



From Digital Control to Moral Self-Governance: A Theory of Amanah Internalization in Muslim Children

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Abstract

Children increasingly make morally relevant digital decisions beyond immediate parental supervision, creating a regulatory challenge that parental mediation research does not fully explain. This conceptual paper addresses the external guidance–internal governance gap by developing Amanah Internalization Theory (AIT), a middle-range theory of digital moral self-governance among Muslim children. Integrating parental mediation, self-determination theory, religious socialization, and moral self-regulation, the paper constructs a sequential explanatory mechanism linking parental moral guidance to independent digital regulation. AIT proposes that parental moral framing interprets digital agency as entrusted responsibility, increasing amanah salience during unsupervised digital decisions. Salient responsibility activates reflective accountability, which converts moral meaning into prospective self-evaluation and supports internalized digital restraint. Repeated responsibility-based restraint subsequently develops digital moral self-governance by reducing dependence on immediate parental surveillance. The theory further specifies autonomy support, family religiosity, and developmental capacity as boundary conditions. AIT extends digital parenting theory toward post-mediation internal governance and provides a testable framework for future construct validation, experimental mechanism testing, experience-sampling research, and longitudinal investigation of children's moral regulation in digital environments.

Keywords

internalization; digital moral self-governance; parental mediation; reflective accountability; religious socialization; self-determination theory

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1. Introduction

Children increasingly make digital decisions beyond the immediate presence of their parents. They decide whether to continue viewing questionable content, exceed agreed screen limits, conceal online activities, or engage with digital interactions that may conflict with family expectations. These decisions are theoretically important because digital environments create repeated situations in which children possess agency while parental observation is limited. Although digital parenting research has extensively examined how parents restrict, monitor, discuss, and co-use digital media with children, its dominant explanatory focus remains on parental intervention and its consequences for children's digital outcomes (Tan *et al.*, 2024, 2025). The more fundamental question, however, is what governs children's digital choices when parents are no longer immediately present.

Parental mediation theory has provided an influential framework for understanding how parents manage children's media use through restrictive, active, and socially interactive strategies (Clark, 2011; Livingstone & Helsper, 2008). This literature demonstrates that parental strategies can shape children's online behavior and reduce several forms of problematic media use. Yet parental mediation contains an inherent situational limitation. Digital access is increasingly personal, mobile, and recurrent, making continuous parental intervention impossible. Moreover, children's own self-regulatory capacities become increasingly relevant as digital use moves beyond direct parental supervision (Meeus *et al.*, 2019). Thus, a theory centered on what parents do does not fully explain how children independently govern morally relevant digital choices.

This limitation creates what we call the external guidance–internal governance transition problem. Parental rules may shape compliance while monitoring is present, but compliance does not necessarily indicate that the underlying moral meaning has been internalized. A child may avoid a prohibited digital action because detection is possible and still engage in the same action when surveillance disappears. The theoretical problem is therefore not simply whether parental mediation changes behavior. It is how externally communicated guidance becomes an internally activated source of regulation that operates during unsupervised digital decision episodes.

Self-determination theory offers an important explanation of how externally introduced regulations can become increasingly internalized and autonomously endorsed. Internalization occurs when individuals progressively accept the meaning and value of externally transmitted expectations, particularly under autonomy-supportive rather than psychologically controlling socialization conditions (Deci *et al.*, 1994; Grolnick *et al.*, 1997). However, this perspective is relatively content-neutral regarding the specific moral schema that becomes internalized. It explains the quality of regulation but less clearly specifies how a religiously meaningful responsibility becomes psychologically salient at the moment a child encounters a digital temptation.

Religious socialization research complements this explanation by showing that families play an important role in transmitting religious meanings and values across generations. Yet religious transmission should not be equated with behavioral activation. Knowing a religious value does not necessarily mean that the value becomes cognitively accessible when a morally relevant decision is made. Moral self-regulation research similarly suggests that moral standards influence conduct when they are connected to the self and activated in a given situation, whereas disengagement from those standards can weaken self-sanctioning processes (Aquino *et al.*, 2009; Bandura, 1999). These perspectives reveal a missing explanatory link between possessing a religious moral value and using that value to govern an immediate digital choice.

This paper argues that the Islamic concept of amanah provides a theoretically meaningful basis for explaining this missing link. Amanah is conceptualized here not as a general indicator of religiosity, but as an internalized moral responsibility schema through which digital freedom is interpreted as entrusted agency. The distinction is important. A child who interprets digital choice through surveillance may ask whether parents will discover the

behavior. A child whose sense of amanah is activated may instead evaluate what responsibility accompanies the freedom to choose. The key theoretical issue is therefore not merely whether children have been taught the meaning of amanah, but whether entrusted responsibility becomes salient during a specific digital decision.

To explain this process, we develop Amanah Internalization Theory (AIT). AIT proposes that parental moral framingshapes how children interpret digital agency by presenting freedom not simply in terms of rules and prohibitions but as entrusted responsibility. Such framing increases amanah salience, or the situational accessibility of entrusted moral responsibility during a digital choice. Amanah salience subsequently activates reflective accountability, through which children prospectively evaluate a contemplated action against an internally accepted sense of responsibility. This evaluative process supports internalized digital restraint, defined as self-initiated inhibition that does not depend on immediate surveillance. Through repeated unsupervised decision episodes, internalized restraint can develop into digital moral self-governance.

AIT makes three theoretical contributions. First, it extends parental mediation research from a control-centered explanation toward an account of post-mediation internal governance. Second, it specifies the moral content and activation process that remain underdeveloped in general theories of internalization by positioning amanah salience as the mechanism through which entrusted responsibility becomes behaviorally relevant. Third, it connects religious socialization and moral self-regulation through reflective accountability, explaining how religious moral meaning may become prospective self-evaluation rather than remain transmitted knowledge. Accordingly, this paper develops AIT to explain the mechanism through which parental moral framing is transformed into children's digital moral self-governance through amanah salience, reflective accountability, and internalized digital restraint. In doing so, it shifts the central problem of digital parenting from how parents maintain digital control to how children learn to govern digital freedom as an amanah.

