From Control to Empowerment: Explaining the Mechanisms of Regulatory Slippage and the Conditions for Its Restraint in Digital Parenting

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Abstract

This digital paper aims to analyze the phenomenon of "control slippage" in digital parenting practices through an integrated analytical framework that combines the perspectives of family psychology, affordance theory, self-determination theory, and the media affordance model. It adopts a three-level analytical methodology (individual, interactive, systemic) to examine the underlying mechanisms behind the transformation of digital tools from preventive means into instruments of psychological control within family dynamics.The results reveal that "control slippage" represents a form of boundary disturbance in family relationships, where the interaction between the technological affordances of digital platforms and the frustration of basic psychological needs (autonomy, competence, relatedness) generates a self-reinforcing slippage loop. The paper also proposes a transformative model based on four "inhibition conditions": (digital contract, periodic reviews, reasonable reciprocity, and gradual withdrawal) to achieve balance in digital parenting practices between the demands of protection and the needs of psychological growth. Thus, this research paper provides both a theoretical contribution and a field-oriented project for establishing the emerging discipline of digital family psychology, aiming to shift digital practices from surveillance to empowerment.

Keywords: *Digital Parenting, Control Slippage.*

Introduction

Digital parenting is an emerging field within family psychology, where digital media contribute to reshaping traditional family dynamics through tools that have come to play a central role in structuring the relationship between parents and children (Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2020). In this context, there arises an urgent need for a paradigm shift in educational thinking from the traditional monitoring-based model to a modern model centered on empowerment.

This paradigm shift represents the core issue addressed in this research paper. Rather than treating digital tools merely as instruments of surveillance, they are viewed as potential tools for psychological and educational support and empowerment. This transformation is understood as a transition from a philosophy of "behavioral control" to a philosophy of "growth empowerment."

The scientific significance of this shift lies in its role as a framework for understanding and addressing the phenomenon of control creep a gradual and unintentional process through which parental practices shift from preventive purposes to excessive surveillance. Semantically, this control creep reflects a shift in the compass of family relationships from protection to control; functionally, it indicates a disturbance in family boundaries, leading to the reduction of the psychological space necessary for healthy autonomous development in children (Petronio, 2002).

This research paper seeks to address a set of interrelated questions, arranged according to the analytical sequence adopted in the body of the paper, namely:

- What is the nature of the interaction between the technical features of digital platforms and parenting practices, and how does this interaction produce different patterns of digital parenting (controlling vs. empowering)?

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- How does control creep emerge as a dysfunctional pattern within the digital parenting system, and how can it be analyzed through the integrative framework of family distance and boundaries?

- What are the conditions and mechanisms necessary to achieve the paradigm shift in digital parenting from the control-oriented model prone to control creep to the empowerment-oriented model that supports growth?

Relatedness: This refers to the feeling of care and genuine connection with others. Although parental monitoring is ostensibly intended for protection, it can transform the relationship from supportive communication into constant surveillance, thereby weakening trust and undermining emotional attachment (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

- **Media Affordances Model:** This model focuses on analyzing interactions with the technical features of digital platforms not as neutral tools, but as environments that enable or constrain certain actions. It highlights four central dimensions (Evans et al., 2017):

 • **Visibility**: The platform's ability to make users' activities visible to others (such as online status or message-read indicators), which facilitates surveillance (Treem & Leonardi, 2013).

 • **Instantaneity:** The possibility of real-time communication, creating constant expectations of immediate responses (Ling, 2012).

 • **Persistence:** The platform's capacity to permanently store data (photos, messages, locations), thereby adding a surveillance dimension to every interaction (boyd, 2014).

 • **Trackability**: The ability to track and analyze movement and digital behavior over time, forming the foundation of continuous spatial monitoring (Green, 2010).

- **Integrative Framework of Distance and Boundaries**: This framework serves as an advanced theoretical approach to understanding the psychological and social organization of digital relationships within the family. It is grounded in three theoretical components:

 • Communication Privacy Management Theory (Petronio, 2002).

