure 3. Ethical impacts framework: visual model [48].

required no matter the outcome. For example, within the smart city context, a deontological approach may underscore the importance of privacy protections – Citizens are entitled to have their personal data protected and should not be subjected to exploitation even if it means society forgoing valuable insights from such data. In a similar vein, virtue ethics focuses on the notion of moral character and thereby takes the meta point towards design decisions that align with values such as fairness, empathy, and transparency; all of which are needed to create trust between citizens and governing bodies. Chang [47] demonstrates the often unfortunate consequences of using algorithms to optimize for a given outcome: such optimization introduces biases and leads to discrimination, with the result that individuals from marginalized groups who would otherwise have succeeded face systematically lower outcomes. To combat these kinds of ethical problems, they propose embedding specific definitions of social objectives such as fairness and privacy directly within the designs of algorithms. Differential privacy is introduced as a way to preserve the anonymity of individuals, certifying that data from other datasets or portions do not enable the identification of personal information. The authors suggest that fulfilling these social objectives may come at the price of a certain amount of efficiency and betoken equity over efficiency. This makes their work

to embed ethics into algorithmic frameworks to avoid harm and ensure other socially beneficial properties timely and highly relevant.

Engagement with stakeholders is crucial and proportional to the application of these ethical frameworks [45–48]. Smart city projects involve a multitude of stakeholders like government officials, citizens, and technology vendors, each with distinct interests and perspectives. Balancing conflicting needs and priorities keeps governance ethical, engaging all stakeholders in the decision-making process. An open and inclusive discourse can expose risks, mitigate against unwanted negative externalities, and assure that smart city technologies are implemented in the public interest according to urban spaces embodying common values as long-term sustainable development. Shahrokni and Solacolu [49] introduce the concept of "real-time ethics" in smart city environments, emphasizing the need to empower citizens through technology-enabled participation. The study postulates that Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) can improve sustainability by allowing people to play an active role in urban development. Taking inspiration from behavioral psychology, they look at how citizens can be provided with real-time decision-making tools that make clear their own contributions towards the overall sustainability objective. One concern about this change is the cognitive load that comes from citizens needing to make ethical decisions regularly. According to the authors, however, "As this transition takes place, it needs to be tread carefully - too much decision-making power in citizens' hands may backfire." This interdisciplinary perspective aligns with foundational frameworks for smart sustainable cities, which emphasize that technological solutions must be embedded within broader social, ethical, and governance dimensions to achieve lasting impact [50].

5 Privacy and Data Protection

Data is the key driver of smart cities, enabling more effective public services and urban resource management [51], while simultaneously generating critical ethical challenges related to privacy, security, and equitable access that must be addressed in the governance of 6G smart city infrastructure [52]. Everything from traffic jams to energy use and healthcare indicators is constantly observed by sensors, cameras, and connected devices. Such a treasure trove of insights empowers city administration to make informed choices, anticipate patterns and proactively tackle problems. But, then there is the quantity of individual information profiled from different angles: what individuals do where they go – all that turns out to be clear to public and private players alike. The results reveal the need to facilitate AI for better urban living by tackling privacy, data protection and balanced access to technology. Figure 4 illustrates a framework for data security in 6G networks based on public-key searchable encryption [54]. Complementing this, Li et al. [53] propose a multidimensional feature fusion method for privacy protection under 6G networks, offering an additional technical pathway to safeguarding personal data in smart city environments.

One of the main ethical issues in smart cities is related to the collection and use of people data without their consent [55]. Citizens may sometimes not realise the breadth of their data collection and processing, which can lead to misuse or exploitation. No control over personal information also leads to the problems of surveillance or monitoring, in which a data-driven system can threaten citizen liberty. Additionally, biases in data collection processes themselves can reinforce existing inequalities by affecting some groups more than others. So, ethical data governance is about providing transparency around the way in which data are used and ensuring that the consent was given freely and informed. Beyond everyday data collection, smart city infrastructure must embed privacy protections at the architectural level. Daoudagh et al. [56] propose a consent-based access control framework grounded in data-protection-by-design principles, demonstrating that incorporating privacy safeguards into the core design of smart city systems—rather than treating them as afterthoughts—is both technically feasible and ethically essential, particularly when sensitive citizen data must be managed across multiple stakeholders. The mesh of connected infrastructure in smart cities makes them more vulnerable to cyberattacks and other threats [57], while the deployment of 5G/6G networks simultaneously expands this attack surface, making cybersecurity a dual technical and ethical imperative [58].

