



Beyond Screen-Time Rules: A Theory of Faith-Anchored Digital Boundary Legitimation in Muslim Families

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Article History:

Submitted: 27-02-2026
Approved: 17-04-2026
Published: 04-05-2026



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Abstract

Digital parenting increasingly requires families to establish boundaries for children's participation in rapidly changing digital environments, yet existing parental mediation research explains intervention strategies more effectively than why particular digital limits become normatively legitimate. This conceptual paper addresses this explanatory gap by developing Faith-Anchored Digital Boundary Theory (FADBT), a middle-range theory of digital boundary legitimation in Muslim parent-child dyads. Through an integrative theoretical synthesis of parental mediation, self-determination, family-rule legitimacy, and religious socialization scholarship, the paper reconceptualizes sacred values as normative anchors that simultaneously delimit negotiability and provide transcendent justification for digital boundaries. FADBT proposes that sacred anchoring generates legitimacy through differentiated negotiability, bounded voice, and autonomy-supportive boundary translation, whereas controlling translation can trigger coercion attribution and weaken legitimacy. The theory advances digital parenting scholarship by shifting attention from mediation strategy classification to legitimacy-generating mechanisms, explaining how normative stability can coexist with meaningful child participation. It offers a falsifiable framework for future dyadic, experimental, and longitudinal research on digital boundary legitimacy and compliance across religious family contexts.

Keywords

sacred anchoring; digital boundary legitimacy; parental mediation; bounded voice; self-determination theory; religious socialization

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1. Introduction

Digital parenting can no longer be reduced to managing children's screen time. Digital technologies are embedded in learning, communication, entertainment, and social interaction, requiring parents to continuously establish limits concerning devices, platforms, content, privacy, and acceptable online behavior. Parental mediation research has identified restrictive, active, and co-use strategies through which parents manage children's digital participation (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008; Nikken & Jansz, 2014). More recent scholarship further shows that digital parenting is adaptive and shaped by children's digital skills and rapidly changing media environments (Livingstone *et al.*, 2017; Modecki *et al.*, 2022; Nagy *et al.*, 2023). Yet an unresolved question remains: why are some digital limits accepted as valid boundaries, whereas others are experienced as arbitrary parental restrictions?

This question matters because digital rules operate within ongoing parent–child relationships. Children and adolescents interpret, question, and negotiate parental expectations rather than simply receive them. Similar parental restrictions may generate different levels of conflict, acceptance, or resistance (Beyens & Beullens, 2017), while parents and adolescents may evaluate the same mediation practice differently (Beyens & Valkenburg, 2019). Family-rule research similarly shows that young people increasingly claim voice and domain-specific autonomy in interactions with parents (Parkin & Kuczynski, 2012; Smetana & Rote, 2019). The relevant theoretical problem is therefore not only how parents regulate digital use, but how digital boundaries acquire sufficient legitimacy to guide children's behavior.

Parental mediation theory provides an important explanation of how parents intervene in children's media use. It has progressively expanded from traditional media mediation to internet and digital parenting strategies (Clark, 2011; Livingstone *et al.*, 2017; Livingstone & Helsper, 2008). Meta-analytic findings also indicate that parental mediation can influence media-related outcomes, although its effects vary across strategies and contexts (Chen & Shi, 2019; Collier *et al.*, 2016). However, the literature remains predominantly strategy-centered. Its primary concern is whether parents restrict, discuss, monitor, or jointly engage with children's media use. This approach underexplains why comparable digital rules may be accepted in one relational context but resisted or circumvented in another. Evidence concerning restrictive and inconsistent mediation suggests that strategy form alone is insufficient to explain conflict and compliance (Lee, 2013; Yang *et al.*, 2022).

Autonomy and family-rule scholarship offers a complementary perspective. Self-determination theory argues that autonomy-supportive socialization facilitates more volitional regulation, whereas controlling practices can weaken internalization (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Vansteenkiste *et al.*, 2020). Within parenting research, rationale provision and perspective acknowledgment can shape how children interpret parental guidance (Joussemet *et al.*, 2008; Valkenburg & Peter, 2013). Research on family rules also indicates that compliance is partly influenced by perceived parental legitimacy and procedural fairness (Grusec & Goodnow, 1994; Thomas *et al.*, 2020). Nevertheless, these perspectives provide limited explanation of rules grounded in values that family members perceive as sacred, transcendent, and not entirely open to interpersonal bargaining.

This limitation is particularly visible in Muslim families. Religious socialization is increasingly understood as negotiated and adaptive rather than as simple unilateral transmission. Muslim youth construct religious meaning within changing social environments, while digital spaces diversify sources of Islamic knowledge and moral interpretation (Askar *et al.*, 2025; Donlic, 2023; Kholili *et al.*, 2024; Timol, 2020). Muslim ethical identities are also formed through relational processes of interpretation and meaning-making (Moos & Shaikh, 2024). However, existing research does not adequately explain how sacred commitments shape the negotiation of specific digital boundaries between parents and children.

This omission produces a distinct theoretical tension. Sacred values may strengthen digital boundaries by providing justification beyond parental preference. At the same time, sacred

authority may narrow what family members regard as negotiable. If every aspect of a digital boundary is treated as non-negotiable, child voice may become symbolic and the boundary may be interpreted as coercive. Conversely, if all boundary elements remain fully negotiable, sacred anchoring may lose its normative force. Existing parental mediation, autonomy-support, and family-rule perspectives do not sufficiently explain this sacredness–negotiability tension.

This paper addresses that gap by theorizing sacred values as normative anchors that alter the process of digital boundary legitimation. We argue that sacred anchoring performs two functions. First, it delimits negotiability by distinguishing the underlying normative principle from the specific configuration and implementation of a digital boundary. Second, it provides transcendent justification by locating the perceived source of the boundary beyond unilateral parental preference. However, sacred anchoring does not automatically generate legitimacy. Its effects depend on meaningful child voice within negotiable boundary dimensions and on parents' ability to translate sacred commitments into comprehensible digital rationales through autonomy-supportive communication.

We therefore develop Faith-Anchored Digital Boundary Theory (FADBT), a middle-range theory explaining how sacred anchors, negotiability delimitation, voice inclusion, and autonomy-supportive boundary translation shape digital boundary legitimacy and subsequent compliance in Muslim parent–child dyads. The theory contributes by shifting parental mediation research from strategy classification toward boundary legitimation, introducing differentiated negotiability and bounded voice into autonomy and family-rule scholarship, and repositioning sacred values as causal components of legitimacy formation rather than contextual indicators of religiosity. The objective is to explain when faith-anchored digital limits become legitimate relational boundaries rather than coercive parental controls.