2. Theoretical Foundations

2.1 Parental Mediation and the Limits of External Digital Guidance

Parental mediation theory explains how parents intervene in children's relationships with media through strategies such as restriction, active discussion, monitoring, and co-use. Its foundational logic positions parents as agents who structure children's media environments and influence exposure, interpretation, and behavior (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008; Valkenburg *et al.*, 1999). This logic remains central to contemporary digital parenting research, although mediation practices have expanded as children's digital activities become more individualized and interactive (Clark, 2011; Tan *et al.*, 2024). Accordingly, the dominant explanatory sequence is broadly parental strategy followed by child digital outcome.

The limitation of this sequence is not that parental mediation lacks influence, but that its explanatory power is strongest when parental intervention remains relevant to the behavioral episode. Restriction depends on established boundaries, monitoring relies on some visibility of children's activities, and active mediation originates in parent-child communication. Digital decisions, however, frequently occur when children must act without immediate parental input. Evidence that children's self-regulation is associated with problematic mobile device use already indicates that child-level regulatory processes matter alongside parental mediation (Meeus *et al.*, 2019). Yet mediation theory provides limited explanation of how prior parental guidance becomes an internally activated governing mechanism. This creates a post-mediation problem: what carries the regulatory influence of parenting into digital decisions in which the parent is absent?

2.2 Self-Determination Theory and the Internalization of Regulation

Self-determination theory (SDT) provides a stronger account of the transition from external regulation toward autonomous action. Rather than treating regulation as either externally imposed or fully intrinsic, SDT conceptualizes internalization as a process through which socially communicated expectations can become progressively accepted and integrated into the self (Ryan & Connell, 1989). Within family contexts, the manner in which expectations are communicated is critical. Autonomy-supportive parenting facilitates internalization by enabling children to understand and personally endorse the reasons underlying behavioral expectations, whereas psychological control can sustain externally pressured forms of compliance (Grolnick *et al.*, 1997; Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2010).

SDT therefore supplies an essential regulatory transition logic for explaining why some parental expectations continue to guide behavior without immediate enforcement. However, SDT is intentionally broad regarding the substantive content of what becomes internalized. Its central concern is the quality of motivation and regulation rather than the culturally or religiously specific moral meaning through which an individual interprets a particular choice. In the context of Muslim children's digital decisions, the unresolved issue is not only whether parental expectations become autonomously endorsed. A theory must also explain what moral schema organizes the child's interpretation of digital freedom and how that schema becomes accessible at the moment of choice. AIT builds on SDT's internalization logic but specifies entrusted responsibility as the moral content of internalization.

2.3 Religious Socialization and the Transmission-Activation Problem

Religious socialization explains how religious meanings, beliefs, and practices develop through interactions within families and broader social contexts. Rather than representing a simple transfer of beliefs from parent to child, religious socialization is increasingly understood as a relational and transactional process in which family context shapes how religious values are received and internalized (Flor & Knapp, 2001; Klingenberg & Sjö, 2019). The quality of family relationships and the autonomy surrounding religious engagement may therefore influence whether religiosity is experienced as personally endorsed or externally controlled (Brambilla *et al.*, 2015).

However, value internalization does not automatically establish situational behavioral relevance. A child may understand a religious principle and regard it as important while failing to invoke it during a specific digital decision. This distinction reveals a transmission–activation problem. Religious socialization primarily explains how religious meanings become part of children's developing belief systems; it less clearly specifies how a particular moral meaning becomes cognitively accessible within a fleeting choice environment. AIT addresses this gap by distinguishing the possession of amanah-related moral knowledge from amanah salience. The former concerns knowing or accepting entrusted responsibility; the latter concerns whether this responsibility becomes psychologically active when digital agency must be exercised.

2.4 Moral Self-Regulation and Reflective Accountability

Moral self-regulation provides a further explanatory component by locating moral agency partly within self-evaluative processes. Social cognitive accounts propose that internal moral standards can regulate conduct through anticipatory self-sanctions, while moral disengagement allows individuals to deactivate these regulatory processes (Bandura, 1991, 1999). Moral identity research similarly indicates that possessing moral meanings is insufficient; their centrality and situational activation influence whether they guide behavior (Aquino *et al.*, 2009; Aquino & Reed, 2002). These arguments support the proposition that internal moral knowledge must become behaviorally relevant through an evaluative mechanism.

Yet existing accounts do not specify how a religiously grounded sense of entrusted responsibility produces prospective evaluation in children's digital decisions. AIT

introduces reflective accountability to capture this process. Reflective accountability refers to an internally initiated evaluation of a contemplated digital action against an accepted sense of moral responsibility. It is prospective rather than retrospective: the mechanism operates before action rather than merely producing guilt after misconduct. It also differs from external accountability because the central evaluative question is no longer whether another person will detect or punish the behavior. Instead, the child becomes an evaluator of the compatibility between the contemplated action and the responsibility perceived as personally entrusted.

2.5 Integrating the Explanatory Fragments

The four theoretical traditions explain distinct components of the phenomenon but do not independently account for the full transition from parental guidance to digital moral self-governance. Parental mediation explains the provision of external digital guidance but underdevelops post-mediation regulation. SDT explains how external expectations can become more autonomously regulated but does not specify the religious moral content activated during a digital choice. Religious socialization explains the development and transmission of religious meanings but leaves a gap between value possession and situational activation. Moral self-regulation explains internal evaluative control but does not theorize entrusted religious responsibility as an antecedent of prospective digital self-evaluation.

AIT integrates these explanatory fragments around a specific causal problem. It proposes that parental moral framing gives digital agency a meaning of entrusted responsibility; amanah salience activates this meaning within a decision episode; reflective accountability converts salient responsibility into prospective moral evaluation; and internalized digital restraint translates evaluation into self-initiated behavioral inhibition. The theoretical contribution of AIT therefore lies not in combining four literatures as parallel perspectives, but in specifying a previously underdeveloped mechanism chain connecting external moral guidance with internal digital governance.