At the same time, privacy protection in smart cities can be achieved through practical application of technology without undermining rights. Data-protection measures like anonymization, data minimization and data encryption may help mitigate the impact of a potential data breach or unauthorized access. Patients expect their most sensitive data to be protected, and privacy-by-design

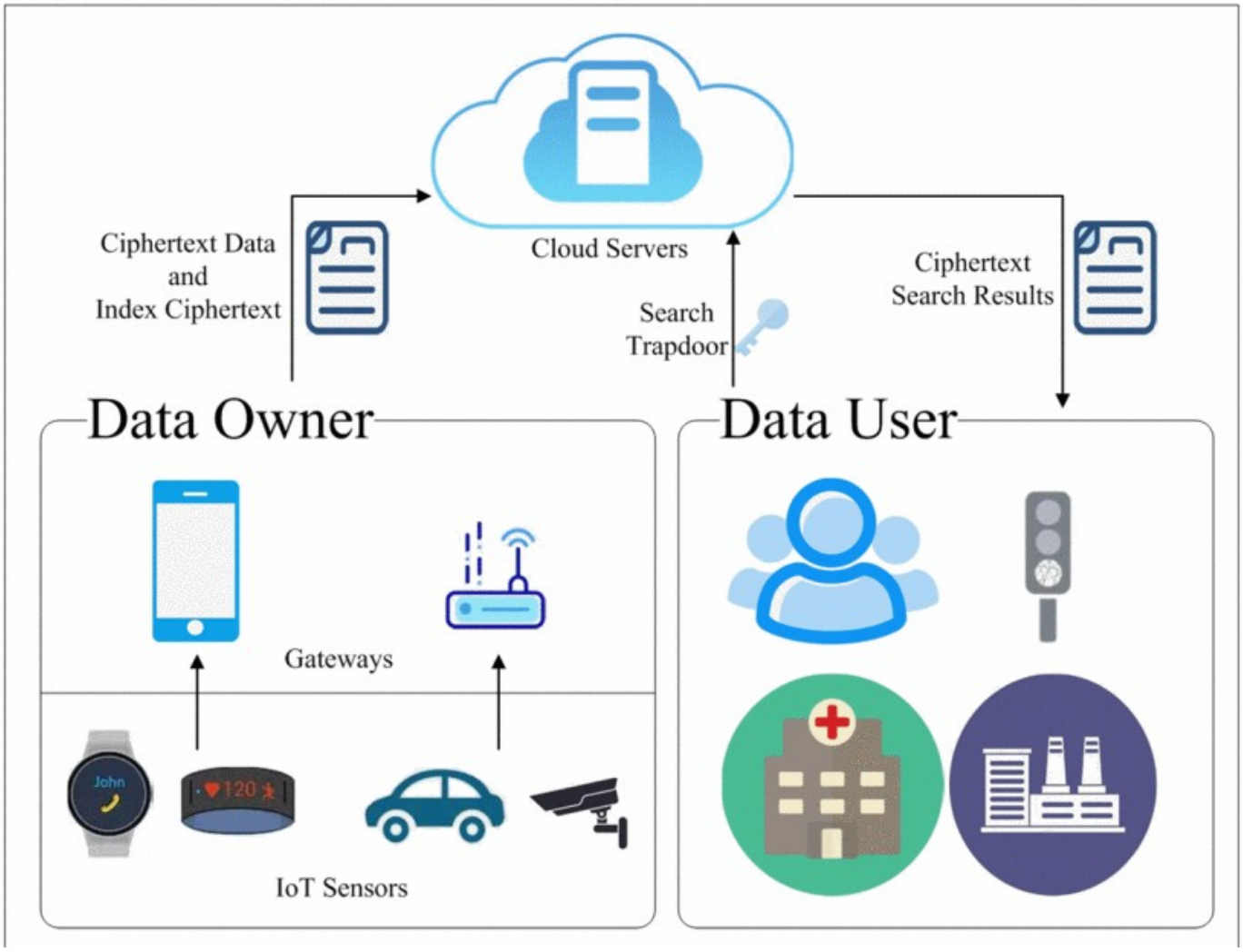


Figure 4. The framework of privacy protection in 6G based on public-key searchable encryption [54].

principles should be put in place to ensure privacy is built into the systems rather than thought of after. Also, the establishment of clear rules for sharing data and accountability increases citizen trust towards governing institutions. As Ahmad et al. [16] explain, regulatory regimes such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) can help cities establish ethical data practices that protect user privacy while preserving the efficiency benefits of smart city technologies.

6 Equity and Inclusion

Equity and inclusion are essential criteria for smart city design and implementation: Everyone should benefit from these advances in technology, regardless of their socioeconomic situation, geographic location, or actions taken throughout the pandemic. But the digital infrastructure that supports smart city initiatives is not equally accessible to all segments of society. To address these gaps, one must consciously work towards eliminating the barriers that persist in access to technology for those at a disadvantage: poor infrastructure, poor infrastructure, inadequate digital skills, and financial incapacity. If smart cities are not approached carefully, they may only target already privileged citizens, pushing the most vulnerable even further behind. Kolotouchkina et al. [59] propose a reflective framework for inclusive smart cities, analyzing who is included or excluded, the value of digital inclusion, and the key principles of inclusive digital governance. Their study reveals that smart city development has deepened social and digital inequalities between technologically proficient residents and those left behind due to age, limited digital skills, or insufficient resources. The authors argue that achieving genuine inclusion requires not only expanding access to infrastructure but also co-designing urban policies with marginalized communities to ensure that technological advances serve all citizens equitably [60]. Brauneis and