2. Theoretical Foundations

2.1 Parental Mediation Theory

Parental mediation theory provides the dominant conceptual vocabulary for explaining how parents intervene in children's media use. Early internet mediation research distinguished restrictive practices from active forms of guidance and joint media engagement, thereby extending parental mediation beyond traditional television contexts (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008). Clark (2011) subsequently argued that digital environments require a broader understanding of mediation because parental practices are embedded in family communication, technological change, and wider social conditions. This expansion is reflected in increasingly differentiated measures of mediation strategies (Nikken & Jansz, 2014) and in evidence that parents adapt their practices according to children's characteristics, perceived risks, and family circumstances (Nikken & Schols, 2015). Digital skills further shape emerging mediation strategies because parents must balance online opportunities against potential risks rather than simply restrict access (Livingstone *et al.*, 2017).

Despite this development, parental mediation scholarship remains predominantly organized around strategy classification. Its central explanatory logic asks what parents do and whether particular forms of mediation produce desirable outcomes. Meta-analytic research demonstrates that mediation can influence media-related outcomes, but effects differ according to the strategy and outcome considered (Chen & Shi, 2019; Collier *et al.*, 2016). Restrictive mediation, for example, may reduce certain forms of exposure without necessarily generating acceptance of the underlying rule (Lee, 2013). Parent–child conflict surrounding tablet use also varies with mediation practices (Beyens & Beullens, 2017), while parents and adolescents may report the same mediation processes differently (Beyens & Valkenburg, 2019). Inconsistent mediation further complicates the relationship between parental intervention and problematic smartphone use (Yang *et al.*, 2022). These findings reveal an explanatory limitation: identifying a mediation strategy does not establish why a child

regards the resulting digital limit as normatively valid. Parental mediation theory therefore explains forms of intervention more precisely than processes of boundary legitimation.

2.2 Autonomy Support and Internalization

Self-determination theory (SDT) shifts attention from external behavioral regulation to the quality of children's motivation and internalization. Autonomy-supportive socialization facilitates volitional regulation by acknowledging perspectives, providing meaningful rationales, and minimizing unnecessary control, whereas controlling practices can frustrate psychological needs and produce less autonomous forms of regulation (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Parenting scholarship informed by SDT similarly suggests that parents can facilitate autonomous self-regulation when guidance supports children's developing sense of agency (Grolnick, 2009; Joussemet *et al.*, 2008). More recent developments in basic psychological need theory reinforce the distinction between need support and psychologically controlling environments (Vansteenkiste *et al.*, 2020).

This logic has particular relevance to media mediation. Valkenburg & Peter (2013) differentiated autonomy-supportive from controlling parental media mediation, demonstrating the importance of how parental guidance is perceived rather than merely whether mediation occurs. Autonomy-related parenting profiles also produce different developmental consequences for adolescents (Teuber *et al.*, 2022). Yet applying autonomy-supportive logic to faith-grounded digital boundaries reveals a conceptual ambiguity. Existing explanations often contrast autonomy support with control without sufficiently distinguishing what is open to negotiation. A family rule may contain an underlying normative principle, a specific boundary configuration, and an implementation arrangement. These elements need not possess equal negotiability. Treating negotiability as an implicit binary—rules are either imposed or open to choice—underexplains situations in which parents regard a sacred principle as stable while remaining willing to negotiate how that principle is translated into digital practice. Thus, autonomy scholarship explains why coercion can weaken internalization but offers limited conceptual precision for theorizing bounded agency within normatively delimited domains.

2.3 Family Rules and Parental Legitimacy

Family-rule scholarship further demonstrates that parental expectations acquire meaning through children's interpretations of authority and relational processes. Parenting practices operate within broader relational contexts that influence how specific parental actions are understood (Darling & Steinberg, 1993). Grusec & Goodnow (1994) similarly argued that value internalization depends partly on children's accurate perception and acceptance of parental messages. Rules are therefore not behaviorally consequential simply because parents communicate them; children interpret both their content and the relational conditions surrounding their enactment.

Research on adolescent–parent relationships extends this argument by showing that young people actively evaluate parental jurisdiction across different domains (Smetana & Daddis, 2002; Smetana & Rote, 2019). Adolescents may recognize parental authority in some matters while resisting it in areas perceived as increasingly personal. Parkin & Kuczynski (2012) demonstrate that adolescents interpret rules and resistance within dynamic parent–child relationships rather than as isolated acts of disobedience. Procedural considerations are equally consequential. Perceptions of parental legitimacy and procedural justice predict compliance with family rules, indicating that how authority is exercised shapes whether expectations are recognized as valid (Thomas *et al.*, 2020).

However, legitimacy scholarship predominantly locates authority within interpersonal and domain-specific relationships. It asks whether parents possess legitimate jurisdiction and whether rule-making procedures are fair. This framework becomes less complete when parents justify a boundary by invoking a normative order they understand as also binding upon themselves. Under such conditions, the child's legitimacy judgment may concern not only whether the parent has authority, but also whether the boundary credibly represents a

sacred commitment beyond parental preference. Existing family-rule theories do not sufficiently specify how this transcendent source of justification alters the legitimacy-generating process.

2.4 Religious Socialization and the Missing Sacred-Anchor Mechanism

Religious socialization scholarship provides important evidence that faith transmission is relational, contextual, and subject to interpretation. Muslim identity formation, for example, emerges through interactions between ethno-religious socialization and wider cultural environments (Timol, 2020). Donlic (2023) shows that younger Muslim generations actively negotiate religiosity and reshape religious self-understandings, while Moos & Shaikh (2024) highlight relational ethical meaning-making within Muslim maternal identities. Digital transformation further complicates this process. Digital religious communication and online Islamic knowledge sources expand the settings through which religious meanings and authority are encountered (Askar *et al.*, 2025; Kholili *et al.*, 2024).

Yet this literature primarily explains religious identity, transmission, authority, or meaning-making. It does not specify how sacred commitments causally restructure the negotiation of concrete family digital boundaries. Treating religiosity as a family characteristic or adding “religious values” to parental mediation leaves the core explanatory problem unresolved. The theoretically relevant issue is whether sacred commitments alter the source of justification and the scope of legitimate negotiation surrounding a boundary.

