

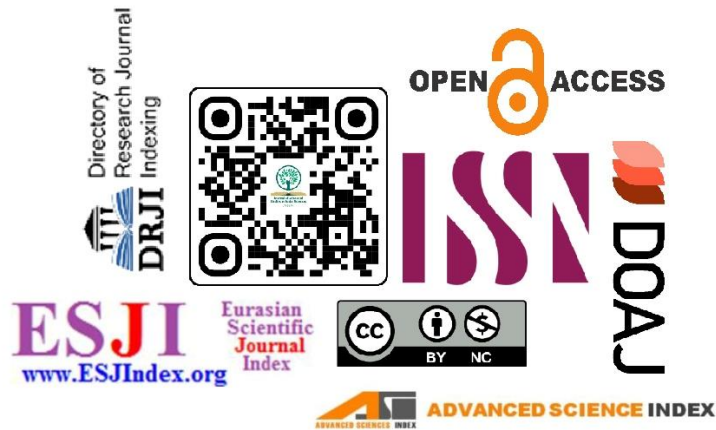
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Parental Experiences of Negotiating Teenagers' Independence and Boundaries in a Technology-Driven World

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Abstract

This study explores parental experiences of negotiating adolescents' independence and boundaries in a technology-driven world within the South African context. Grounded in an integrated framework of Family Systems Theory and Self-Determination Theory, and guided by a transformative qualitative paradigm, the research examines how parents conceptualise digital autonomy, establish boundaries, and balance protection with adolescents' need for independence. A phenomenological design was employed, with data collected through semi-structured interviews with purposively selected parents of teenagers aged 13–18 from diverse socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. Reflexive thematic analysis revealed that adolescent independence is increasingly digital-centric, with autonomy expressed through online engagement rather than traditional responsibilities. Parents experienced ongoing tensions between fostering responsibility and managing overuse, as well as between enforcing control and supporting autonomy. While structured rules such as screen-time limits and monitoring practices were common, many parents also engaged in negotiation and dialogue, reflecting shifts toward more collaborative mediation strategies. Parenting practices were further shaped by cultural, moral, and religious values, alongside structural factors such as socioeconomic status and access to digital resources. A central dilemma involved balancing adolescents' privacy with the need for online safety, compounded by parents' varying levels of digital confidence and uncertainty. The findings highlight that digital parenting is relational, contextually situated, and continuously negotiated. The study underscores the importance of culturally responsive, autonomy-supportive approaches that promote digital competence, trust, and responsible engagement, offering insights for parenting support, policy development, and digital well-being interventions in diverse contexts.

Keywords: digital parenting, adolescent autonomy, parental mediation, digital boundaries, sociocultural context

INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a developmental period characterised by heightened striving for autonomy, identity formation, and the renegotiation of parent–child relationships, and these developmental processes are increasingly being reshaped within a digital context (Avci et al., 2025; West et al., 2025). Traditionally, these processes unfolded within relatively bounded physical and social environments shaped by family, school, and local community contexts. However, the rapid expansion of digital technologies, particularly smartphones, social media, and online platforms, has transformed the terrain in which independence is exercised and monitored (Avci et al., 2025; West et al., 2025). Social media have become a central context for adolescent identity development, enabling self-presentation, social comparison, and feedback that contribute to identity exploration and self-concept clarity (Pérez-Torres, 2024; Avci et al., 2025). Teenagers now explore identity, relationships, and risk in hybrid spaces that blur public and private, local and global, visible and invisible, extending developmental tasks into networked environments that frequently operate beyond direct adult oversight (de Souza e Silva & Campbell, 2025; Pérez-Torres, 2024).

For parents, this shift has introduced new dilemmas. Granting independence is developmentally necessary, yet digital environments expose adolescents to risks such as cyberbullying, sexual exploitation, harmful content, and excessive screen use (OECD, 2025; Smith et al., 2025; Doty et al., 2025). Parents must therefore balance protection with trust, supervision with respect for privacy, and guidance with adolescents' legitimate claims to autonomy. Studies examining parental oversight of adolescent social technology use find that while restrictive monitoring can reduce problematic use among younger teens, the effectiveness of rigid restriction declines as adolescents grow older, highlighting the importance of strategies that support autonomy alongside supervision (Richard & Zainudin, 2024; Ulutaş et al., 2025). These negotiations are further complicated by generational gaps in digital literacy and uneven access to technology, since parents' own digital literacy and confidence significantly shape how they mediate their children's online engagement and influence digital opportunities versus risk exposure (Lou et al., 2024; Lafton et al., 2024). Moreover, research on parent–teen online supervision shows that both parents and adolescents often favour more flexible, collaborative approaches to digital life, reflecting tensions between adolescent desire for independence and parental concerns about online safety and privacy (Wright, 2024).