Goodman [60] further demonstrate that without mandatory algorithmic transparency requirements, public-sector automated systems in smart cities often operate as "black boxes," making it impossible for citizens or oversight bodies to detect and challenge discriminatory outcomes. Their legal analysis of algorithmic decision-making across multiple urban contexts confirms that transparency is not merely a technical virtue but a fundamental governance obligation.

The use of sophisticated technologies in smart cities are likewise centre stage for ethical issues, particularly against marginalized groups [61]. Data-driven systems can make public services more efficient, but they can also inadvertently build biases into the technologies that disadvantage some populations. Predictive algorithms, such as those used in policing or social services, can mirror past injustices and discriminate against particular communities or reinforce old biases. Likewise, the so-called surveillance tools like cameras although meant to secure cannot make algorithms immune from discrimination and oppressed communities is even more subjected to intensified surveillance. These risks must be addressed to ensure that technologies deployed in smart city programs are done so in ethical and non-discriminatory ways. Ertl et al. [62] take a critical stance towards smart cities, while considering the participation of marginalized and vulnerable populations -non-city dwellers such as refugees or neurodiverse communities and the inclusion/exclusion effects on (potential) city dwellers - low-income groups are often excluded from mainstream planning processes providing limited challenges to issues of social equity in high-tech megacities. The Design Fiction workshop emphasises the necessity of participatory design and stakeholder engagement to make sure that smart city initiatives are not technocratic but are truly in the interest of multiple stakeholders. It highlights the importance of citizen-oriented approaches to foster sustainable and social equity for smart cities. It suggests that a belief in an open, comprehensive view is needed to tackle the challenges of urban life and to ensure that advances in technology support all citizens, especially those most vulnerable.