The four theoretical streams therefore leave an integrative gap. Parental mediation theory explains how parents intervene but underexplains why resulting boundaries become legitimate. SDT explains how autonomy-supportive socialization facilitates internalization but insufficiently differentiates levels of negotiability within a single boundary. Family-rule scholarship explains how authority and procedure affect rule acceptance but largely assumes interpersonal sources of normative authority. Religious socialization explains how sacred meanings are transmitted and negotiated but does not identify a mechanism connecting sacred commitments to digital boundary legitimacy. This paper integrates these unresolved problems by proposing that sacred values function as normative anchors with a dual role: they delimit what is legitimately negotiable and provide transcendent justification for digital limits. Explaining how these functions interact with child voice and autonomy-supportive translation requires a distinct middle-range account of faith-anchored digital boundary legitimation.

Table 1. Theory Comparison and Explanatory Gap Matrix

Theoretical Stream	Primary Explanatory Object	Core Mechanism	Explanatory Strength	Limitation for Faith-Anchored Digital Boundaries
Parental mediation theory	Parental digital intervention	Restriction, active mediation, co-use, monitoring	Explains forms and outcomes of digital mediation	Underexplains how digital boundaries acquire normative legitimacy
Self-determination theory	Quality of regulation and internalization	Autonomy support and psychological need satisfaction	Explains autonomous versus controlled regulation	Insufficiently differentiates negotiability of principles, configurations, and implementation
Family-rule and legitimacy scholarship	Rule acceptance and parental authority	Authority attribution and procedural justice	Explains compliance, resistance, and legitimacy judgments	Underexplains transcendent sources of normative justification

Theoretical Stream	Primary Explanatory Object	Core Mechanism	Explanatory Strength	Limitation for Faith-Anchored Digital Boundaries
Religious socialization	Religious transmission and meaning-making	Socialization, interpretation, and identity negotiation	Explains negotiated religious meaning	Does not specify how sacred commitments restructure digital boundary legitimation

Source: Authors' conceptual synthesis based on parental mediation, self-determination, family-rule legitimacy, and religious socialization scholarship.

Table 1 demonstrates that the four theoretical streams illuminate distinct aspects of family digital governance but leave a shared explanatory problem unresolved. Existing perspectives explain parental intervention, autonomous regulation, authority evaluation, and negotiated religious meaning separately. None specifies how sacred commitments simultaneously delimit negotiability and alter the perceived source of normative justification. This integrative gap establishes the theoretical need for FADBT.

3. Domain Specification and Core Constructs

3.1 Domain Specification

Faith-Anchored Digital Boundary Theory (FADBT) explains the relational process through which parents and children establish, interpret, contest, and revise boundaries governing children's digital participation when those boundaries are explicitly justified through sacred values. The theory focuses on the parent–child dyad because digital rules acquire behavioral significance through reciprocal interpretation rather than parental action alone. This relational emphasis is consistent with evidence that parental mediation is contextually embedded and differently perceived by parents and children (Beyens & Valkenburg, 2019; Zaman *et al.*, 2016). It also reflects family scholarship portraying children and adolescents as active participants in negotiating parental expectations and domains of authority (Parkin & Kuczynski, 2012; Smetana & Rote, 2019).

The focal domain is Muslim families with children from late childhood through adolescence. This developmental range is theoretically relevant because increasing autonomy makes parental jurisdiction more contestable while children possess sufficient cognitive and communicative capacity to evaluate parental rationales (Smetana & Rote, 2019; Teuber *et al.*, 2022). FADBT applies when parents explicitly connect digital limits to religiously grounded normative commitments and when recurring digital practices create opportunities for interpretation or negotiation. The theory assumes that parental authority remains consequential but is not behaviorally absolute. It does not primarily explain infant screen exposure, technical cybersecurity restrictions, school-level digital governance, algorithmic authority competition, or cross-institutional religious education. These boundaries preserve the theory's micro-relational explanatory focus.

A conceptual distinction between rules and boundaries is fundamental to FADBT. Rules prescribe expected conduct, whereas digital boundaries designate normatively meaningful limits separating acceptable from unacceptable digital participation. A restriction can therefore exist without becoming a legitimate boundary from the child's perspective. FADBT explains the process through which a parental digital limit acquires perceived normative validity and relational acceptability. Its central outcome is boundary-specific compliance rather than generalized moral internalization.

3.2 Sacred Anchors

Sacred anchors are religiously grounded normative commitments perceived within the family as deriving authority beyond unilateral parental preference and invoked to justify the

moral location of a digital boundary. The construct does not denote parental religiosity, frequency of religious practices, or the simple use of Islamic language when communicating rules. Religious socialization is interpretive and negotiated, meaning that sacred meanings cannot be assumed to operate uniformly merely because families identify with the same religious tradition (Donlic, 2023; Timol, 2020).

Sacred anchors possess two theoretically relevant properties. First, transcendent authority locates the perceived source of normative obligation beyond individual parental preference. Second, normative durability implies that the underlying commitment is not readily revised in response to situational convenience. These properties allow sacred anchors to structure both why a digital boundary exists and which aspects of that boundary may legitimately become objects of negotiation.

3.3 Negotiability Delimitation

Negotiability delimitation refers to the process through which family members distinguish the sacred principle underlying a digital boundary from the adjustable arrangements through which that principle is enacted. FADBT differentiates three levels: the principle level, concerning the underlying sacred commitment; the boundary-configuration level, concerning how the normative limit is specified in a digital context; and the implementation level, concerning practical arrangements for applying the boundary.

The construct challenges an implicit binary between imposed and negotiable rules. Parent-child relationships often involve differentiated claims to authority and resistance across domains (Parkin & Kuczynski, 2012; Smetana & Daddis, 2002). FADBT extends this logic by proposing that negotiability can also vary within a single digital boundary. A sacred principle may remain normatively stable while its technological configuration or implementation remains open to revision.

3.4 Voice Inclusion and Bounded Voice

Voice inclusion is the degree to which children receive meaningful opportunities to express digital experiences, concerns, preferences, and implementation objections during boundary formation or revision. Voice is conceptually distinct from decision control. Procedural justice research indicates that perceptions of legitimate authority are shaped by how rules are established, not only by their substantive demands (Thomas *et al.*, 2020). Similarly, adolescent resistance and negotiation can function as relational communication rather than simple noncompliance (Parkin & Kuczynski, 2012).