These explanatory limitations are not isolated gaps but complementary theoretical fragments. Their integration clarifies how AIT selectively extends existing perspectives to construct a mechanism linking external guidance with internal governance.

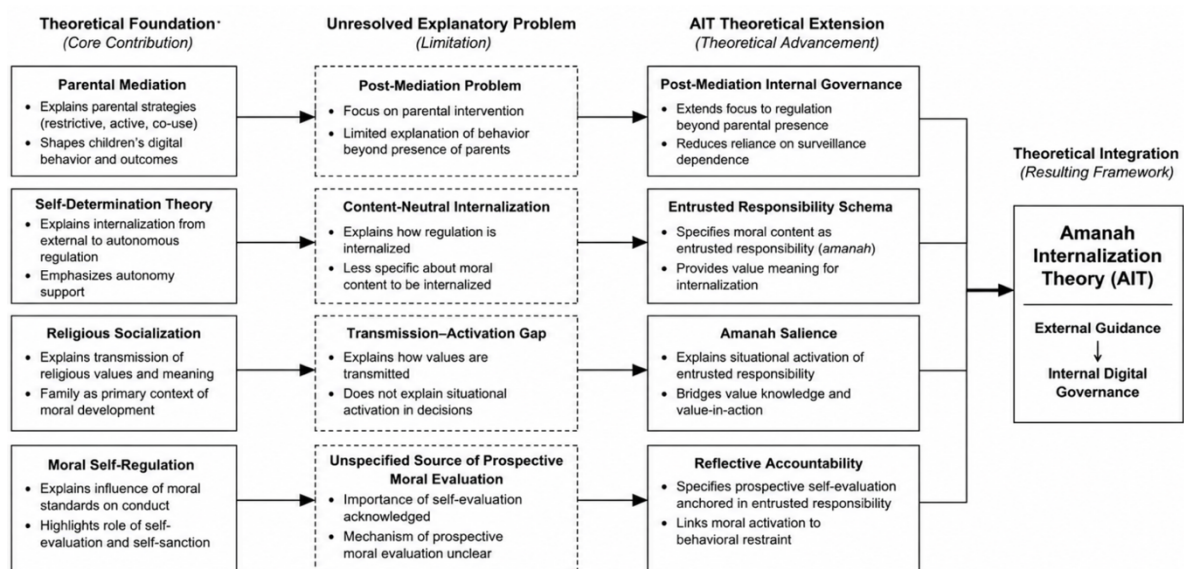


Figure 1. Integrative Theoretical Foundations of Amanah Internalization Theory

Source: Authors' conceptualization.

Figure 1 shows that AIT emerges from selective theoretical integration rather than simple theory accumulation. Each foundation contributes a distinct explanatory resource while leaving a specific unresolved problem. AIT converts these limitations into four extensions: post-mediation internal governance, entrusted responsibility schema, amanah salience, and

reflective accountability. Together, these extensions establish the theoretical architecture underlying the proposed causal mechanism of AIT.

Table 1. Comparative Explanatory Scope of Theoretical Foundations

Theoretical foundation	Primary explanatory focus	Explanatory strength	Unresolved problem for digital self-governance	AIT extension
Parental mediation	Parental digital intervention	Explains external guidance and mediation strategies	What regulates choices after immediate parental intervention recedes?	Post-mediation internal governance
Self-determination theory	Internalization of regulation	Explains transition toward autonomous regulation	What morally substantive schema is internalized and activated?	Amanah as entrusted responsibility schema
Religious socialization	Development and transmission of religious meanings	Explains family-based religious value formation	How does possessed moral meaning become active during a digital choice?	Amanah salience
Moral self-regulation	Internal standards and self-evaluation	Explains self-directed moral regulation	How does entrusted religious responsibility trigger prospective evaluation?	Reflective accountability

Source: Authors' synthesis based on Livingstone and Helsper (2008), Ryan and Connell (1989), Flor and Knapp (2001), Bandura (1991, 1999), Aquino and Reed (2002), and Aquino et al. (2009).

Table 1 clarifies that the central theoretical gap is neither the absence of a theory of parenting, internalization, religious transmission, nor self-regulation. Rather, the gap lies in the absence of an integrated explanation of how externally framed religious responsibility becomes situationally activated and converted into self-governing digital restraint. This explanatory gap provides the theoretical foundation for specifying the domain and constructs of Amanah Internalization Theory.

3. Domain and Construct Specification

3.1 Domain of Amanah Internalization Theory

Amanah Internalization Theory (AIT) is a middle-range theory developed to explain moral self-governance in unsupervised digital decision episodes among Muslim children. Its focal phenomenon is not children's general technology use, screen time, or digital well-being. Rather, AIT addresses situations in which a child possesses sufficient digital agency to select among available actions, immediate parental supervision is absent or psychologically weak, and the choice carries perceived moral relevance. The unit of analysis is therefore the individual digital decision episode rather than the family, parenting style, or child's aggregate level of media use.

This domain specification distinguishes AIT from conventional parental mediation models. Parental mediation typically examines strategies through which parents structure children's media experiences and manage digital opportunities or risks (Clark, 2011; Livingstone *et al.*, 2017). AIT begins analytically at a later point in the regulatory process: the moment at which prior parental guidance must operate without immediate parental intervention. The theory is therefore concerned with post-mediation regulation. Its explanatory question is whether and how a morally relevant digital choice becomes governed by an internalized sense of entrusted responsibility when external enforcement is not immediately available.