Likewise, Suneetha et al. [63] put forward a framework that combines AI and blockchain to further improve the performance of smart cities IoT applications in regard to 6G. By suggesting decentralized control using blockchain technology, their study tackles issues of security, privacy and data management in large-scale IoT systems. A combination of qualitative and quantitative metrics are used to assess the potential benefits of the working framework over established methods. According to the authors, the combination of AI and blockchain opens a new door for more effective management of complex urban infrastructure while providing better measurable performance in IoT-enabled smart city applications.

In sum, the multi-dimensional approach to promoting inclusion in smart city initiatives: To start, policy makers and city planners should work with marginalized communities at every step of the decision to sort out their needs, challenges, and hopes. Such participatory design frameworks also guarantee the creation of tech solutions with input from all stakeholders, especially those often marginalized in discussions around urban planning. Second, cities should implement programs to advance digital skills, provide low-cost access to the Internet, and offer smart offerings to bridge the digital divide. Lastly, our smart cities of the future will need to have regulatory frameworks that require ethical audits of all technologies used on citizens and surveillance data in key areas such as healthcare and public services to avoid unintended harm, ensure equity, and prevent discriminatory outcomes. By following these strategies, smart cities can create an environment that is inclusive of all citizens who need access to technology and provide them with meaningful participation in the urban ecosystem.

As shown in Table 1, various research studies have explored the ethical, technological, and governance challenges associated with 6G-enabled smart cities. These studies examine key areas such as AI-driven urban management, resilience-by-design frameworks, and the role of AI in sustainable urban planning. Additionally, they highlight concerns related to privacy risks, digital divides, and ethical governance, emphasizing the need for transparency and accountability. Furthermore, emerging solutions such as AI-blockchain integration for IoT security and real-time ethical paradigms for citizen participation are discussed. Collectively, these findings underscore the importance of interdisciplinary approaches to balance technological advancements with ethical considerations, ensuring that future smart cities remain inclusive, sustainable, and ethically responsible.

Table 1. Summary of research studies in the literature (Landscape Orientation).

Author (Reference)	Objective	Methodology	Key Findings	Future Work
Skubis et al. [27]	Explore AI's role in smart city management	Case studies from Silesian and Lesser Poland Voivodships	Highlighted human-centric approaches to improve sustainability and efficiency; data-driven decisions can embed systemic biases	Examine socio-technical dynamics in broader urban AI applications
Juvenile Ehwi et al. [32]	Examine how ethical considerations are embedded in smart city governance decisions	Empirical case study of the Smart Cambridge programme using expert interviews	City officials prioritise legal compliance but neglect normative ethical principles; utilitarianism and deontology are implicitly present in decisions	Develop structured ethical reflection frameworks for 6G-enabled urban governance
Colding et al. [38]	Examine digital divides and their implications for inclusive smart city development	Capability approach (Sen's framework) applied to smart city inclusion policies	Identified three levels of digital inequality disproportionately affecting marginalized groups; digital divides risk reinforcing social exclusion	Develop policy tools to bridge digital divides and foster inclusive smart city participation
Kolotouchkina et al. [59]	Propose a reflective framework for inclusive digital governance in smart cities	Systematic analysis of inclusion/exclusion dynamics and digital governance principles	Smart city development deepens social and digital inequalities; genuine inclusion requires co-design with marginalized communities	Develop digital inclusion metrics and co-design methodologies for diverse urban populations
Suneetha et al. [63]	Propose AI and blockchain integration for IoT in 6G-enabled smart cities	Combination of qualitative and quantitative assessment	Demonstrated improved performance in large-scale IoT systems with enhanced privacy and security	Test and refine framework for real-world large-scale IoT deployments
Shahrokni and Solacolu [49]	Introduce a real-time ethics paradigm for sustainability in smart cities	Behavioral psychology-inspired framework	ICT-enabled participation empowers citizens but risks cognitive overload	Explore interdisciplinary approaches to balance citizen empowerment with decision-making load
Daoudagh et al. [56]	Propose a consent-based access control framework grounded in privacy-by-design for smart cities	Technical design and evaluation of GDPR-compliant consent and access control mechanisms	Privacy-by-design is technically feasible and ethically essential for managing citizen data across multiple stakeholders	Extend the framework to cover emergency and cross-border data sharing scenarios in smart city infrastructure
Chang [47]	Analyze ethical dimensions of algorithm design in societal decisions	Case analysis and algorithmic evaluation	Presented an ethical framework for big data and smart cities; embedding fairness and privacy objectives into algorithm design can reduce discriminatory outcomes	Test socially aware algorithms in diverse societal contexts
Oliveira et al. [37]	Propose a human-centric smart city model aiming at citizen well-being and quality of life	Conceptual framework analysis of human-centered urban development	Identified gaps in inclusivity and transparency in existing smart city models; argued that citizen well-being must be the central design objective	Expand research into participatory and human-centered smart city governance models