 • Digital Privacy Studies (Shin & Kang, 2016).

 • Surveillance Balance Research (Wisniewski et al., 2017).

It is based on two complementary concepts:

• **Digital Distance:** This represents a psycho-social space essential for healthy development and encompasses four dimensions: cognitive distance (the space for self-reflection free from interference), temporal distance (the freedom to manage one's own time without real-time monitoring), spatial/physical distance (the sense of digital boundaries and personal privacy), and availability (the freedom not to respond immediately, which respects the individual's personal rhythm).

• **Family Boundaries:** These constitute the organizational framework of digital relationships and appear in three main patterns: healthy boundaries (a flexible balance between protection and autonomy), weak boundaries (which expose sensitive information and increase risks), and rigid boundaries (which restrict growth and lead to resistance).

This theoretical and conceptual framework allows for a deeper analysis of the phenomenon of "control creep" as a result of an imbalance between children's psychological needs on the one hand and parents' digitally mediated responses driven by fear or anxiety on the other. It also highlights how the same technical features can be used either in a restrictive, control-oriented context or in an empowering, supportive one

depending on the underlying educational philosophy. Thus, this framework provides a fundamental entry point for understanding the paradigm shift from a surveillance model to an empowerment model in digital parenting.

Analysis of the Interaction Between the Technical Features of Digital Platforms and Parenting Practices, and How This Interaction Produces Different Patterns of Digital Parenting (Empowering vs. Controlling):

After establishing the core concepts and clarifying the tripartite theoretical framework on which the analysis is based, this paper moves to address the main research questions, beginning with the dynamic interaction between the technical features of digital platforms and parenting practices. This interaction serves as a key entry point for understanding how different patterns of digital parenting emerge, and whether these patterns contribute to children's empowerment or to their restriction.

Recent studies reveal that the interaction between technical affordances and parenting practices is not determined automatically but rather constitutes a complex dynamic system in which psychological and contextual factors intersect (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008). The technical features of digital platforms_such as visibility, instantaneity, persistence, and trackabilitycreate a space of potential actions, but they do not necessarily dictate a specific pattern of use (Treem & Leonardi, 2013).

According to the Media Affordances Model (Evans et al., 2017), these features represent "affordances for action" that can be activated in multiple ways, depending on parents' educational orientations. For example, visibility enables parents to monitor their children's online activities, but it does not determine whether such monitoring will be supportive or controlling (Wisniewski et al., 2017).

Meanwhile, Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) clarifies that the effect of these technical affordances depends on the parental response to them: empowering practices enhance children's basic psychological needs (autonomy, competence, relatedness), while controlling practices frustrate these needs (Grolnick & Pomerantz, 2022).

To illustrate how these technical affordances are reflected in the parenting context, the following table presents four key technical dimensions of digital platforms and compares two ways of using them:

the empowering pattern, which promotes growth and autonomy, and the controlling pattern, which reinforces control and leads to control creep.

Table (1): Interaction Between the Technical Features of Digital Platforms and Parenting Practices

Technical feature	Theoretical definition	The empowering pattern	The supervisory pattern	Scientific reference
Visibility	The platform's ability to make activities visible	Limited participation within agreed-upon contexts	Comprerehensive and continuous monitoring of all activity	**Treem & Leonardi, 2013**
Instantaneity	Enabling real-time communication	Respecting availability space and avoiding immediate response	Expectations of immediate response and accountability for delay	**Ling, 2012**
Persistence	Permanent storage of digital recordings	Using recordings for supervisory purposes	Using them for continuous accountability and punishment	**boyd, 2014**

Technical feature	Theoretical definition	The empowering pattern	The supervisory pattern	Scientific reference
Trackability	Tracking movement and location over time	Tracking only in emergency contexts	Continuous and comprehensive spatial monitoring	**Green, 2010**

But interaction with technology does not occur in a vacuum; it is influenced by a set of psychological and educational factors that shape parents' motivation and their way of responding to the digital environment. To explain the variation between the controlling and enabling patterns, the following table presents three central determinants that account for this interaction: parental trust, anxiety management style, and educational flexibility.