AIT applies under four conditions. First, the child must possess meaningful choice; technically blocked behavior does not constitute self-governance. Second, the digital decision must contain perceived moral significance rather than represent a purely functional

technology choice. Third, the child must have encountered the concept of entrusted responsibility through family religious socialization. Fourth, immediate external surveillance must be sufficiently limited for internal regulation to matter. Accordingly, AIT does not explain involuntary digital exposure, behavior determined entirely by technological restrictions, or digital decisions made by children who have not encountered amanah as a meaningful moral idea. These boundaries locate AIT within the intersection of digital parenting, religious socialization, and children's emerging moral agency.

3.2 Core Constructs

Parental moral framing refers to parental communication that interprets children's digital agency through moral meaning rather than solely through rules, risks, rewards, or sanctions. The construct concerns how parents explain the meaning of digital freedom. Whereas restrictive mediation may establish what children should or should not do, parental moral framing communicates why digital agency carries responsibility. This distinction is theoretically important because internalization is facilitated when socializing agents provide meaningful rationales that enable children to understand and endorse behavioral expectations (Deci *et al.*, 1994; Joussemet *et al.*, 2008). In AIT, parental moral framing constitutes the external interpretive input from which entrusted responsibility may become internalized.

Amanah salience is the situational cognitive accessibility of entrusted moral responsibility during a digital decision episode. It is distinct from religiosity, knowledge of amanah, and the general importance assigned to religious values. A child may understand amanah and still fail to invoke entrusted responsibility when encountering an attractive digital option. This distinction parallels the broader argument that moral meanings influence action partly through their accessibility and situational relevance (Aquino *et al.*, 2009). Amanah salience therefore captures an activation state: the extent to which a digital choice is presently interpreted through the lens of entrusted responsibility. It represents the first internal mechanism in AIT.

Reflective accountability refers to an internally initiated, prospective evaluation of a contemplated digital action against a personally accepted sense of moral responsibility. The construct differs from external accountability because it does not require anticipated evaluation by parents or other observers. It also differs from guilt, which may occur after an action, and from general moral identity, which concerns the importance of morality to one's self-concept (Aquino & Reed, 2002). Reflective accountability is episodic and evaluative. It captures the moment in which a child mentally examines whether an intended digital action is compatible with the responsibility perceived as entrusted to the self.

Internalized digital restraint is the self-initiated inhibition of an available digital action without immediate dependence on external surveillance or sanction. Restraint is conceptualized here neither as a stable trait nor merely as effortful impulse suppression. Contemporary self-control perspectives suggest that regulatory action can reflect how individuals value competing courses of action and structure responses to temptation (Berkman *et al.*, 2017; Fujita, 2011). Internalized digital restraint specifically captures the behavioral consequence of internally accepted moral regulation. A child may possess the technical ability and situational opportunity to act but voluntarily refrain because the contemplated behavior conflicts with an internally activated responsibility.

Finally, digital moral self-governance refers to the developing capacity to independently direct morally relevant digital choices according to internalized moral responsibility across decision episodes. It is distinct from a single act of restraint. Self-governance implies increasing regulatory consistency and reduced dependence on immediate parental control. The construct therefore represents an emergent regulatory capacity produced through repeated episodes in which moral responsibility is activated, reflectively evaluated, and behaviorally enacted. AIT treats digital moral self-governance as its principal theoretical outcome.

Table 2. Core Construct Definitions and Theoretical Roles in AIT

Construct	Definition	Distinction from adjacent constructs	Role in AIT
Parental moral framing	Parental interpretation of digital agency through moral responsibility	Differs from restriction and risk communication by explaining the moral meaning of digital freedom	External interpretive input
Amanah salience	Situational accessibility of entrusted moral responsibility during a digital choice	Differs from religiosity and knowledge of amanah because it captures episodic activation	Moral activation mechanism
Reflective accountability	Prospective self-evaluation of contemplated action against accepted moral responsibility	Differs from external accountability, guilt, and general moral identity	Internal evaluative mechanism
Internalized digital restraint	Self-initiated inhibition of an available digital action without immediate external enforcement	Differs from trait self-control and technologically imposed restriction	Behavioral regulatory mechanism
Digital moral self-governance	Capacity to independently regulate morally relevant digital choices across episodes	Differs from single acts of compliance or restraint	Theoretical outcome

Source: Authors' conceptualization synthesized from Deci et al. (1994), Aquino et al. (2009), Aquino and Reed (2002), Bandura (1991), Berkman et al. (2017), Fujita (2011), Ryan and Connell (1989), and Flor and Knapp (2001).

AIT rests on several assumptions that delimit its explanatory logic. Digital environments repeatedly create episodes of meaningful agency; external parental control is inherently incomplete; moral values regulate conduct only when they become relevant to the decision at hand; and sustained self-governance requires more than behavioral compliance. On these assumptions, AIT theorizes internal governance not as the disappearance of parental influence but as its transformation. Parental moral guidance becomes theoretically consequential when the parent no longer needs to be immediately present for entrusted responsibility to enter the child's interpretation, evaluation, and regulation of digital choice.

4. Building Amanah Internalization Theory

4.1 From Parental Rules to Moral Framing

Parental mediation commonly operates by structuring children's digital choices through restrictions, monitoring, and discussion. Such strategies can establish behavioral boundaries, but the existence of a boundary does not determine how children interpret it when enforcement recedes. A child may understand that certain digital behavior is prohibited while construing the prohibition primarily as a parental demand. Under this interpretation, the regulatory relevance of the rule remains connected to parental authority. The distinction between controlled and autonomous regulation suggests that the meaning attached to an externally communicated expectation is central to its internalization (Deci et al., 1994; Ryan & Connell, 1989).

AIT proposes that parental moral framing changes the interpretive basis of digital guidance. Rather than presenting digital boundaries solely in terms of permitted and prohibited actions, moral framing situates digital agency within a broader meaning of entrusted responsibility. The child is encouraged to understand access, privacy, choice, and technological competence as forms of agency for which responsibility is carried. Thus, the regulatory message shifts from “*you must not do this because I prohibit it*” toward “*the*

freedom to choose requires you to act responsibly.” This shift does not eliminate parental boundaries. It changes the meaning through which those boundaries may be internalized.