In South Africa, parental negotiation of adolescents' independence in technology-driven contexts is deeply shaped by structural inequalities, diverse cultural norms, and uneven access to digital resources (Gillwald et al., 2018). While smartphone penetration is relatively high, meaningful access to the internet remains constrained by high data costs, inconsistent connectivity, and persistent disparities between urban and rural areas (Gillwald et al., 2018). These inequalities create a “digital divide” in which adolescents' opportunities for online learning, social participation, and identity exploration vary significantly depending on household resources and geographic location (Mwansa et al., 2025; South African Knowledge and Access Network [SAKAN], 2024). In lower-income households, limited data access may restrict adolescents' online engagement but also reduce parental capacity for active mediation, as parents themselves may lack consistent access or digital literacy (Chauke & David, 2025). Conversely, in more resourced contexts,

greater connectivity can expand opportunities but also increase exposure to online risks, requiring more nuanced parental mediation strategies (van der Spuy & Sutherland, 2024).

Parenting practices in South Africa are further shaped by collectivist orientations, extended family involvement, and culturally embedded expectations regarding respect, authority, and interdependence (Mkhize, 2004; Nsamenang, 2015). These factors influence how autonomy is granted and negotiated, often resulting in hybrid parenting approaches that combine elements of control, guidance, and relational accountability. At the same time, generational differences in technological familiarity may widen the gap between adolescents' digital competence and parents' ability to effectively supervise or guide online activities (Gillwald et al., 2018; Hadzic, 2024). National policy frameworks such as the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA) and educational initiatives led by the Department of Basic Education increasingly recognise the importance of digital safety and literacy, yet the translation of these frameworks into everyday family practices remains uneven (Republic of South Africa, 2013; Department of Basic Education, 2020).

Studies of youth online safety in Global South contexts highlight the need for culturally grounded approaches, as much existing research reflects Western paradigms that may not fully capture the lived realities of South African families (Oguine et al., 2025). Parents adopt heterogeneous mediation styles ranging from restrictive to autonomy-supportive depending on their skills, resources, cultural values, and children's developmental stage, emphasizing that digital parenting is both contextually situated and relationally negotiated (Navarro & Jensen, 2025).

Understanding parental meaning-making and everyday practices is therefore essential for developing culturally responsive parenting support, school policies, and digital well-being interventions. Evidence indicates that active parental mediation strategies, such as open discussion, guidance, and supportive supervision, are associated with improved adolescent digital competence and reduced negative outcomes (Lou et al., 2024; Bayar et al., 2025). Developmental differences further shape how adolescents perceive parental strategies: restrictive oversight may reduce risky device use among younger teens, while autonomy-supportive approaches are more effective for older adolescents (Ho et al., 2025). Exploring these dynamics in South Africa provides critical insight into the tensions, strategies, values, and emotions that shape parent-teen negotiations of independence within a rapidly evolving, technology-driven social landscape.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How do parents conceptualise teenagers' independence in relation to digital technologies and online spaces?
2. What boundaries do parents attempt to establish around teenagers' technology use, and how are these negotiated in everyday family life?
3. How do sociocultural values, parental beliefs, and contextual factors shape parents' strategies for balancing autonomy and protection?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Adolescence involves a normative shift toward autonomy and renegotiation of parental authority, as young people seek independence in decision-making and self-regulation, including in digital contexts (Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2020). Online activities

are often less visible to parents, undermining traditional monitoring strategies and complicating negotiations over autonomy and control (Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2020; Lou et al., 2024). Digital parenting research conceptualizes parental mediation along a spectrum: restrictive mediation (rules and limits), active mediation (discussion and guidance), and co-use or participatory engagement. Recent studies identify multiple profiles of digital parental mediation, influenced by parents' digital confidence, engagement, and cultural contexts (Navarro & Jensen, 2025).

While restrictive approaches can limit exposure to online risks, they may provoke secrecy or resistance, potentially weakening trust (Ho et al., 2025; Gámez-Guadix, et al., 2018). Conversely, autonomy-supportive and dialogical approaches that emphasize active mediation and shared engagement are associated with stronger parent-child relationships, better self-regulation, and positive online behaviours (Ho et al., 2025; Navarro & Jensen, 2025). Parents frequently report moral and emotional tension, balancing protection against harm with recognition that overcontrol may impede adolescents' autonomy. These challenges are intensified in cultural contexts emphasizing respect for elders and collective responsibility, which can clash with more individualistic notions of independence (Lou et al., 2024).