FADBT introduces bounded voice to describe meaningful child participation within a normatively delimited decision domain. Voice is meaningful when children's input can influence boundary configuration or implementation, even when they do not possess equal authority to redefine the sacred principle. Bounded voice therefore reconciles participation with normative asymmetry.

3.5 Autonomy-Supportive Boundary Translation

Autonomy-supportive boundary translation is the parental process of translating sacred commitments into developmentally comprehensible digital boundaries through rationale provision, perspective acknowledgment, and non-coercive communication. SDT emphasizes that autonomy support concerns the quality of socialization rather than the absence of guidance or structure (Joussemet *et al.*, 2008; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Vansteenkiste *et al.*, 2020). Media mediation research similarly distinguishes autonomy-supportive from controlling forms of parental communication (Valkenburg *et al.*, 2013).

FADBT specifies the object of this translation: the connection between an abstract sacred commitment and a concrete digital limit. Translation is autonomy-supportive when parents explain this normative connection while acknowledging children's digital experiences. It differs from psychological control, which may use guilt, anxiety, or relational pressure to secure conformity (Barber, 1996).

3.6 Digital Boundary Legitimacy and Compliance

Digital boundary legitimacy is the child's perception that a digital boundary constitutes a normatively valid, appropriately justified, and relationally acceptable limit on digital participation. Legitimacy differs from obedience because behavior can conform under surveillance without the boundary being perceived as valid. Research on parental legitimacy demonstrates that perceived authority and procedural justice are consequential for family-rule compliance (Thomas *et al.*, 2020). In FADBT, legitimacy is the central mediating state connecting boundary negotiation processes to behavior.

Digital boundary compliance refers to behavioral adherence to an established digital boundary, including when immediate parental enforcement is limited. The construct remains boundary-specific and should not be equated with generalized moral self-governance. FADBT therefore explains how a particular faith-anchored digital boundary becomes behaviorally consequential through legitimacy rather than claiming complete internalization of a religious moral system.

Table 2. Core Construct Definitions and Theoretical Roles

Construct	Conceptual Definition	Theoretical Role	Distinct From
Sacred anchors	Religiously grounded commitments deriving perceived authority beyond parental preference	Normative antecedent	Parental religiosity
Negotiability delimitation	Differentiation of principle, boundary configuration, and implementation negotiability	Boundary-structuring mechanism	Restriction
Voice inclusion	Meaningful opportunity for child input during boundary formation or revision	Procedural mechanism	Decision control
Bounded voice	Meaningful participation within a normatively delimited decision domain	Legitimacy mechanism	Equal authority
Autonomy-supportive boundary translation	Non-coercive translation of sacred commitments into comprehensible digital limits	Meaning-translation mechanism	Generic autonomy support
Digital boundary legitimacy	Perceived normative validity and relational acceptability of a digital limit	Central mediating state	Obedience
Digital boundary compliance	Adherence to a specific digital boundary	Dependent outcome	Moral self-governance

Source: Authors' theoretical development of the Faith-Anchored Digital Boundary Theory (FADBT).

Table 2 specifies the construct architecture of FADBT by distinguishing normative antecedents, boundary-structuring, procedural, meaning-translation, mediating, and behavioral constructs. These distinctions prevent sacred anchoring from being conflated with religiosity, bounded voice with equal decision authority, and legitimacy with obedience. Collectively, the constructs define the theory's explanatory vocabulary and establish the conceptual precision required to trace faith-anchored digital boundary legitimation.

4. Building Faith-Anchored Digital Boundary Theory

4.1 From Digital Mediation to Boundary Legitimation

Parental mediation research commonly explains digital governance through strategies such as restriction, active discussion, monitoring, and co-use (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008; Nikken & Jansz, 2014). Although these categories clarify how parents intervene, they do not fully explain how children interpret the normative validity of resulting limits. Comparable restrictions can generate conflict, acceptance, or circumvention, and parent-child perceptions of the same mediation practice may diverge (Beyens & Beullens, 2017; Beyens &

Valkenburg, 2019). Thus, mediation strategy and boundary legitimacy are analytically distinct.

FADBT shifts the explanatory question from how parents intervene to why children recognize a digital limit as normatively binding. A parent's restriction constitutes an intervention; it becomes a legitimate boundary only when the child perceives the limit as appropriately justified and relationally acceptable. This distinction extends Clark (2011) relational understanding of mediation and responds to calls for greater conceptual precision in digital parenting research (Modecki *et al.*, 2022). Boundary legitimacy is therefore not an inherent property of a rule but an interpretive state produced through a legitimation process. FADBT proposes that, in religious families, sacred anchoring can alter this process by changing both the perceived source of justification and the scope of legitimate negotiation.

4.2 The Dual Legitimation Function of Sacred Anchoring

Existing religious socialization scholarship shows that religious meanings are interpreted and negotiated within changing social contexts (Donlic, 2023; Timol, 2020). However, it does not specify how sacred commitments influence the legitimacy of concrete digital limits. FADBT proposes that sacred anchors perform two interdependent functions: negotiability delimitation and transcendent justification.

Negotiability delimitation occurs because sacred anchoring identifies a normative principle that family members perceive as more durable than situational preferences. When a digital boundary is connected to such a principle, negotiation is no longer an unrestricted bargaining process over whether any limit should exist. Instead, sacred anchoring establishes a normative reference point around which boundary configuration occurs. This does not imply that every sacred claim is accepted by the child. Rather, sacred anchoring changes the object of negotiation by distinguishing the principle underlying the boundary from its technological enactment.

Transcendent justification concerns the perceived source of normative authority. Children may interpret a purely preference-based restriction as “my parent wants me to do this.” By contrast, a credibly sacredly anchored boundary can be understood as representing a commitment that parents themselves regard as binding. This attribution potentially reduces perceptions of arbitrariness because the boundary is not presented solely as an expression of unilateral parental will. Grusec & Goodnow (1994) emphasize that children's acceptance of parental messages depends partly on how those messages are perceived, while legitimacy research demonstrates that rule acceptance cannot be inferred from parental authority alone (Thomas *et al.*, 2020).

Sacred reference, however, is insufficient by itself. Religious language can be communicated through psychologically controlling practices that rely on guilt, anxiety, or coercive pressure (Barber, 1996). Under such conditions, children may attribute the boundary to parental control rather than transcendent normative commitment. Sacred anchoring is therefore a potential legitimation mechanism, not an automatic source of legitimacy.