The mechanism is interpretive. Repeated moral framing creates an association between digital agency and amanah, increasing the likelihood that entrusted responsibility becomes accessible when children subsequently encounter independent choices. Religious values are more likely to become personally meaningful when family socialization facilitates their internalization rather than relying solely on externally controlled religiosity (Brambilla *et al.*, 2015; Flor & Knapp, 2001). Accordingly, AIT proposes:

Proposition 1 (P1).

Parental moral framing positively influences children's amanah salience during unsupervised digital decision episodes.

4.2 Amanah Salience as a Moral Activation Mechanism

Internalized moral knowledge cannot regulate every action continuously. Individuals possess multiple values, goals, and standards, only some of which become relevant within a particular situation. Moral identity research similarly indicates that moral meanings influence behavior through an interaction between personal moral centrality and situational activation (Aquino *et al.*, 2009). AIT applies this activation logic to entrusted responsibility by distinguishing between having a concept of amanah and experiencing amanah as salient during a digital choice.

This distinction addresses the transmission–activation problem identified earlier. Religious socialization may enable a child to understand that human agency entails responsibility. However, knowledge remains behaviorally dormant if the child interprets an immediate digital opportunity only through entertainment, curiosity, social reward, or fear of detection. Amanah salience occurs when entrusted responsibility enters the child's interpretation of the decision itself. The digital episode is no longer construed merely as an opportunity to act but as an occasion in which the use of agency has moral significance.

AIT therefore treats amanah salience as an interpretive switch between transmitted moral meaning and active moral regulation. When amanah is not salient, the child may evaluate whether a behavior is technically possible or likely to be detected. When amanah becomes salient, the evaluative frame changes toward responsibility. Importantly, salience does not guarantee restraint. It makes entrusted responsibility psychologically available for evaluation. The next mechanism must convert that activated meaning into an examination of contemplated action.

This conversion occurs through reflective accountability. Amanah salience identifies the self as a bearer of responsibility, thereby creating an internal basis for asking whether an intended digital action is consistent with that responsibility. AIT consequently proposes:

Proposition 2 (P2).

Amanah salience positively influences reflective accountability during unsupervised digital decision episodes.

4.3 Reflective Accountability and Internalized Digital Restraint

Moral self-regulation depends partly on the capacity to evaluate conduct against internal standards. In social cognitive theory, self-regulatory processes enable individuals to monitor and judge conduct and respond through self-reactive mechanisms; moral disengagement, conversely, weakens regulation by separating behavior from internal moral sanctions (Bandura, 1991, 1999). AIT extends this evaluative logic by specifying how entrusted responsibility can initiate prospective moral evaluation before a digital action occurs.

Reflective accountability begins when a child considers a contemplated action in relation to the responsibility perceived as personally entrusted. Its defining feature is prospective evaluation. The child need not first violate a digital boundary and subsequently experience guilt. Instead, the contemplated behavior becomes an object of internal examination before

enactment. This process creates psychological distance between immediate digital attraction and behavioral response, allowing the child to evaluate whether acting is compatible with an accepted responsibility.

Reflective accountability also alters the perceived locus of evaluation. Under surveillance-based regulation, behavioral calculation centers on external consequences: whether parents will know, whether a device will reveal activity, or whether punishment will follow. Under reflective accountability, the self participates in moral evaluation. This does not imply that children become entirely independent of social or religious influences. Rather, previously socialized moral meanings have acquired sufficient internal relevance to support self-evaluation. The regulatory question shifts from anticipated detection toward perceived responsibility.

AIT argues that this shift is critical for internalized digital restraint. Self-control need not consist solely of effortfully suppressing a dominant impulse. It may also reflect how competing actions are valued and interpreted (Berkman *et al.*, 2017; Fujita, 2011). Reflective accountability changes the value structure of the choice by making violation costly in terms of inconsistency with entrusted responsibility. Restraint can therefore become self-initiated even when the prohibited action remains technically available and externally undetectable.

Proposition 3 (P3).

Reflective accountability positively influences internalized digital restraint by shifting digital choice evaluation from anticipated external consequences toward internally generated moral evaluation.

4.4 From Episodic Restraint to Digital Moral Self-Governance

A single act of restraint does not constitute self-governance. Children may occasionally resist a digital temptation because of mood, fatigue, or competing interests. AIT therefore distinguishes episodic internalized restraint from digital moral self-governance, which represents a developing capacity to regulate morally relevant digital choices across decision episodes.

The transition from restraint to self-governance is based on regulatory repetition. Self-regulation research suggests that successful regulation is not adequately explained by repeated acts of effortful resistance alone; patterns and strategies that reduce dependence on immediate impulse control can support more stable outcomes (Duckworth *et al.*, 2016; Galla & Duckworth, 2015). Within AIT, repeated episodes of amanah-based restraint reinforce a regulatory pattern in which entrusted responsibility becomes a recurring basis for digital choice. The child increasingly learns to approach morally relevant digital situations through an internally available governance logic.

This process gradually reduces surveillance dependence. Reduced dependence does not mean that parents become irrelevant. Parental socialization remains historically important to the development of the moral schema. Rather, its regulatory influence is transformed from immediate behavioral control into an internalized basis for independent decision-making. Digital moral self-governance therefore represents the continuation of moral socialization through the child's own regulatory agency.

Proposition 4 (P4).

Repeated internalized digital restraint positively influences digital moral self-governance by reducing dependence on immediate parental surveillance across digital decision episodes.

4.5 Boundary Conditions of Amanah Internalization

AIT does not assume that parental moral framing uniformly produces self-governance. Internalization depends on the socialization context and the child's capacity to process moral responsibility. Three boundary conditions are particularly central: autonomy support, family religiosity, and developmental capacity.