Despite extensive quantitative research linking mediation styles to adolescent outcomes, fewer studies provide qualitative insights into parents' lived experiences, particularly in non-Western or culturally diverse settings (Navarro & Jensen, 2025). Understanding how parents negotiate digital independence, interpret risk, and make meaning of authority within their sociocultural context is crucial for developing culturally sensitive guidance and support. This study addresses this gap by foregrounding parents' experiences, highlighting the complexities of digital parenting in the modern age and the tensions inherent in balancing adolescent autonomy with protection (Ho et al., 2025; Lou et al., 2024).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study was guided by an integrated framework combining Family Systems Theory (FST) and Self-Determination Theory (SDT), interpreted through a sociocultural lens. This integration enabled analysis across relational, developmental, and contextual levels, providing a nuanced understanding of how parental mediation of adolescents' digital autonomy unfolds within families.

Family Systems Theory conceptualises the family as an interdependent emotional system in which patterns of interaction, roles, and boundaries are dynamically organised and mutually influential (Bowen, 1993; Brown & Errington, 2024). Within this system, adolescents' engagement with digital technologies can disrupt established relational patterns, requiring families to renegotiate boundaries, authority, and communication. FST is particularly useful for interpreting how parents regulate digital behaviour, manage conflict, and maintain cohesion while responding to adolescents' increasing independence.

Self-Determination Theory complements this systemic perspective by explaining adolescents' developmental and motivational needs (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2024). SDT posits that autonomy, competence, and relatedness are essential for optimal functioning. In digital contexts, adolescents' online engagement can be understood as an expression of autonomy, a means of developing digital competence, and a way of

sustaining social connectedness. Parental mediation strategies may either support or frustrate these needs, shaping adolescents' digital behaviours and well-being.

The integration of FST and SDT highlights both complementarity and tension. While FST foregrounds relational regulation, hierarchy, and boundary maintenance, SDT emphasises individual autonomy and psychological need satisfaction. Tensions arise when parental control, driven by concerns for safety, constrains adolescents' autonomy. However, both frameworks converge on the importance of supportive relationships that balance structure with responsiveness. Embedding this integration within a sociocultural perspective further recognises that autonomy is not purely individual but relationally negotiated within cultural norms, expectations of respect, and structural constraints (Rogoff, 2003). This integrated framework therefore provides a coherent lens for interpreting how parents balance control and autonomy in a technology-driven environment.

METHODOLOGY

Paradigm

The study was situated within a transformative paradigm, which foregrounds social justice, empowerment, and attention to structural inequalities (Mertens, 2020; Creswell & Poth, 2018). This paradigm was appropriate because it enabled the research to examine how socioeconomic, cultural, and technological disparities in South Africa shape parental negotiation of adolescent digital autonomy. By prioritising participants' voices and highlighting structural inequities, this approach supported findings that could inform culturally responsive policies, interventions, and parenting support programs.

Approach

A qualitative approach was employed to explore parents' lived experiences in depth, focusing on the meanings and perspectives that participants attached to their parenting practices (Lim, 2025; Patton, 2023). This approach facilitated flexible, context-sensitive engagement with the complexities of family dynamics, digital mediation, and autonomy negotiations, allowing rich, descriptive data to emerge without imposing pre-determined hypotheses. Qualitative inquiry was particularly suitable for examining nuanced relational and cultural factors that influence parental decision-making in diverse South African settings.

Design

A phenomenological orientation guided the study, focusing on understanding the essence of parents' experiences regarding adolescent independence and digital boundaries (Ahmed, 2025; Groenewald, 2004). Phenomenology was selected because it emphasised participants' subjective perceptions and interpretations, capturing both the emotional and relational dimensions of parenting. This design allowed the researcher to explore how parents made sense of conflicts, rules, and negotiations in real-world contexts, while acknowledging the influence of sociocultural norms and structural inequalities on everyday family practices.

Participants and Sampling

Participants were parents or primary caregivers of adolescents aged 13–18, recruited purposively to ensure diverse representation across socioeconomic status, cultural background, family structure, and urban–rural location (Rahimi, 2024). A total of

approximately 15–25 participants were included, consistent with qualitative research focused on depth rather than breadth.