Table (2): Determining Factors of Parenting Patterns in Interaction with Techn

Determining factor	The empowering pattern	The supervisory pattern	The theoretica basis
Parental confidence	Confidence in children's abilities and self-regulation.	Fear of risks and lack of confidence in abilities	Family psychology.
Anxiety management	Turning anxiety into positive guidance .	Turning anxiety into excessive monitoring.	Self-determination theory.
Edu cational resilience	Adapting practices to children's developmental.	Rigidity in practices with neglect of the developmental stage.	Developmental psychology.

The integrated analysis reveals that the interaction between technological affordances and parenting practices is a dynamic and complex process, rather than a deterministic or mechanical one. The technological affordances of digital platforms create a field of possibilities that can be directed in two opposing ways:

Enabling Direction: Emerges when parental trust, educational flexibility, and positive anxiety management prevail, leading to the use of technological affordances to support basic psychological needs and achieve positive outcomes.

Controlling Direction: Results from fear, lack of trust, and cognitive rigidity, leading to a negative use of technological affordances that frustrates psychological needs and results in a controlling drift.

Thus, understanding the nature of this complex interaction represents the theoretical and methodological foundation for the paradigmatic shift from the controlling pattern to the enabling one. This constitutes the focus of the subsequent research questions in this study:

How does the controlling drift emerge as a dysfunctional pattern within the system of digital parenting, and how can it be analyzed through the integrative framework of family distance and boundaries?

After reviewing the interaction between technological affordances and parenting practices, the analysis here moves toward understanding one of the main dysfunctions of digital parenting: the controlling drift. This drift does not appear as a direct practice, but rather as a gradual transformational pattern shaped through a dynamic interaction between technological affordances and unintended psychological and social responses. To understand this pattern, the study proposes an analysis based on the integrative framework of family distance and boundaries.

The First Stage: Compression of Distances and Redefinition of Boundaries:

The affordances of digital platforms work to compress the psychological, temporal, and spatial distances that once served as a protective barrier for children's autonomy. This compression not only eliminates distance but also redefines family boundaries , leading to a disruption of the psychological and social organization within the digital parent child relationship.

 Visibility compresses cognitive distance, transforming the child's state from (unknown/inferred) to(known/monitored). This generates an expectation of constant awareness, shifting the boundaries from trust and inference to a perceived right to know and observe (Utz & Beukeboom, 2011).

 Instantaneity compresses temporal distance, creating a short "virtual response window." Any delay becomes interpretable as neglect or danger, shifting boundaries from visible time norms to individual accountability (Ling, 2012).

 Persistence also compresses temporal distance by collapsing the gap between past and present, making past actions perpetually available for review and evaluation. The boundaries thus shift from trust/forgetting to continuous verification and retrospective accountability (boyd, 2014).

 Trackability compresses spatial/physical distance by eliminating the notion of "absence." Digital presence becomes a substitute for physical presence, transforming the boundaries from respect for personal space and privacy to continuous spatial monitoring (Green, 2010).

The Second Stage: Formation of the Self-Reinforcing Surveillance Loop

The compression of distances and the redefinition of boundaries do not occur in a vacuum; rather, they trigger a series of psychological and social interactions between parents and children, producing a vicious cycle of escalation and resistance. This loop evolves autonomously and reinforces itself through four successive stages:

Constant Interpretation and Rising Anxiety:

Every absence or delay by the child demands an immediate explanation, and silence becomes a negative event. Declared family rules are replaced by momentary interventions (repeated calls, questioning, etc.).

(Karahanna et al., 2018)

Frustration of Psychological Needs:

According to Self-Determination Theory, unjustified interactive interventions frustrate the child's basic needs for autonomy and competence, leading to the emergence of psychological reactance as a strong drive to regain the lost sense of autonomy.