First, autonomy support conditions the relationship between parental moral framing and amanah salience. Moral language can itself be communicated in controlling ways. Parents may invoke religious obligations primarily to pressure, threaten, or induce compliance. SDT suggests that controlling socialization can sustain externally pressured regulation, whereas autonomy-supportive communication facilitates the personal endorsement of behavioral expectations (Joussemet *et al.*, 2008; Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2010). Thus, simply using the language of amanah does not constitute effective moral framing. Children must be provided with meaningful rationales and sufficient psychological space to understand entrusted responsibility as relevant to their own agency.

Proposition 5 (P5).

The positive influence of parental moral framing on amanah salience is stronger when parental communication is autonomy-supportive rather than controlling.

Second, family religiosity conditions the moral legitimacy of amanah. AIT does not conceptualize religiosity as the direct cause of digital restraint. Such an argument would collapse amanah internalization into a generic religion–behavior relationship. Instead, family religiosity provides a meaning context within which amanah may possess greater symbolic coherence and normative legitimacy. Religious development is embedded within family and relational contexts, and the internalization of parental religious values varies with the context of transmission (Hardy *et al.*, 2022; Myers, 1996). When entrusted responsibility is embedded in a coherent family religious meaning system, its activation should more readily support internal moral evaluation.

Proposition 6 (P6).

The positive influence of amanah salience on reflective accountability is stronger when amanah possesses greater moral legitimacy within the child's family religiosity context.

Third, developmental capacity conditions whether reflective accountability can be translated into restraint. Reflective accountability requires children to hold a prospective action in mind, relate it to an internal moral standard, and consider the implications of acting before behavioral enactment. The development of conscience and internalization is not reducible to cognitive knowledge alone and changes with children's emerging capacities for self-regulation and moral agency (Kochanska, 1994). Younger or developmentally less prepared children may experience amanah as meaningful yet have greater difficulty sustaining prospective evaluation when confronted with immediate digital attraction.

AIT therefore treats age as an imperfect proxy for the more theoretically relevant condition: developmental capacity for prospective moral evaluation. Children of similar chronological ages may differ in their ability to interrupt immediate action and reflect on responsibility. Consequently:

Proposition 7 (P7).

The positive influence of reflective accountability on internalized digital restraint is stronger when children possess greater developmental capacity for prospective moral evaluation.

Together, these propositions specify AIT as a sequential but contingent mechanism. Parental moral framing provides the interpretive basis for entrusted responsibility; amanah salience activates that responsibility within a digital decision; reflective accountability converts activated responsibility into prospective moral evaluation; and internalized digital restraint enacts that evaluation behaviorally. Repetition across decision episodes supports digital moral self-governance. However, this mechanism is strengthened or constrained by the autonomy of parental communication, the moral legitimacy of amanah within family religious life, and children's developmental capacity to engage in prospective evaluation.

Table 3. Summary of AIT Propositions and Theoretical Logic

	Propositionn & Theoretical relationship	Core mechanism	Boundary logic
P1	Parental moral framing → Amanah salience	Digital agency is interpreted as entrusted responsibility	—
P2	Amanah salience → Reflective accountability	Activated responsibility initiates prospective self-evaluation	—
P3	Reflective accountability → Internalized digital restraint	Evaluation shifts from detection to internal moral responsibility	—
P4	Repeated internalized digital restraint → Digital moral self-governance	Regulatory repetition reduces surveillance dependence	—
P5	Autonomy support moderates PMF → Amanah salience	Personal endorsement strengthens internalization	Autonomy-supportive communication
P6	Family religiosity moderates Amanah salience → Reflective accountability	Religious meaning context strengthens moral legitimacy	Family religiosity
P7	Developmental capacity moderates Reflective accountability → Internalized digital restraint	Prospective evaluation enables responsibility-based inhibition	Developmental capacity

Source: Authors' theoretical development based on the integration of Parental Mediation Theory, Self-Determination Theory, Religious Socialization Theory, and Moral Self-Regulation Theory.

The propositions collectively locate AIT's primary theoretical novelty in the transition from amanah salience to reflective accountability. Parental moral framing is necessary as an external socialization input, and digital self-governance is the ultimate regulatory outcome. The distinctive explanatory contribution of AIT, however, lies in specifying how entrusted responsibility becomes situationally active and is converted into internal moral evaluation. This mechanism explains why religious moral knowledge may sometimes remain behaviorally dormant and, under other conditions, become a basis for governing digital freedom without immediate parental control.

5. Formalization and Theoretical Implications

5.1 Amanah Internalization Theory as a Middle-Range Explanation

Amanah Internalization Theory (AIT) explains how externally communicated moral meaning becomes an internally activated basis for children's self-governance in unsupervised digital decisions. Its central claim is that parental influence can persist beyond immediate parental presence when the meaning of digital agency is internalized as entrusted responsibility. AIT therefore does not conceptualize self-governance as independence from socialization. Rather, self-governance emerges through the transformation of socialized moral guidance into an internal regulatory mechanism.

AIT is deliberately specified as a middle-range theory. It does not seek to explain religious internalization across all behavioral domains or propose a universal theory of children's self-regulation. Its explanatory domain concerns Muslim children who possess meaningful digital agency, have encountered amanah within family moral socialization, and make morally relevant digital choices under limited immediate parental supervision. Within this domain, AIT explains a specific transition: how parental moral framing becomes digital moral self-governance.

The theory rests on a distinction between regulatory presence and physical presence. Parental mediation commonly assumes some form of parental regulatory involvement, whether through rules, communication, monitoring, or technological restriction. AIT argues that parental physical absence does not necessarily imply the disappearance of parental moral influence. Through internalization, the interpretive meaning previously

communicated by parents may become psychologically present within the child's own decision process. This argument builds on the broader internalization principle that externally introduced values can become increasingly self-endorsed (Grolnick *et al.*, 1997; Ryan & Connell, 1989). AIT specifies the mechanism through which this transformation may occur around the religious meaning of entrusted responsibility.