Participants were recruited through schools, community organisations, and faith-based institutions. Efforts were made to include parents from varying socioeconomic contexts to reflect structural inequalities in access to digital resources. This sampling strategy enabled the inclusion of information-rich cases and facilitated exploration of both shared and divergent parenting experiences within the South African context.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, which elicited detailed, context-rich accounts of parenting strategies, digital rules, conflict negotiation, and the values and emotions shaping parental decisions (Ahmed, 2025). Interviews lasted approximately 45–75 minutes, were conducted in participants' preferred languages, audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim. Field notes captured contextual and non-verbal details, while follow-up prompts deepened reflection and clarified emerging themes, enhancing interpretive validity.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis as outlined by Ahmed et al. (2025), involving iterative processes of familiarisation, coding, theme development, and interpretation. Analysis began with repeated reading of transcripts to ensure deep engagement with the data, followed by inductive coding that captured both explicit (semantic) and underlying (latent) meanings.

Codes were progressively organised into candidate themes, which were reviewed, refined, and defined to ensure internal coherence and distinction between themes. Reflexive memoing supported analytic decision-making, while constant comparison across participants allowed identification of patterns as well as contextual variation.

The analysis was interpretive rather than purely descriptive, drawing on the theoretical framework to make sense of how family dynamics, sociocultural norms, and structural conditions shaped parental experiences. This approach ensured that findings were both grounded in participants' accounts and theoretically informed.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was ensured through deep engagement with transcripts, reflexive memoing, thick description, audit trails, and peer discussions (Ahmed, 2024). Credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were maintained in ways consistent with reflexive thematic analysis, prioritising analytic depth and interpretive sufficiency over rigid notions of saturation or reliability, while validating that findings authentically reflected participants' experiences.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of the Witwatersrand Non-Medical Ethics Committee (Protocol H24/01/23). Participants provided informed consent and were assured of confidentiality, anonymity, and the right to withdraw at any stage. Interviews were conducted sensitively, with attention to emotional safety, and participants were informed about support services. These procedures aligned with ethical

principles and the transformative paradigm's commitment to protecting participants while highlighting social inequities influencing parental experiences.

Findings and Discussions

This section presents the findings of the study and provides a brief synthesis of the key themes that emerged from the data. It examines parents' experiences of negotiating adolescents' independence and boundaries within a technology-driven context, highlighting how independence is increasingly understood through digital engagement. The section also captures the tensions between autonomy and control, responsibility and overuse, and protection and privacy, while considering how parents establish rules, engage in negotiation, and draw on cultural, moral, and socioeconomic influences. Overall, it summarises the complex and evolving nature of digital parenting as families navigate adolescents' growing independence in an increasingly connected world.

Theme 1: Increasing Digital-Centric Independence

Parents described a shift from traditional markers of independence (e.g., dressing, cooking, completing chores) to forms of autonomy that are increasingly mediated through digital technologies. While teenagers are still perceived as capable of managing everyday tasks, their independence is now often expressed through sustained engagement with digital devices. As one participant noted, *"Teenage independence has become more digital-centric, where teenagers enjoy increased access to information and less real-world risk-taking."* Similarly, another parent observed, *"He is able to do most things on his own like dressing and cooking but is always on the phone,"* while others simply emphasised the extent of this shift, stating *"Very independent. Yes technology has influenced their behaviour"* and *"Drastically."* These excerpts illustrate a perceived redefinition of independence, where autonomy is no longer solely grounded in physical or social responsibilities but is increasingly linked to digital competence and connectivity.

This finding aligns with recent scholarship highlighting how digital technologies are reshaping adolescent development and autonomy. Research suggests that young people's independence is increasingly enacted through online spaces, where they access information, form identities, and exercise agency in ways that differ from traditional offline contexts (Odgers & Jensen, 2020; Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2017). While digital engagement can enhance cognitive and social competencies, it may also reduce opportunities for experiential learning and real-world risk navigation, which are critical for holistic development. Furthermore, studies indicate that excessive reliance on digital environments may contribute to shifts in parent-child dynamics, with parents perceiving autonomy as technologically driven rather than socially negotiated (George & Odgers, 2015). In this sense, digital-centric independence reflects both an expansion of adolescents' capabilities and a transformation in how independence is understood and evaluated within contemporary families.