7 Transparency and Accountability

Smart cities are modern urban centers rapidly developing with technologies designing service delivery, infrastructure and engagement to citizens but it must be balanced out with these ethical aspects like Transparency and accountability. Transparency helps residents and stakeholders know how the technologies are implemented, what data is collected and used, and what outcomes to expect. To facilitate trust and ensure that the public does not react with scepticism or resistance to these initiatives, it is essential for cities to openly communicate about their technology deployment in smart city systems because they are very complex. Transparency is particularly important in decision-making contexts where data practices and algorithms shape the decisions made by, or input into urban sensing systems, as these practices can be complex and opaque. With a greater understanding of how urban governance works, through more transparent city strategies for public participation, citizens gain a clearer sense on how they can engage meaningfully with their local governments and make informed choices about whether, and to what extent they choose to participate. Accountability is also about ensuring that ethical and equitable decision-making is followed. Across smart city systems, algorithms and automated decision-making tools increasingly determine outcomes in traffic control, public safety, resource allocation, and social services. This makes it essential to determine clearly who is accountable when these systems produce harmful or inequitable outcomes. The absence of clear accountability frameworks can mean that negative consequences—such as biased algorithms or data breaches—go without repercussion. Governance must ensure that neither city officials nor technology providers escape accountability for their actions, reaffirming the primacy of public interests. Accountability also includes how fail-safes are built into when technologies develop irreparable problems or unintended consequences, so as not to punish one human being or group of beings over another. Although the possibilities that AI offers in improving urban life are immense, success depends on seamless integration with existing governance structures and ensuring equal access to technology across all population groups [40, 45]. The research highlights the importance of comprehensive policy infrastructure, effective public-private collaborations, and ongoing oversight to ensure the positive influence of AI solutions on sustainable urban evolution. The results call for a nuanced deployment of technology, taking into account the potential value and social inequities that may result from smart city efforts. A transparent and accountable governance framework should be adopted by the cities. In these frameworks, there should be some open data policies (non-sensitive city data is open for public use and innovation). Also, smart city projects should have open procurement processes, and the specific technologies used and their purposes should be made known to the public. Technologies must meet public values new laws can help by increasing independent audits of algorithms and systems, which increase the likelihood that biases will be detected and acted on. Moreover, participatory governance models - ones where residents are empowered to participate in decision-making - will strengthen accountability by establishing direct lines of communication between citizens and city governments. In this way, smart cities can help to guarantee that technology serves the public good and strengthens meaningful citizen engagement in urban governance.

8 Security and Ethical Concerns

Security is one of the critical aspects of smart city design that utilizes various interconnected technologies to manage urban systems and process huge amounts of data [64–66]. However, deploying security measures in smart cities creates a number of ethical issues. Surveillance technologies, for instance, are frequently justified as needed to increase public safety but may risk privacy and civil liberties. When cameras, facial recognition technology, and sensors are permanently watching our every move, it fosters an atmosphere of ubiquitous surveillance that erodes trust in the relationship between society and those acting on behalf of its interests. Likewise, securing smart city data is also problematic since a breach or exposure of sensitive personal information could put residents at risk for identity theft, fraud, or other targeted attacks.