P1. *The explicit anchoring of a digital boundary in sacred values increases digital boundary legitimacy to the extent that the sacred justification is perceived as normatively binding beyond unilateral parental preference.*

P2. *Sacred anchoring strengthens digital boundary legitimacy through the joint operation of negotiability delimitation and transcendent justification.*

4.3 Resolving the Sacredness–Negotiability Tension

Sacred anchoring creates a theoretical tension. Strong normative anchoring can clarify why a boundary exists but may also narrow perceived agency. Conversely, unrestricted negotiation may enhance agency while weakening the distinctive normative force of sacred commitments. Conventional distinctions between controlling and autonomy-supportive parenting do not fully resolve this tension because they insufficiently specify which

components of a boundary must be open to participation. Autonomy support does not require the elimination of structure (Joussemet *et al.*, 2008; Vansteenkiste *et al.*, 2020), yet existing theory provides limited precision concerning how agency operates when an underlying principle is treated as sacred.

FADBT introduces differentiated negotiability as the structural resolution to this tension. The theory separates three levels of a digital boundary. At the principle level, the sacred commitment defining the moral direction of the boundary may possess low negotiability. At the boundary-configuration level, families determine how the principle applies to particular platforms, content, interactions, or forms of access. At the implementation level, families arrange timing, monitoring, exceptions, and revision procedures. Configuration and implementation can therefore remain negotiable even when the underlying principle is comparatively stable.

This layered structure transforms negotiation from a binary choice between parental imposition and unrestricted child choice into a differentiated process. Family-rule research demonstrates that young people make domain-specific judgments about parental authority (Smetana & Daddis, 2002; Smetana & Rote, 2019). FADBT extends this reasoning within a single boundary: perceived authority and negotiability may vary across the principle, configuration, and implementation levels. By clarifying where negotiation can meaningfully occur, differentiated negotiability preserves sacred anchoring while creating space for agency.

P3. *Sacred anchoring is more likely to generate digital boundary legitimacy when families differentiate the relative non-negotiability of sacred principles from the negotiability of boundary configurations and implementation arrangements.*

4.4 Bounded Voice as a Procedural Legitimation Mechanism

Differentiated negotiability creates structural space for bounded voice. Parent–child negotiation scholarship indicates that children's resistance and rule-related communication can convey perspectives about authority, fairness, and lived experience rather than merely signal disobedience (Parkin & Kuczynski, 2012). Procedural justice research likewise suggests that legitimate authority depends partly on how rules are established (Thomas *et al.*, 2020). FADBT builds on these insights by separating voice from final decision authority.

Bounded voice refers to meaningful child participation within the dimensions of a boundary that are legitimately open to influence. A child need not possess authority to redefine the sacred principle for voice to matter. Voice is procedurally meaningful when information about digital experiences, contextual difficulties, or implementation concerns can alter boundary configuration or application. This distinction is particularly important because adolescents increasingly seek autonomy while parents retain claims to authority in domains they perceive as consequential (Smetana & Rote, 2019).

Bounded voice generates legitimacy through two pathways. Relationally, it communicates recognition of the child's perspective and procedural standing. Informationally, it allows parents to incorporate children's digital experiences into boundary design. This second function is especially relevant where children's familiarity with digital environments exceeds that of parents. Voice that cannot influence any boundary dimension, however, becomes symbolic and should not produce the same legitimating effect.

P4. *Voice inclusion increases digital boundary legitimacy when children's input can meaningfully influence boundary configuration or implementation, even when the underlying sacred principle remains non-negotiable.*

P5. *The positive relationship between sacred anchoring and digital boundary legitimacy is strengthened by bounded voice at the boundary-configuration and implementation levels.*

4.5 Autonomy-Supportive Boundary Translation

Sacred principles are abstract normative commitments, whereas digital boundaries address specific technological practices. A causal link between them therefore requires boundary translation. Parents interpret a sacred commitment, connect it to a digital situation, and communicate why a particular limit follows from that commitment. Children subsequently evaluate the coherence of this normative connection. Without translation, sacred references may appear detached from the digital practice being regulated.

SDT suggests that rationale provision and perspective acknowledgment support more autonomous forms of regulation (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Autonomy-supportive parenting similarly combines guidance with recognition of the child's perspective (Joussemet *et al.*, 2008), while media mediation research distinguishes autonomy-supportive communication from controlling mediation (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013). FADBT specifies this process as autonomy-supportive boundary translation: communicating the connection between sacred principle and digital limit through comprehensible rationale, perspective acknowledgment, and non-coercive language.

Such translation strengthens sacred anchoring by increasing normative comprehension. The child can evaluate why a specific digital practice is located beyond a boundary rather than being asked to comply with an unexplained religious assertion. Conversely, controlling translation may trigger coercion attribution. When sacred language is coupled with guilt induction, psychological pressure, or dismissal of the child's perspective, the perceived source of the boundary may shift from a shared transcendent commitment to parental domination. Psychological control scholarship demonstrates the developmental significance of intrusive forms of parental authority (Barber, 1996), while autonomy theory distinguishes structure from coercion (Vansteenkiste *et al.*, 2020). FADBT therefore predicts that communication quality determines whether sacred anchoring retains its legitimating potential.

P6. *Autonomy-supportive boundary translation strengthens the positive relationship between sacred anchoring and digital boundary legitimacy by increasing comprehension of the normative connection between sacred principles and specific digital limits.*

P7. *Controlling boundary translation weakens the legitimating effect of sacred anchoring by increasing the child's attribution of the digital boundary to parental coercion.*

4.6. From Digital Boundary Legitimacy to Compliance

FADBT positions digital boundary legitimacy as the proximal explanation of boundary-specific compliance. Family-rule research indicates that perceived parental legitimacy and procedural justice contribute to compliance beyond the mere existence of parental expectations (Thomas *et al.*, 2020). Similarly, internalization scholarship emphasizes that children's interpretation and acceptance of socialization messages influence behavioral regulation (Grusec & Goodnow, 1994). However, FADBT makes a narrower claim than a theory of moral internalization.