Theme 2: Digital Independence as Responsibility vs. Overuse

Parents conceptualised digital independence in two contrasting ways: as responsible self-management and informed decision-making, or as excessive and potentially harmful autonomy. On the one hand, some participants framed digital independence as a positive developmental outcome, emphasising agency and self-regulation. For instance, one parent noted, *"Digital independence means empowered*

decision making... balancing online time and real world responsibilities,” while another stated, *“Digital independence means controlling and choosing carefully what to view online.”* On the other hand, several parents expressed concern about overuse and diminished control, with one remarking, *“It means they can do whatever they want on their phones... This affects them badly because they are always glued to their gadgets,”* and another adding, *“If they don’t have phone they become moody.”* These contrasting accounts highlight a clear tension between viewing digital independence as empowerment and perceiving it as a loss of behavioural regulation.

From our perspective, these findings point to the complexity of digital autonomy in contemporary adolescence, where independence is not inherently beneficial or harmful but contingent on how it is exercised and supported. This duality reflects broader debates in the literature, which suggest that while digital environments can foster autonomy, decision-making, and access to information, they also introduce risks related to overuse, emotional dependence, and reduced self-regulation (Odgers & Jensen, 2020; Przybylski & Weinstein, 2017). The parents’ concerns about mood changes and excessive attachment to devices resonate with emerging evidence that problematic digital engagement may be associated with emotional dysregulation and compulsive use patterns among adolescents (Keles et al., 2020). At the same time, the emphasis on responsible use underscores the importance of developing digital self-regulation skills, which are increasingly recognised as critical competencies in the digital age.

We argue that this tension should not be understood as a simple dichotomy between “good” and “bad” technology use, but rather as an indication of the need for guided autonomy. In line with contemporary research, adolescents benefit most when digital independence is accompanied by parental mediation, digital literacy, and the cultivation of self-regulatory capacities (Valkenburg et al., 2022). Thus, digital independence becomes meaningful not merely through unrestricted access, but through the ability to make informed, balanced, and context-sensitive decisions. This suggests that both families and educational institutions have a crucial role to play in shaping how young people navigate the opportunities and risks associated with digital autonomy.

Theme 3: Structured Boundaries and Rule Enforcement

Parents’ emphasis on structured boundaries reflects a clear attempt to regulate adolescents’ digital engagement in ways that prioritise discipline, health, and academic focus. The excerpts *“Responsibilities first rule, taking health breaks, setting curfews, phones-free zones”* and *“No internet after 7pm”* demonstrate how parents intentionally establish routines to promote balanced lifestyles. This aligns with recent research showing that rule-setting and structured parental mediation are associated with improved self-regulation, sleep patterns, and academic outcomes among adolescents (Lauricella et al., 2014; Nagata et al., 2022). Additionally, practices such as *“I sometimes put curfews... I also have access to their phones”* reflect a hybrid approach combining restriction and monitoring, which literature suggests can be effective when paired with communication and guidance (Livingstone et al., 2017; Valkenburg et al., 2013). From my perspective, these strategies indicate that parents are not simply controlling behaviour but actively attempting to scaffold responsible digital use.

However, more rigid approaches such as *“I do not believe in privacy for my teenager. I can randomly take their device”* highlight tensions between parental control and

adolescents' need for autonomy. While strict monitoring may reduce immediate online risks, evidence suggests that excessive surveillance can undermine trust and encourage secretive behaviours (Shin & Lwin, 2017; Wisniewski et al., 2015). In our view, this reveals a key contradiction within this theme: although boundaries are necessary, overly restrictive enforcement may weaken parent-child relationships and limit the development of independent decision-making. Thus, the effectiveness of structured boundaries lies not only in their presence but in how they are implemented whether through collaborative agreements that foster internalised responsibility or through unilateral control that may provoke resistance (Coyne et al., 2020).

Theme 4: Negotiation, Dialogue, and Conditional Flexibility

Parents' accounts of negotiation and dialogue suggest that digital rule enforcement is often shaped through interaction, compromise, and relational dynamics within the family. Excerpts such as "*We had a chat about why the rule existed... They could join for a shorter session*" and "*They pushed back... We compromised*" illustrate how some parents use conflict as a constructive space for mutual understanding. This aligns with autonomy-supportive parenting approaches, where adolescents are included in decision-making to promote internalisation of rules and self-regulation (Valkenburg et al., 2013). The emphasis on "*Listen first: Hear them out before responding*" further reflects communication patterns associated with positive developmental outcomes, including trust and responsible digital behaviour (Shin & Lwin, 2017; Coyne et al., 2020). From a Family Systems Theory perspective, these interactions can be understood as part of ongoing relational negotiations, where rules are co-constructed and adjusted to maintain balance within the family system. In this sense, conflict is not inherently negative but serves as a mechanism through which families recalibrate roles, expectations, and boundaries in response to adolescents' growing autonomy.