5.2 The Amanah Internalization Mechanism

The complete AIT mechanism consists of three theoretical transitions. The first is a meaning transition from rule compliance to entrusted agency. Parental moral framing changes the interpretive meaning of digital freedom by connecting children's capacity to choose with responsibility for how that capacity is exercised. This transition is important because behavioral expectations accompanied by meaningful rationales are more conducive to internalization than demands experienced primarily as external pressure (Deci *et al.*, 1994). Digital boundaries thus become more than parental instructions; they are connected to a broader moral understanding of agency.

The second is a regulatory transition from external evaluation to reflective accountability. Amanah salience makes entrusted responsibility accessible within a specific digital decision. Once responsibility becomes salient, the child can prospectively evaluate a contemplated action against an accepted moral obligation. The evaluative center consequently moves away from exclusive concern with detection and external sanctions. This does not remove external moral sources from the regulatory process. Instead, their meaning has become sufficiently internalized to participate in self-evaluation, consistent with theories that locate moral regulation in the activation of internal standards and self-reactive processes (Aquino *et al.*, 2009; Bandura, 1991).

The third is a governance transition from episodic restraint to reduced surveillance dependence. Reflective accountability supports restraint in situations where an unwanted digital action remains available. Repeated responsibility-based restraint can gradually establish a pattern of independent moral regulation. AIT does not assume that repetition mechanically produces virtue or permanent self-control. Rather, repeated decision episodes provide opportunities for children to enact entrusted responsibility as a recurring basis for choice. Digital moral self-governance emerges when this regulatory logic becomes sufficiently consistent to guide morally relevant choices without requiring immediate parental enforcement.

Together, these three transitions define AIT as a sequential process through which externally framed moral responsibility is progressively transformed into an internal basis for digital self-governance.

The mechanism is contingent rather than universal. Autonomy-supportive parental communication strengthens the possibility that moral framing will be personally received rather than experienced as imposed religious control. Family religiosity provides a meaning context that can strengthen the moral legitimacy of amanah. Developmental capacity shapes children's ability to sustain prospective moral evaluation before action. These conditions define when the proposed mechanism should possess stronger or weaker explanatory power.

5.3 Formal Theory Statement

Amanah Internalization Theory proposes that Muslim children's digital moral self-governance develops when parental moral framing transforms digital agency into a psychologically meaningful form of entrusted responsibility. When this responsibility becomes salient during an unsupervised digital decision, it activates reflective accountability through which children prospectively evaluate contemplated actions against internally accepted moral obligations. Reflective accountability supports internalized digital restraint by shifting the basis of regulation from anticipated external detection toward self-initiated moral evaluation. Across repeated decision episodes, responsibility-based restraint reduces dependence on immediate parental surveillance and supports digital moral self-governance.

This mechanism is more likely to operate when parental moral framing is autonomy-supportive, amanah possesses moral legitimacy within the family religious context, and children possess sufficient developmental capacity for prospective moral evaluation.

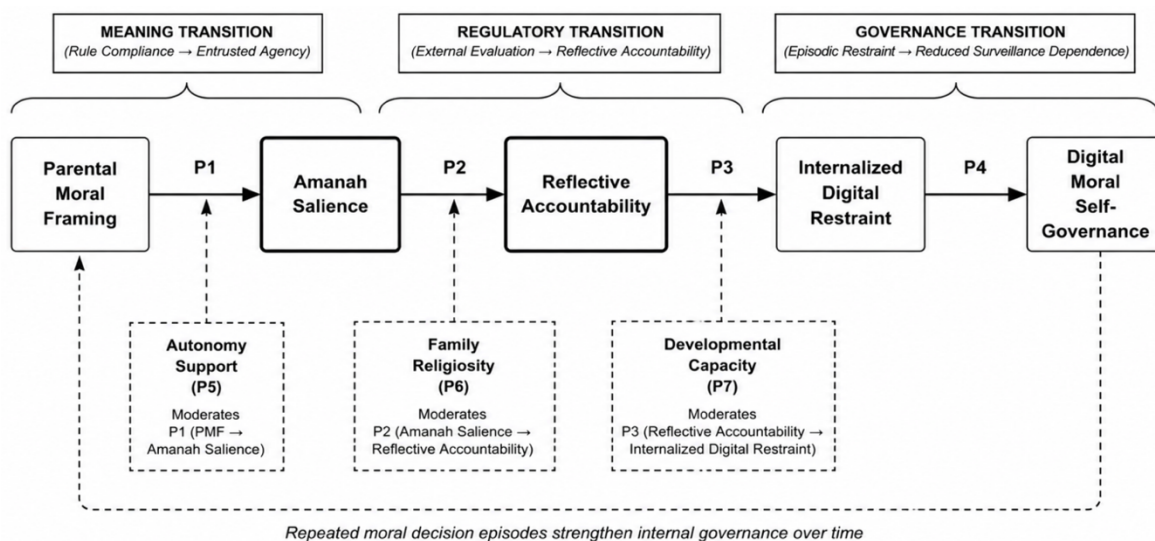


Figure 2. Amanah Internalization Theory of Digital Moral Self-Governance
Source: Authors' conceptualization.

Figure 2 formalizes AIT as three connected transitions from moral framing to self-governance. Amanah salience activates entrusted responsibility, while reflective accountability converts this activation into prospective moral evaluation and restraint. The mechanism develops toward reduced surveillance dependence through repeated decision episodes. Autonomy support, family religiosity, and developmental capacity condition specific relationships, defining the circumstances under which the internalization process becomes theoretically stronger.

The figure's theoretical function is to make visible the distinction between socialization input, activation mechanism, evaluative mechanism, behavioral mechanism, and governance outcome. In particular, the model positions amanah salience and reflective accountability as sequential mechanisms rather than interchangeable indicators of religiosity or moral orientation.