A child may comply with a particular digital boundary because it is perceived as a valid limit without having developed generalized digital moral self-governance. This distinction protects the theory's middle-range scope. Legitimacy should become especially consequential when immediate enforcement is limited because behavior can no longer be explained solely by surveillance or sanction avoidance. Accordingly:

P8. *Digital boundary legitimacy is positively associated with digital boundary compliance, particularly when immediate parental enforcement is limited.*

Table 3. Proposition Summary and Theoretical Logic

	Proposition & Core relationship	Explanatory mechanism	Theoretical extension
P1	Sacred anchoring → legitimacy	Beyond-parental normative attribution	Parental mediation
P2	Sacred anchoring → dual mechanism → legitimacy	Delimitation and transcendent justification	Sacred-value mechanism

	Proposition & Core relationship	Explanatory mechanism	Theoretical extension
P3	Differentiated negotiability → legitimacy	Reconciliation of sacredness and agency	Autonomy scholarship
P4	Voice inclusion → legitimacy	Procedural and informational recognition	Family-rule scholarship
P5	Sacred anchoring × bounded voice → legitimacy	Meaningful participation within normative limits	Integrated FADBT logic
P6	Autonomy-supportive translation × sacred anchoring → legitimacy	Normative comprehension	SDT
P7	Controlling translation → weaker sacred-anchor effect	Coercion attribution	Psychological control
P8	Boundary legitimacy → compliance	Recognition of a valid digital limit	Mediation outcomes

Source: Authors' theoretical development and proposition synthesis within FADBT.

Table 3 consolidates the eight propositions into a mechanism-based causal architecture linking sacred anchoring to digital boundary compliance. The propositions move from normative attribution and dual legitimation to differentiated negotiability, bounded voice, and boundary translation before reaching legitimacy and compliance. This sequence clarifies that sacred values do not directly determine behavior; their theoretical effects depend on relational and interpretive mechanisms that generate or weaken boundary legitimacy.

5. Faith-Anchored Digital Boundary Theory

5.1 The Integrated FADBT Model

Faith-Anchored Digital Boundary Theory (FADBT) integrates the preceding mechanisms into a middle-range explanation of how sacredly grounded digital limits acquire legitimacy within Muslim parent–child dyads. The theory begins from the premise that parental intervention alone cannot explain children's responses to digital boundaries. Parental mediation strategies may structure children's digital access and experiences (Livingstone *et al.*, 2017; Livingstone & Helsper, 2008), but their behavioral consequences depend partly on how children interpret parental expectations. FADBT therefore positions digital boundary legitimacy, rather than mediation strategy, as the proximal explanatory state linking faith-anchored boundary formation to compliance.

The model begins with sacred anchoring, through which parents connect a digital limit to a religiously grounded normative commitment perceived as extending beyond individual parental preference. Sacred anchoring activates two related processes. Negotiability delimitation structures the scope of legitimate negotiation by differentiating the underlying principle from its digital configuration and implementation. Transcendent justification potentially changes the child's attribution of why the boundary exists by locating its normative source beyond unilateral parental will. Together, these mechanisms create the conditions for differentiated negotiability.

Differentiated negotiability does not itself guarantee legitimacy. Rather, it establishes a structured domain within which bounded voice can operate. Children may express experiences, objections, and implementation concerns and meaningfully influence negotiable boundary dimensions without acquiring equal authority over the sacred principle. Simultaneously, autonomy-supportive boundary translation helps children comprehend why a sacred commitment is connected to a particular digital limit. These mechanisms jointly influence whether the boundary is perceived as normatively valid and relationally acceptable. This legitimacy, in turn, increases the likelihood of boundary-specific compliance when immediate parental enforcement is limited. Conversely, controlling translation can activate coercion attribution, weakening the legitimating potential of sacred anchoring.

The integrated causal architecture clarifies how sacred anchoring operates through boundary structuring, participatory, and meaning-translation mechanisms to generate legitimacy and, ultimately, boundary-specific digital compliance within parent–child relationships.

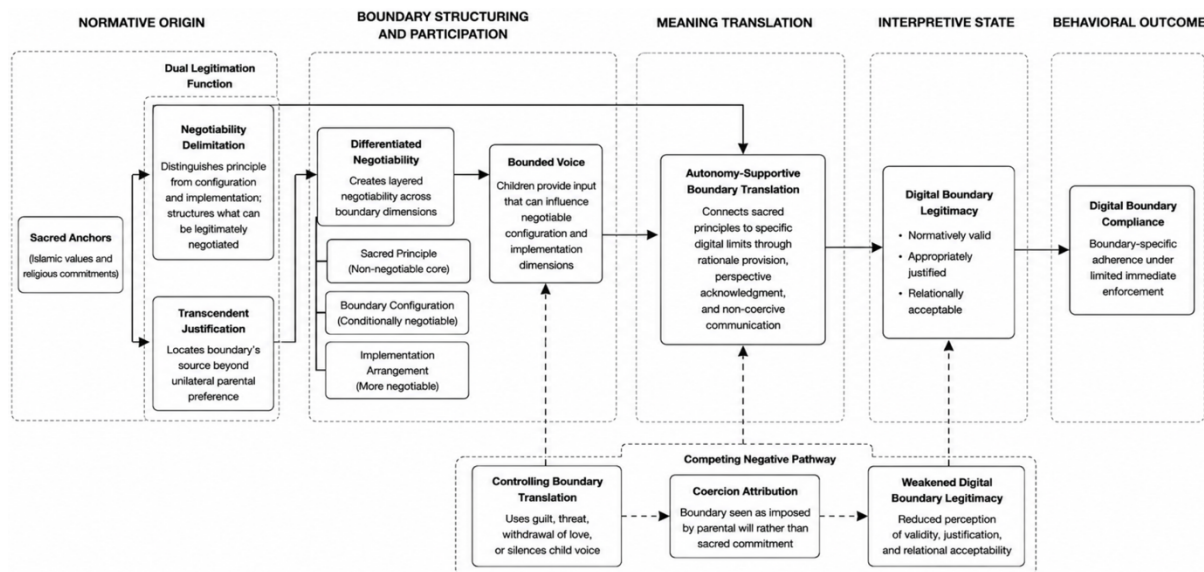


Figure 1. Causal Architecture of Faith-Anchored Digital Boundary Theory (FADBT)

Source: Authors' theoretical development.

Figure 1 depicts FADBT as a legitimacy-generating architecture rather than a direct sacred-values-to-compliance relationship. Sacred anchors restructure both negotiability and justification, while bounded voice and autonomy-supportive translation shape children's interpretation of digital limits. Boundary legitimacy connects these mechanisms to compliance. The competing coercion pathway further explains why religious justification may lose legitimating force when translated through controlling parental communication practices.