However, the contrasting stance captured in "*My word is final*" highlights the persistence of more authoritarian dynamics, where decision-making remains parent-centred and less open to negotiation. While such firmness may ensure immediate compliance, research suggests that limited adolescent participation can hinder the development of independent reasoning and may foster resistance or covert behaviours (Rote & Smetana, 2018; Livingstone et al., 2017). From a Family Systems lens, this reflects a more hierarchical structure in which power is less fluid and boundaries are rigidly maintained. In our view, the coexistence of dialogical and authoritarian approaches within this theme underscores a key tension: families are simultaneously striving for stability and adaptation. Conditional flexibility where parents allow discussion but retain ultimate authority emerges as a balancing strategy that enables the system to remain cohesive while accommodating developmental change. Thus, effective digital parenting appears to depend not on eliminating control, but on integrating it with dialogue in ways that support both relational harmony and adolescents' evolving independence.

Theme 5: Cultural, Religious, and Moral Framing of Digital Management

Parents' narratives indicate that digital parenting is deeply shaped by cultural, religious, and moral values. Excerpts such as "*Listening to elders and adhering to what they say*" and "*Respect for authority*" reflect norms prioritising hierarchy, obedience, and intergenerational respect, while "*Relying and standing in the guidance of God*" highlights the influence of religious frameworks in guiding digital behaviour. Research shows that

parental mediation practices are often informed by these beliefs, with collectivist values, spirituality, and moral reasoning shaping boundaries around media use and adolescents' self-discipline (Ren & Zhu, 2022; Zhao et al., 2023). From a Family Systems Theory perspective, such value-driven practices serve to maintain cohesion, regulate relational boundaries, and preserve shared meanings within the family unit. Excerpts like *"Technology should be embraced... but should not replace the bond and physical interactions between family members"* illustrate how parents negotiate digital engagement alongside relational priorities, suggesting that effective digital mediation is not value-neutral but entwined with cultural and moral socialisation, supporting adolescents' development within ethically grounded family frameworks (Ren & Zhu, 2022).

Furthermore, the excerpt *"Technology should be embraced... but should not replace the bond and physical interactions between family members"* reflects an effort to balance technological engagement with relational priorities. This resonates with literature emphasising that families actively negotiate the place of digital media within existing value systems, often positioning face-to-face interaction as central to emotional connection and well-being (Coyne et al., 2020). From a Family Systems Theory perspective, these value-driven practices can be understood as mechanisms for maintaining cohesion, regulating boundaries, and preserving shared meanings within the family unit. In my view, this theme reveals that digital parenting is not value-neutral; rather, it is shaped by deeply held beliefs about morality, relationships, and the kind of individuals parents hope their children will become. Consequently, effective digital mediation is intertwined with cultural and moral socialisation, reinforcing that adolescents' digital lives are inseparable from the broader ethical frameworks of the families in which they are embedded.

Theme 6: Socioeconomic and Resource Influences

Parents consistently described how socioeconomic and resource factors influenced how they set boundaries and supervised their children's digital activities. Excerpts such as *"Because we have free Wi-Fi my son can always have access"* and *"Data costs can be a factor"* highlight how connectivity and affordability shape day-to-day access and, by extension, how parents negotiate limits. Research shows that family socioeconomic status (SES) is meaningfully associated with adolescents' digital engagement and mediation; for example, higher SES is linked with greater digital literacy and more effective parental mediation strategies, suggesting that access and resources help families guide digital use (Shi et al., 2024). At the same time, SES can shape patterns of access itself, since families with more financial means can offer more devices and constant connectivity, which may increase children's opportunities for both educational and recreational use (Salza & Samuel, 2025). From my perspective, these structural inequalities underscore that digital independence is not only a matter of parenting style but also one of material and contextual affordances, such that *"Financial status determine how we set boundaries"* and *"Having abundant resources makes them feel entitled"* reflect how differing levels of access and economic capital influence how rules are perceived, implemented, and negotiated within the family system. In sum, this theme highlights that socioeconomic and resource conditions do not just frame children's online behaviours but also shape the capacity and confidence parents have to supervise and mediate those behaviours effectively (Lou et al., 2024).