9 Sustainability and Environmental Ethics

Smart city design is characterized by its focus on sustainability and environmental ethics, urging the need for balancing technological innovation with stewardship of the environment. While it is clear it will be broader in application as cities utilize to help make automated infrastructure, this also must abide within the context of sustainable practices in order for resource consumption and carbon footprints to hit holistic health levels. Making urban planning

ethics not only use energy and material more efficiently but also a matter of thinking about sustainable environmental impact in the long term. Urbanization cannot threaten our environment and therefore, smart cities need to take up green practices including energy grid optimization, public transport promotion and waste reduction. A simple but similar connection of future smart cities with 6G network is shown in Figure 5.

From a sustainability standpoint, next-generation wireless networks—building on the trajectory established by 5G and extending into 6G—will support innovations such as smart grid optimization, real-time green energy monitoring, and reduced carbon emissions across urban systems [67]. The transition from 5G to 6G represents not merely a technical upgrade but an ethical opportunity to embed environmental sustainability and energy efficiency as foundational design principles from the outset [42]. By enabling instantaneous data transfer between multiple urban systems through improved connectivity and latency, 6G has the potential to optimize energy consumption from residential buildings and public utilities, curb traffic related emissions and encourage sustainable modes of living. For example, 6G sensors will enable cities to monitor air quality in real time read for much water consumed and waste levels indicating an over-exploitation of resources. The advantages, though, will only come if 6G technology is designed and utilized ethically, as an enabler of sustainability rather than a perpetrator of environmental destruction. Even though 6G holds promise in applying technology for sustainability, new technologies always present new environmental challenges, like electronic waste and greater energy requirements. The base station energy consumption accounts for a large part of the 6G network energy consumption, and the construction and maintenance infrastructure (e.g., data centre, antenna) of 6G networks would also greatly increase energy consumption. The curse of fast-changing devices in smart cities is another challenge adding e-waste and pollution. Given all the ethical aspects, cities have to use circular economy stages to recycle, reuse and repurpose technology parts whenever it is possible. In addition, working on energy-efficient systems and emphasising renewable energy resources can help to eliminate the environment returns needed for technology use. Through the balance of innovation and ecological responsibility, smart cities can accomplish sustainability targets, all while ensuring there is an original living environment for future generations.

Figure 5. Future of smart cities design with 6G network.

10 Future Directions and Recommendations

Utilizing 6G technology to build smart cities in future requires addressing several ethical issues. The rapid growth of 6G technology, which extends the possibilities for interconnected systems and continuous data exchange in real-time will exacerbate problems related to data privacy, security, inclusiveness, and algorithmic bias. Develop frameworks with policymakers, designers, and stakeholders to ensure the responsible use of AI and data while reducing risks of surveillance technology and privacy infringements. Inclusiveness needs to be promoted through the inclusion of marginalized communities so that smart city technologies benefit all societal segments and do not reproduce existing inequalities. It recommends stakeholders create visible regulatory frameworks to react to the adoption of technologies being integrated into existing regulations. User-centred methods should be a design principle for designers, and citizens should be involved through participatory design. It is, thus, for policies to enforce an ethics oath for innovation that weighs citizens' rights against further exploration in any technology that serves such great potential, if operated within the scope of social value. Last but not least, public-private partnerships should be reinforced in order to sustain and advance responsible innovation in cities. As the technologies behind smart cities change and improve over time, constant ethical contemplation is needed

in any smart city initiative. Continuous evaluation of the impact of innovative solutions enabled by 6G is needed to mitigate emerging ethical challenges. Integrating ethical audits, design processes situated within ongoing stakeholder feedback channels, and adaptive governance mechanisms can ensure cities have the adaptability to manage equilibrium of techno-social change.

