Social Control Mechanisms for Protecting Children from the Risks of the Digital Environment in Algerian Families

By

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Abstract

The excessive use of electronic devices by children presents a pressing societal challenge for families in general, and Algerian families in particular. As a consequence of modernity, this excessive use compels families in the digital age to possess sufficient awareness to guide their children's engagement with digital media. This is especially crucial given that these devices have become integral to our reality, carrying with them significant risks that can impact a child's psychological, social, and relational health, with potential repercussions extending to the family unit.

This research paper will explore the collective risks associated with excessive use of digital media within the digital environment, as well as the mechanisms employed by families to mitigate and reduce its harmful effects.

Keywords: Social control, digital environment, risks, family, mechanisms, child.

Introduction and Problem Statement

The field of family research is a central part of family sociology, which is concerned with studying the components, concepts, and development of family systems, frameworks for interaction within the family and extended family, and other topics that form its branches. The family is the first nucleus from which the child learns behavior, as it transforms him from a biological being to a social being by providing him with the culture of society in an automatic way. In other words, the family is the first social institution that carries out the process of instilling social norms in the child, and through it, the foundations of his personal characteristics and social identity are formed, which enhances his social belonging to a particular group.

The family has been exposed throughout historical stages to inevitable structural changes due to economic, political, social, and religious factors, which contributed to the change of its forms, types, roles, and functions. In the recent past, its basic structure was a group of families living within the extended family. However, due to demographic growth, technological transformation, and economic necessity, other forms of the Algerian family have emerged. In addition to the extended family, which includes the nuclear family, due to the spread of the phenomenon of divorce, the family that includes the mother and children who live independently has emerged as a form separate from its reference family.

The structural transformations of the family were not limited to changes in its form and functions but were also accompanied by changes in the digital space. The imperative of entering this global shift to meet the needs of its members in this field was added, so that its members would not be exposed to social marginalization. This resulted in a new addition to the set of frameworks existing within the family, the virtual framework, which requires the family to be familiar with all its cognitive and operational tools to maintain the balance of the social structure.

The child constitutes a social framework that the family seeks to protect from all social risks by providing for the child's various needs of security, health, mental and physical safety, and spirituality.

The use of digital resources such as electronic games and smart devices such as television screens and tablets is an area of attraction for the child. The Algerian family seeks to achieve this satisfaction according to the availability of its financial resources. However, the excessive use of these resources by the child makes him vulnerable to a set of risks, which makes the family enact a set of mechanisms to control the child's consumption of these uses. Hence, we ask:

What are the mechanisms of social control to protect the child from the risks of the digital environment in the Algerian family?
This question can be divided into two main questions:
What are the risks of the digital environment on the child?
What are the mechanisms of social control to protect the child from the risks of the digital environment in the Algerian family?

Research Objectives

The importance of this research can be summarized as follows:

To reveal the risks of the digital environment.

✓   To reveal the mechanisms of social control within the family to reduce the risks of the digital environment on children.

Review of Previous Studies on the Topic
Research on the impacts of children's use of the digital environment has gained a foothold in Algerian research. Among the studies closest to our research paper is:

A study by researcher « Meriem Kouider » entitled: The Impact of Electronic Games on Children's Behavior, A Descriptive Analytical Study on a Sample of School Children in Algiers, a thesis submitted for a Master's degree in Information and Communication Sciences, University of Algiers 3, Specialization in Information Gathering during the academic year 2011-2012.

The researcher's study began with the problem of:

What is the impact of playing electronic games on the behavior of Algerian schoolchildren in the primary stage in Algiers?
This is the question from which a set of questions branched out, as a set of questions branched out, represented in:

What is the place of play within the family context?

What is the extent of the impact of the use of digital technologies on the use of electronic games?

What are the habits of the Algerian child in playing these games?

What are the most popular types of electronic games?

Do electronic games instill aggressive behavior in the personality of the Algerian child?