Theme 7: Protection vs. Privacy Dilemma

Parents in this study described the challenge of balancing protection with adolescents' privacy and autonomy in the digital space. Excerpts such as *"Balancing teen online safety with privacy involves fostering open communication"* and *"Monitor, don't micromanage"* reflect approaches where safety is maintained while allowing some independence. Research shows that active mediation strategies focusing on discussion rather than strict surveillance are associated with higher trust, better relational outcomes, and improved adolescent capacity to manage online risks (Helsper et al., 2024; Suárez-Álvarez et al., 2022). However, authoritarian positions illustrated by *"I do not believe in privacy for my teenager"* and *"I make sure the gadgets are not used behind closed doors"* prioritise protection over autonomy and may hinder adolescents' development of self-regulation and digital responsibility (Young & Tully, 2022; Allison & Dawson, 2025). Meta-analytic evidence suggests that balanced parental mediation, which combines monitoring with dialogue, optimally supports children's digital wellbeing and reduces the negative effects of overly restrictive oversight (Tan et al., 2025). From my perspective, this theme highlights that the protection–privacy dilemma is a central challenge in digital parenting: effective approaches require parents to safeguard adolescents while nurturing trust, autonomy, and digital competence.

Theme 8: Parental Confidence and Digital Uncertainty

Parents' narratives reveal a mix of confidence and uncertainty in navigating their adolescents' digital lives, underscored by rapid technological change and evolving online trends. Excerpts such as *"In the middle. The kids are very smart"* and *"Keeping up with the latest apps and trends"* illustrate how many parents feel simultaneously competent and outpaced by their children's digital fluency. This aligns with research showing that parents often report moderate confidence in managing digital media but struggle with the speed of technological change and the complexity of platforms, which can undermine their sense of efficacy (Law et al., 2019). Such uncertainty is further compounded when parents consider the impact of social media on adolescent well-being; the concern in *"Understanding the impact of social media on mental health"* reflects broader empirical findings that parents worry about links between social media use, anxiety, depression, and body image issues among young people (Odgers & Jensen, 2020; Dai et al., 2022). Moreover, the excerpt *"There's so much changing so fast online"* resonates with studies indicating that parents' digital learning curves are ongoing, and that continuous adaptation and upskilling are necessary for effective mediation (Livingstone et al., 2017). From my perspective, this theme highlights that parental confidence in the digital age is not static but shaped by ongoing learning, reflective practice, and engagement with both risks and opportunities a dynamic process that requires support, resources, and dialogue across generations.

Theme 9: Aspirations for Future Digital Competence

Parents in this study expressed clear aspirations for their teenagers' ability to not only navigate digital environments safely but also to develop competencies that support lifelong learning, self-regulation, and responsible engagement online. Excerpts such as *"Digital wellness and self-regulation"*, *"Critical thinking about online info"*, and *"Digital footprint management"* show that parents hope adolescents cultivate not just access but judgment and reflective skills in their digital lives. Research indicates that digital parenting practices which encourage active engagement and discussion about technology use are associated with stronger digital literacy and critical engagement among young people (Tan

et al., 2025). This body of work suggests that when parents promote awareness of digital risks and opportunities, adolescents are likelier to handle information responsibly and consider long-term consequences such as digital footprints and online reputation.

Parents' hopes encapsulated in "I would like them to use AI for more fulfilling and productive purpose" and "Guide and mentor... Model good habits" also highlight the role of parents as mentors and role models in fostering digital competence. The notion that parents should model positive digital behaviour and scaffold learning aligns with findings that parental self-efficacy and digital confidence influence mediation strategies parents with greater digital readiness tend to support proactive, communicative engagement rather than solely restrictive control (Fidan et al., 2023; Zhao et al., 2023). From my perspective, this theme underscores that parental aspirations go beyond safety to include preparing adolescents for a digital future through mentoring, critical thinking, and purposeful use of technology elements vital for cultivating responsible digital citizenship in an increasingly complex digital landscape.