The challenge of ensuring an appropriate balance between safety and freedom is one of the most problematic ethical dilemmas surrounding smart city security. Although sophisticated security systems may prevent crime and keep public areas safe, citizens' fundamental rights should never be sacrificed in the name of security. Overreliance on surveillance or invasive data practices risks creating authoritarian governance structures that erode civil liberties and undermine the democratic principles that smart city initiatives are meant to serve. The answer to these dilemmas requires ethical security practices that consider not only the effectiveness of technologies but also their broader social impact on freedom, dignity, and community trust. It means that safety measures must avoid having disproportionately adverse effects on people from specific communities or lead to discrimination. As a solution, smart cities need to strike a balance between security and inclusion, ensuring that surveillance is not deployed against marginalized populations. In order to navigate this ethical tension, designers of smart cities can implement security strategies that are intertwined with democratic values and human rights principles. Security systems should be built with privacy-by-design principles, collecting as little data as possible and anonymizing it when feasible. But transparency about surveillance and data collection enables residents to know how their data is treated, alongside opportunities for public scrutiny. Additionally, assembling multiple stakeholders to ensure the development of security frameworks with local governments, civil society and technology providers helps align security requirements with public interests. Audits, impact assessments and citizen feedback mechanisms on security measures will allow accountability in the long term, adaptability over time and ethical application. These initiatives enable smart cities to create secure spaces that protect public health while respecting privacy and civil liberties, and will lead to trust and sustainable urban resilience.

11 Conclusion

We have examined the ethical implications of utilising 6G technologies in developing smart cities in this review paper. The discussion included the use of AI and IoT-driven solutions to make urban living optimized, sustainable, and safer. On the other hand, this rapid growth also raises serious ethical questions related to privacy of data, bias in algorithms, and the possibility of increasing social inequalities.

In this review paper, we have emphasized why it is crucial to weave ethical considerations into the design and implementation of smart cities. Stakeholders need to tackle these challenges head-on through transparency, inclusivity, and accountability at each step of smart city development. We have to develop ethical systems that adapt to rapidly changing technology to avoid a cycle of environmental destruction and the exclusion of vulnerable communities from urban life. This review paper emphasizes the importance of raising ethical consciousness in how 6G technologies are implemented into smart cities. We, as policymakers, designers, and citizens, must work together to forge urban solutions that reflect our values of fairness, privacy, and inclusivity. Striking this balance—innovating smart cities with 6G technology without betraying the rights of city residents—is the defining challenge that future research and policy must address. With the correct application of ethics, smart cities powered by this next generation of technology can indeed improve life for all citizens.

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Sumaira Rafique received the MS degree in Data Science from National University of Computer and Emerging Sciences, Lahore, Pakistan in 2024. Her research interests include Natural Language Processing, Generative AI, Deep Learning, Machine Learning, Image Processing. Currently she is working as a Machine Learning Engineer at Reallytics.ai, Lahore. (Email: rsumaira80@gmail.com)

Sundas Iqbal received the MS degree in Computer Science from National College of Business Administration and Economics, Pakistan in 2018. Her research interests include Biomedical image analysis, Machine Learning, Image Processing. Currently she is PhD student at Nanjing University of Information Science and Technology (NUIST) with a research focus on domain adaptation, transfer learning and novel AI techniques for various fields.(Email: sundasiqbal058@gmail.com)

Danish Ali is a highly motivated computer researcher from Pakistan, with a strong educational background and expertise in various fields of computer science. He received the bachelor's degree in computer science from the University of Haripur, Haripur, Pakistan, in 2023. Currently, he is a MS Scholar at Wuhan University China. His research interests are in machine learning, biomedical imaging, natural language processing, and the deep learning. (Email: danishalikhan545@gmail.com)

Farhad Khan received the Bachelor degree in Business Administration (Hons) from Iqra National University in Pakistan and now pursuing a Master's degree in Business Administration from the School of Economics and Management at Chang'an University China. His research interests include a intelligent logistics and supply chain management. (Email: Farhadkhan@chd.edu.cn)