(Steindl et al., 2015)

Compensatory Responses:

Children resort to behaviors aimed at restoring personal space (secret accounts, muting notifications, intentionally delaying responses, etc.), which are often interpreted within the family as risky behaviors.

(Modecki et al., 2022)

Escalation and Reinforcement:

 These compensatory responses heighten parental anxiety, leading to intensified surveillance. The surveillance loop thus reinforces itself   increased monitoring leads to greater resistance, and greater resistance leads to further escalation.

 (Geurts et al., 2024)

Accordingly, the "controlling drift" undermines the essential balance described by distance and boundary theories: the psychological distance necessary for healthy development diminishes, and family boundaries shift from flexibility to rigidity. This results in an unbalanced relationship in which attachment becomes constraint and independence becomes separation.

Thus, the analysis goes beyond describing mere practices to reveal a deep paradigmatic transformation in the philosophy of digital parenting. Consequently, the shift in educational practice does not concern tools alone but rather the underlying model of thought. This distinction becomes clear when comparing the "Risk Management Paradigm" with the "Social Control Paradigm," as illustrated in the following table:

Table (3): From the Risk Management Paradigm to the Social Control Paradigm

Paradigm	Focus	Education logic	Tools Used
Risk Management	Physical and psychological safety.	"How can we protect children from digital risks ?"	Awareness,flexible restriction, active guidance.
Social Control	Compliance and behavioral regulation .	"How can we ensure that the child behaves exactly as we want ? "	Comprehensive monitoring , enforced obedience ,immediate intervention.

Identifying the conditions and mechanisms necessary to achieve a paradigmatic shift in digital parenting from the controlling type prone to authoritarian slippage to the empowering type that supports growth?

After analyzing the mechanisms of authoritarian slippage and deconstructing its psychological and technical roots, this paper proposes a practical model for shifting toward an empowering mode of digital parenting. This model is based on four central conditions that together form the infrastructure for an effective paradigmatic transformation in the philosophy of digital education. The model illustrates how, through theoretically grounded practical practices, it is possible to break the closed loop of surveillance and control and rebuild the digital relationship on a foundation of trust and empowerment.

Accordingly, the "conditions of restraint" are, in fact, conditions for creating a healthy digital family environment, within which we propose four fundamental principles:

The Digital Contract:

This is a declared agreement that defines what is monitored?, why? , how ?, and for how long ?. It transforms the practice from silent surveillance into a framework of shared accountability (for example: sharing location data only during travel, or reviewing browsing history weekly for guidance purposes) (Mascheroni et al., 2018).

It reflects on the two modes of digital parenting through two main pathways:

- **The controlling mode:** Establishes one-sided, opaque monitoring, which leads to *tension and gaps in family trust bonds.*

- **The empowering mode:** *Establishes clear, shared rules, thereby reducing the tendency toward "constant interpretation" and promoting shared responsibility.*

Periodic Reviews and Reassessment:

These are regular family meetings held to review rules and define boundaries. In this context, the relationship shifts from crisis management to continuous governance that supports balance between control and autonomy (Vossen et al., 2024).

It reflects on the two modes of digital parenting through two pathways:

- **The controlling mode:** Maintains rigid rules despite changes in the child's developmental stage and context.

- **The empowering mode:** Adapts regulations in line with evidence and daily experience, reducing perceived negative bias and strengthening emotional connection.

Balanced Reciprocity:

This is a declared commitment by parents to uphold part of the same regulations they expect from the child, in a manner that suits the roles of both parties. It does not imply complete equality in privacy; rather, it is a mechanism that gives rules a structured framework defining when?, why?, and how a rule is applied?, and when it should be reviewed?. This reduces the likelihood of resistance behavior (Grolnick & Pomerantz, 2022).

It reflects on the two modes of digital parenting through two pathways:

- **The controlling mode:** Selective reciprocity, where parents demand compliance without modeling it themselves, reinforcing hierarchical authority and emotional distance.

- **The empowering mode:** Reciprocal commitment, where parents demonstrate transparency and accountability within reasonable limits, fostering mutual trust and self-regulation.