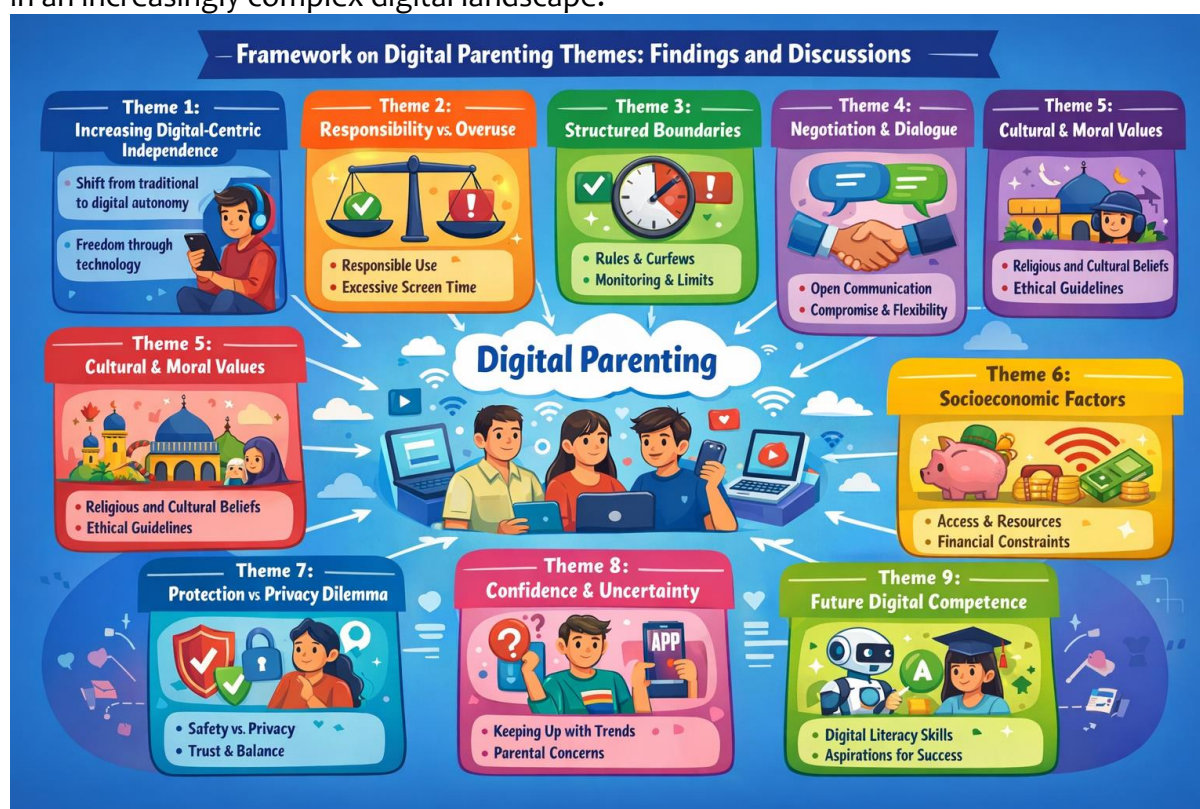


Figure 1: Framework on Parental Mediation of Adolescent Digital Autonomy

The framework visually represents the multifaceted nature of digital parenting and how parents mediate adolescent digital autonomy. At the centre, adolescent digital autonomy reflects the growing independence of teens through technology, surrounded by interconnected themes that influence this.

CONCLUSIONS

From this study, we conclude that adolescent independence is increasingly shaped by digital technologies, representing a shift from traditional forms of autonomy toward competence in navigating online environments. Parents perceive this transformation as both an expansion of adolescents' capabilities and a redefinition of independence, where access to information, digital agency, and connectivity are central. Digital autonomy has a

dual nature: it can enhance responsible decision-making and self-regulation, yet excessive or unmonitored use may lead to emotional dependence and reduced self-control. The findings also indicate that structured boundaries, negotiation, and dialogue are essential strategies for supporting balanced digital engagement, with conditional flexibility fostering relational cohesion and adaptive independence. Furthermore, cultural, religious, and moral values, together with socioeconomic conditions, strongly influence how parents mediate digital use, while rapid technological change creates both confidence and uncertainty in parental approaches. Overall, we conclude that parents aim to cultivate adolescents' digital literacy, critical thinking, and responsible engagement, emphasizing purposeful, safe, and productive technology use that supports long-term digital citizenship.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on these results, we recommend that parents foster guided digital autonomy by balancing independent decision-making with scaffolding that develops self-regulation and critical engagement. Hybrid strategies combining clear boundaries, monitoring, and open dialogue are encouraged, with collaborative rule-setting enhancing trust and internalized responsibility. Families should integrate cultural, moral, and religious frameworks to align technology use with values while addressing socioeconomic disparities through community and school support. Conditional flexibility, negotiation, and constructive dialogue help maintain relational harmony and adaptive independence. Digital wellbeing can be promoted through balanced screen time, critical reflection on online behaviour, and purposeful engagement with emerging technologies. Continuous parent development, modelling positive digital behaviour, and mentoring adolescents are essential for navigating rapid technological change and preparing young people for responsible, informed, and productive participation in digital environments.

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