5.2 Boundary Conditions

FADBT is deliberately bounded because sacred anchoring should not be assumed to operate uniformly across family relationships. The first boundary condition is developmental autonomy. As children move toward adolescence, claims to personal jurisdiction and autonomous decision-making become increasingly salient (Smetana & Rote, 2019). Autonomy-related parenting processes also have distinct implications for adolescent adjustment (Teuber *et al.*, 2022). FADBT therefore expects sacred reference alone to become less sufficient as autonomy expectations increase. Under higher developmental autonomy, differentiated negotiability and bounded voice should become more consequential because adolescents are increasingly capable of evaluating both the normative rationale and procedural quality of parental boundaries.

The second boundary condition is family hierarchy. Parenting practices acquire meaning within broader relational contexts (Darling & Steinberg, 1993), and cultural or familial authority structures can shape how autonomy and control are interpreted (Soenens *et al.*, 2015). In strongly hierarchical families, children may behaviorally comply with digital restrictions even when they perceive little procedural voice or normative legitimacy. This condition highlights a crucial distinction within FADBT: observed compliance is not necessarily evidence of successful legitimation. Compliance produced primarily by authority asymmetry may weaken when surveillance or sanction capacity declines. The theory's explanatory advantage therefore lies in distinguishing legitimacy-based compliance from externally sustained conformity.

The third boundary condition is parent–child digital competence asymmetry. Digital skills influence how families manage online opportunities and risks (Livingstone *et al.*, 2017), while parental digital self-efficacy varies across social contexts (Huang *et al.*, 2018). When

children's knowledge of platforms and digital practices substantially exceeds that of their parents, rigid boundary configurations may be perceived as technologically uninformed even when the underlying sacred commitment remains meaningful. Under such conditions, bounded voice acquires an informational function: children's input can improve the contextual fit of boundary configurations. Thus, competence asymmetry should increase the importance of voice at the configuration and implementation levels without necessarily changing the normative status of the sacred principle.

The three boundary conditions shape distinct aspects of the legitimation process, determining the relative importance, visibility, and behavioral expression of FADBT mechanisms across different parent–child relational and digital contexts.

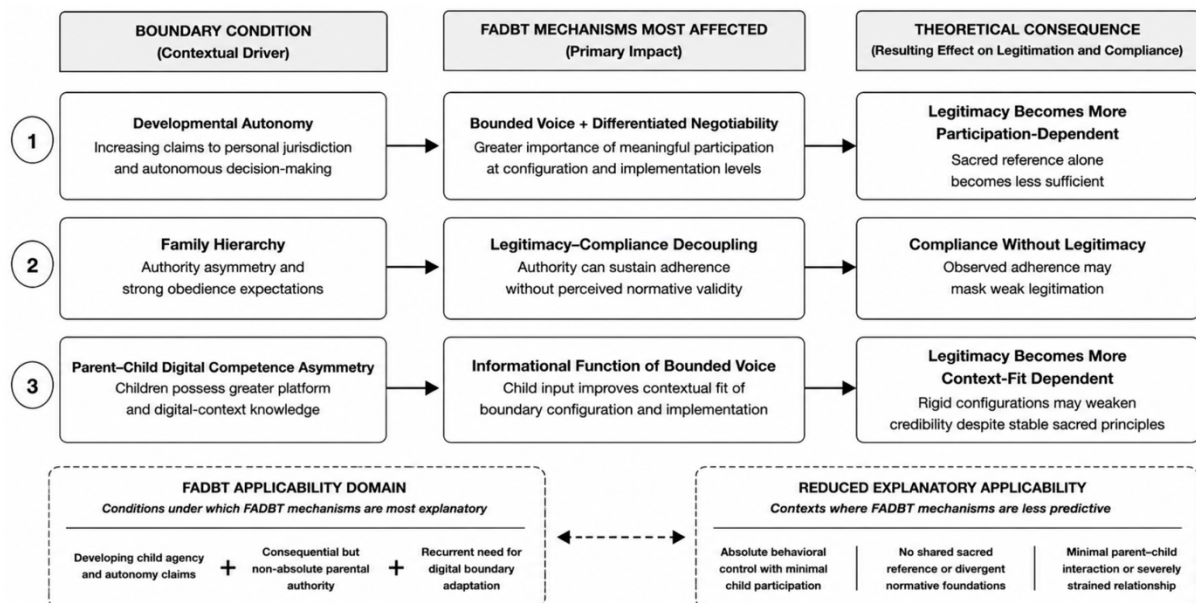


Figure 1. Boundary Conditions Shaping the Operation of FADBT Mechanisms

Source: Authors' theoretical development.

Figure 2 clarifies that FADBT's core mechanisms remain theoretically stable while their relative importance and behavioral expression vary across relational and digital conditions. Developmental autonomy increases dependence on participation, hierarchy may separate compliance from legitimacy, and digital competence asymmetry strengthens voice's informational function. Together, these conditions specify when faith-anchored boundary legitimation is most explanatory and where its predictive reach becomes more limited.

These conditions specify where FADBT's explanatory mechanisms should be strongest. The theory is particularly relevant where children possess developing autonomy, parental authority remains consequential, and digital boundaries require recurrent contextual adaptation. It is less suited to settings characterized by absolute behavioral control, absence of shared sacred reference, or no meaningful opportunity for parent–child interaction.

5.3 Formal Theory Statement

Faith-Anchored Digital Boundary Theory proposes that sacred values alter digital boundary legitimation by simultaneously delimiting the negotiability of underlying normative principles and providing transcendent justification for digital limits. Sacred anchoring generates legitimacy not through religious reference alone but through differentiated negotiability, bounded voice, and autonomy-supportive boundary translation. When children can meaningfully influence negotiable boundary configurations or implementation arrangements and comprehend the normative connection between sacred principles and specific digital limits, faith-anchored boundaries are more likely to be perceived as normatively valid and relationally acceptable. Such legitimacy increases boundary-specific digital compliance, particularly when immediate parental enforcement is limited. Conversely, when sacred commitments are translated through psychological control or

invoked to eliminate meaningful voice across all boundary dimensions, children are more likely to attribute digital limits to parental coercion, weakening boundary legitimacy. These processes are conditioned by developmental autonomy, family hierarchy, and parent–child digital competence asymmetry.

The formal statement establishes FADBT as a middle-range rather than universal theory. It does not predict all forms of digital behavior or religious socialization. Its explanatory object is the legitimacy-generating process surrounding sacredly anchored digital boundaries within parent–child relationships.