5.4 Theoretical Implications

AIT first extends parental mediation theory by introducing the problem of post-mediation internal governance. Existing mediation research has generated substantial knowledge concerning how parental strategies influence children's media experiences and outcomes (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008; Tan *et al.*, 2024). AIT shifts the explanatory endpoint. The theoretical success of mediation should not be assessed solely by children's behavior in relation to current parental strategies; it may also concern whether prior guidance develops a regulatory basis that remains operative when immediate intervention recedes. AIT thus introduces surveillance dependence as an implicit limitation of control-centered digital parenting explanations.

Second, AIT extends internalization theory by specifying both the moral content and situational activation of internalized regulation. SDT explains why autonomy-supportive contexts facilitate more autonomous forms of regulation (Ryan & Deci, 2020; Vansteenkiste *et al.*, 2020), but AIT identifies entrusted responsibility as the substantive schema organizing a particular class of moral digital decisions. More importantly, amanah salience explains why internalized meaning may be influential in one decision episode yet dormant in another. AIT therefore adds an activation layer between value internalization and behavioral regulation.

Third, AIT redirects religious socialization theory from value transmission toward value-in-action mechanisms. Religious socialization research recognizes that religious development

is relational and contextually embedded (Flor & Knapp, 2001; Klingenberg & Sjö, 2019). However, explaining how children acquire religious meaning is theoretically different from explaining how religious meaning governs a fleeting behavioral choice. By distinguishing amanah knowledge from amanah salience, AIT proposes that religious moral socialization becomes behaviorally consequential through situational activation rather than value possession alone.

Finally, AIT contributes to moral self-regulation by introducing reflective accountability as a prospective evaluative mechanism anchored in entrusted responsibility. Existing theories establish the importance of internal standards, moral identity, and self-sanctioning processes for moral agency (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Bandura, 1991). Reflective accountability specifies a narrower process: the child evaluates an intended action before enactment because salient entrusted responsibility makes the self-accountable within the decision process. The concept therefore links moral activation with restraint without reducing regulation to fear of punishment or generalized trait self-control.

5.5 Future Research Agenda

AIT requires empirical development rather than immediate assumption of construct validity. A first priority is to establish whether amanah salience and reflective accountability are empirically distinguishable from religiosity, moral identity, autonomous regulation, and self-control. Scale development should combine qualitative construct elicitation among Muslim families with subsequent psychometric validation. Experimental designs could then manipulate moral framing and decision contexts to examine whether amanah salience activates prospective evaluation.

Longitudinal research is particularly important because AIT theorizes digital moral self-governance as an emergent capacity rather than an immediate outcome. Repeated-measures and experience-sampling designs could capture digital decision episodes and test whether responsibility-based restraint predicts declining surveillance dependence over time. Developmental comparisons should examine whether the mechanism changes across childhood and adolescence rather than treating chronological age as a simple control variable.

Table 4. Future Research Directions for Amanah Internalization Theory

Research Stream	Core Theoretical Question	Suggested Approach	Theoretical Extension
Construct validation	Are amanah salience and reflective accountability distinct constructs?	Qualitative elicitation and scale development	Construct precision
Mechanism testing	Does moral framing activate amanah and reflective accountability?	Experiments and process mediation	Causal mechanism
Episodic regulation	How does AIT operate during actual digital choices?	Experience sampling	Decision-episode logic
Governance development	Does repeated internalized restraint reduce surveillance dependence?	Longitudinal research	Temporal theory
Boundary testing	When and for whom does AIT operate?	Developmental and family-context comparisons	Theory boundaries

Source: Authors' proposed future research agenda.

Future research should also test AIT's boundaries rather than prematurely universalizing the theory. Its constructs may require modification in religious traditions organized around different understandings of moral agency and accountability. Such comparative research could eventually clarify which components of AIT are specifically amanah-based and which represent more general mechanisms of moral internalization. The immediate theoretical

task, however, is narrower: to explain how entrusted responsibility can become an internally activated basis for Muslim children's digital moral self-governance.

6. Conclusion

Children's digital lives increasingly require independent decisions in situations where parents cannot remain continuously present. This reality creates a theoretical challenge for digital parenting research. Parental mediation provides important explanations of how parents structure, restrict, monitor, and discuss children's digital engagement, but the persistence of parental influence beyond immediate intervention remains less clearly explained. The central problem is therefore not simply how parents regulate children's digital behavior, but how external moral guidance becomes an internal capacity for governing digital freedom.

This paper developed Amanah Internalization Theory (AIT) to address this external guidance–internal governance transition problem. AIT proposes that parental moral framing can change the meaning of digital agency by presenting freedom of choice as entrusted responsibility. When this meaning becomes situationally accessible as amanah salience, children are more likely to engage in reflective accountability by prospectively evaluating contemplated digital actions against internally accepted moral responsibility. Reflective accountability, in turn, supports internalized digital restraint without requiring immediate surveillance or anticipated external sanctions. Across repeated digital decision episodes, such restraint can contribute to digital moral self-governance by reducing dependence on direct parental control.

The theoretical significance of AIT lies in explaining the mechanisms connecting previously fragmented explanatory traditions. Parental mediation identifies external guidance, self-determination theory explains the internalization of regulation, religious socialization accounts for the development of religious meaning, and moral self-regulation explains internal evaluative processes. AIT integrates these insights around a narrower explanatory problem by specifying amanah salience as a moral activation mechanism and reflective accountability as a prospective evaluative mechanism. The theory thereby distinguishes possessing religious moral knowledge from activating that knowledge as a basis for self-governing action.

AIT does not imply that parental control becomes unnecessary or that religious socialization automatically generates digital restraint. Its explanatory logic is bounded by the nature of parental communication, the moral legitimacy of amanah within family religious life, and children's developmental capacity for prospective evaluation. Its central theoretical claim is more specific: parental moral influence can persist beyond parental presence when entrusted responsibility becomes internally available to interpret, evaluate, and regulate digital choice. Digital parenting, from this perspective, concerns not only the governance of children's technology use but also the development of children capable of governing digital agency as an amanah.

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