Emotional Literacy in the Digital Context:

This refers to parents' ability to recognize, interpret, and respond empathetically to the child's emotions as they arise through digital interactions such as frustration, exclusion, or comparison anxiety. Developing digital emotional literacy transforms monitoring from a punitive act into a supportive dialogue, bridging the gap between emotional safety and digital autonomy (Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2020).

It reflects on the two modes of digital parenting through two pathways:

• **The controlling mode:** Neglects the child's developmental maturity, resulting in a gradual loss of trust.

• **The empowering mode:** Involves a gradual and balanced parental withdrawal in line with the child's developmental stages, leading to competence and self-regulation.

In general, the psychological mechanisms driving the paradigmatic transformation within families can be summarized according to the following schematic framework:

- **The controlling mode:** Fear /or lack of trust+ combined with cognitive–educational rigidity leads to the negative use of digital affordances, ⟶ which frustrates psychological needs and reinforces authoritarian slippage.

- **The empowering mode:** Parental trust+ positive anxiety management+ and flexibility translate the four conditions into daily practices ⟶ that break the cycle and rebuild the relationship on new psychological and organizational foundations.

Conclusion:

This paper represents an original scientific contribution to the field of digital family psychology through its in-depth analysis of the phenomenon of "authoritarian slippage" in digital parenting practices. It situates this phenomenon within an integrated theoretical framework that combines Self-Determination Theory, the Model of Media Affordances, and the Integrative Framework of Family Distance and Boundaries.

The study's originality lies in two interrelated aspects:

First, it goes beyond the traditional treatment of digital supervision as a purely technical practice, showing instead that it results from a dynamic interaction between the technical affordances of platforms and complex psychological and educational responses.

Second, it offers a new interpretation of authoritarian slippage not as a behavioral deviation, but as an indicator of a profound paradigmatic shift from the philosophy of "risk management" to that of "social control."

The paper adopted a three-level analytical structure (individual, interactive, systemic), which enabled it to trace parental and child behaviors within a network of techno-psychological-familial interactions. Based on this, it proposed a transformative mode grounded in four "conditions of restraint": the digital contract, periodic reviews and reassessment, balanced reciprocity, and developmental alignment with gradual parental withdrawal. This model can thus serve as a practical framework for restoring balance between supervision and empowerment in the digital relationship between parents and children.

As future recommendations based on this study, the following can be proposed:

1. Field-testing the model across diverse family contexts (age, culture, and digital environment) to verify the effectiveness of the proposed "conditions of restraint" and transformation mechanisms.

2. Developing standardized assessment tools to measure levels of authoritarian slippage and indicators of family digital empowerment.

3. Studying the longitudinal impact of the family digital contract and periodic reviews on children's mental health and the development of their self-regulation.

4. Expanding the model to include new forms of media (such as artificial intelligence), reflecting the rapid changes in the digital environment.

Although this paper proposes an integrated transformative model for understanding and addressing the phenomenon of authoritarian slippage within the context of digital parenting, it does not claim to encompass all dimensions of the phenomenon. It acknowledges the existence of research avenues that remain open for expansion and improvement, including:

1. Cultural and applied expansion: It is advisable to test the proposed model in diverse cultural contexts particularly within Arab societies to examine how social values and family structures interact with concepts such as the "digital contract" and "balanced reciprocity."

2. Analysis of age and gender differences: The paper recommends studying variations in children's acceptance of digital parenting practices according to their developmental stages, gender, and personal characteristics, thereby enriching the understanding of empowerment and slippage dynamics.

3. Development of standardized measurement tools: It is important to design quantitative and qualitative scales to assess levels of authoritarian slippage and degrees of family digital empowerment, in order to facilitate evaluation and monitoring in applied and educational research.

4. Addition of a conceptual appendix: Future versions of the model may include a concise appendix clarifying key analytical terms to make it easier for researchers and practitioners in the educational and family psychology fields to apply the framework effectively.

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