5.4 Theoretical Contributions

FADBT first extends parental mediation theory by moving beyond strategy classification toward boundary legitimation. Existing research has substantially clarified restrictive, active, and contextualized mediation practices (Clark, 2011; Livingstone *et al.*, 2017; Modecki *et al.*, 2022). FADBT adds an explanatory layer by theorizing why a digital intervention becomes recognized as a valid limit. This shift distinguishes the form of parental action from the child's legitimacy attribution and explains why similar strategies may generate divergent relational and behavioral outcomes.

Second, FADBT extends autonomy and family-rule scholarship through differentiated negotiability and bounded voice. Autonomy support is often contrasted with controlling socialization (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Joussemet *et al.*, 2008), while family-rule research emphasizes authority, resistance, and procedural justice (Parkin & Kuczynski, 2012; Thomas *et al.*, 2020). FADBT shows that negotiability need not be uniform within a rule. By separating principle, configuration, and implementation, the theory explains how meaningful participation can coexist with normative asymmetry. Bounded voice thus conceptualizes agency without requiring equal authority over every dimension of a boundary.

Third, FADBT contributes to religious socialization scholarship by positioning sacred values as causal components of legitimation rather than contextual markers of religiosity. Research increasingly recognizes negotiated religious identity and ethical meaning-making (Donlic, 2023; Moos & Shaikh, 2024; Timol, 2020), but the mechanisms through which sacred commitments structure concrete family boundaries remain underdeveloped. FADBT identifies a dual function of sacred anchors: delimiting negotiability and supplying transcendent justification. Sacredness thereby changes both what can be negotiated and how the source of normative obligation is attributed.

5.5 Practical and Educational Implications

FADBT suggests that faith-grounded digital governance should not be equated with either unrestricted negotiation or unilateral religious restriction. For Muslim parents and family educators, the theory implies the importance of distinguishing sacred principles from the digital configurations used to enact them. Platform access, monitoring arrangements, timing, and implementation procedures may require contextual adjustment even when an underlying moral commitment remains stable. Bounded voice can improve both procedural legitimacy and the informational quality of digital boundaries, particularly where children possess greater technological knowledge.

The theory also cautions against assuming that religious justification automatically strengthens compliance. Sacred language communicated through psychological control may produce coercion attribution rather than legitimacy. The relevant educational task is therefore not simply to attach Islamic terminology to digital rules, but to translate the normative connection between sacred commitments and specific digital limits in developmentally comprehensible and autonomy-supportive ways.

5.6 Future Research Agenda

FADBT generates an empirical research program centered on construct validation, causal mechanisms, dyadic perceptions, and boundary conditions. Initial research should

distinguish sacred anchoring from general religiosity and develop measures of negotiability delimitation, bounded voice, and digital boundary legitimacy. Dyadic designs can test whether parents' intended sacred justification corresponds with children's legitimacy attribution. Experimental vignette studies could manipulate sacred anchoring, voice, and translation style to examine transcendent justification and coercion attribution. Longitudinal and digital diary methods may further capture how boundaries are revised as platforms and children's autonomy change.

Table 4. Future Research Directions for FADBT

Research Priority	Core Question	Suggested Method	Theory-Building Value
Construct validation	Is sacred anchoring distinct from religiosity?	Scale development	Construct precision
Mechanism testing	Does transcendent justification reduce arbitrariness attribution?	Vignette experiment	Causal validation
Dyadic legitimacy	Do parent and child legitimacy perceptions diverge?	Dyadic survey	Relational refinement
Boundary dynamics	How are digital boundaries revised over time?	Longitudinal diary	Dynamic extension
Hierarchy	When does compliance occur without legitimacy?	Comparative study	Boundary specification
Cross-religious extension	Do sacred-anchor mechanisms travel across traditions?	Comparative research	Generalizability testing

Source: Authors' theoretical development and proposition synthesis within FADBT.

Table 4 presents a structured roadmap for advancing FADB) through future empirical research. The proposed agenda emphasizes construct validation, examination of underlying mechanisms, dyadic parent–child legitimacy, longitudinal boundary dynamics, hierarchical boundary conditions, and cross-religious comparisons. Collectively, these research priorities are expected to refine theoretical precision, strengthen causal explanations, and enhance the generalizability of FADBT across diverse sociocultural settings.

6. Conclusion

Digital family governance increasingly involves more than controlling screen time or selecting appropriate parental mediation strategies. As digital technologies become embedded in children's everyday activities, parents must continually establish limits concerning platforms, content, interactions, and forms of digital participation. The central theoretical challenge is therefore not simply how parents intervene in children's digital lives, but how particular digital limits acquire sufficient normative legitimacy to become behaviorally consequential. This challenge becomes especially salient in religious families, where digital boundaries may be justified through sacred commitments that are understood as extending beyond individual parental preferences.

Existing parental mediation perspectives explain important differences among restrictive, active, and participatory forms of digital guidance, while autonomy and family-rule scholarship clarifies why control, procedural processes, and perceptions of authority shape children's responses to parental expectations. Religious socialization research, in turn, demonstrates that sacred meanings are interpreted and negotiated within changing social environments. However, these perspectives do not sufficiently explain how sacred commitments restructure the legitimation of concrete digital boundaries. In particular, they

leave unresolved the tension between preserving the normative force of sacred values and allowing meaningful child participation in boundary negotiation.

Faith-Anchored Digital Boundary Theory addresses this explanatory problem by conceptualizing sacred values as normative anchors with a dual legitimation function. Sacred anchoring delimits the scope of legitimate negotiation while providing transcendent justification for digital limits. FADBT proposes that this dual function becomes legitimating through differentiated negotiability, bounded voice, and autonomy-supportive boundary translation. By distinguishing the sacred principle from boundary configuration and implementation, the theory explains how normative stability can coexist with meaningful child participation. Digital boundary legitimacy subsequently connects these relational processes to boundary-specific compliance, while coercive translation can weaken legitimacy by shifting children's attribution from sacred commitment toward parental domination.

The theory contributes by moving digital parenting research from strategy classification toward boundary legitimation, refining autonomy and family-rule scholarship through differentiated negotiability and bounded voice, and repositioning sacred values from contextual religious characteristics to causal components of legitimacy formation. FADBT does not claim to explain generalized moral internalization or all forms of religious parenting. Instead, it offers a deliberately bounded middle-range account of how sacredly anchored digital limits become normatively valid within parent–child relationships. By explaining when faith-grounded digital restrictions become legitimate relational boundaries rather than coercive parental controls, FADBT provides a mechanism-based foundation for advancing theory and empirical research on digital governance in religious family life.

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