What is the impact of the duration of playing games on the academic achievement of schoolchildren?

What are the potential effects of electronic games on the behavior of the Algerian child? (Meriem Kouider http://biblio.univalger.dz/jspui/bitstream/1635/11557/1/KOUIDER_MERIEM.PDF.pdf)

To answer these cognitive problems, the researcher set a set of goals, among which we mention knowing the reality of Algeria in the information society through its interaction with electronic communication media, represented by online and electronic games. The researcher also aimed through this study to reveal the reality of electronic games in Algerian children's circles, in addition to trying to uncover the aspects surrounding the phenomenon and knowing its causes and factors of spread to reduce its negative consequences and stop its spread. As a final goal, the researcher wanted to know the extent of the impact of electronic games on the behavior of children in Algiers (Meriem Kouider, same reference). To investigate and research, the researcher chose the descriptive approach, relying on a set of techniques represented in observation, interview, and questionnaire as techniques for collecting data. As for her sample, the researcher chose the purposive sample, its vocabulary was represented in school children aged between seven to twelve years, and the place of conducting the examination was represented in four schools from different popular and upscale neighborhoods in Algiers, to diversify the sample and they are enrolled from the second, third, fourth and fifth year and of both sexes and course from school children who play electronic games and the number of the sample ranged to 200 vocabularies (Meriem Kouider, previous reference) and among the results that the researcher reached, we find that games develop the child's motivation for achievement, competition, and the search for profit and persistence, as well as the child's acquisition of knowledge in the digital world. The researcher also found that the use of these games is during the holidays due to family restrictions, as their use is prohibited during the study period, but their use has negative effects on the child, as children impersonate characters that are not related to Algerian culture because it is a different product. The use lasts more than five hours, which affects the health of children and their concentration in the study, in addition to the tendency of males to practice sports and fighting games, while females tend to practice intellectual games such as puzzles and educational games, which develops aggressive behavior in the child due to repeated practices, the child's tendency to social isolation and introversion, where the child prefers to resort to playing instead of talking with the family, (Meriem Kouider, same reference)

The Child: Concept, Characteristics, and Needs

According to Ma'n Khalīl 'Umar, based on stereotyping, early childhood begins from birth and ends at the age of six. During this age stage, the child learns the basics of social behavior, transforming from a biological being to a social being through the process of socialization. In this process, the child learns all the taboos and permissions and most of the symbols of social interactions and acquires the prevailing social customs in his society. This affects his behavior and framework of thinking in the future, where indirect influences on his future social life and positions, tendencies, emotions, way of thinking, dimensions of imagination, and others are represented (Ma'n Khalīl 'Umar, p. 232, 2005).

Childhood is considered a delicate stage of life as it is characterized by physical, emotional, cognitive, and psychological fragility, which requires continuous parental accompaniment, especially in the digital environment.

The Needs of the Child in the Light of Social Change

In the digital age, the child no longer needs only the biological satisfactions of food, drink, clothing, and shelter, or the emotional satisfactions of love, affection, appreciation, and emotional fulfillment. Rather, the child needs to rationalize his consumption of digital media and to be protected in the part related to the risks resulting from his use of information and communication technology and digital games, and what may result from them in terms of risks at all psychological, social, and serious health levels. Therefore, the child in the digital age requires a conscious family to protect him from the risks of use and to rationalize his consumer behavior so that he does not fall victim to poor choices.

The Concept of the Digital Environment:

The digital environment is the environment that relies heavily on modern digital technology. It includes a huge number of electronic resources and technical facilities related to the production and use of information. It also represents the development of information systems, research, and retrieval (Mohamed Al-Hijrasy Saad, p. 97, 2000). We mean by the digital environment the set of electronic devices that the family provides for the child, and all digital applications and programs from a digital phone, digital screens, video games, etc., and everything related to technology and modern media, especially those connected to the Internet.

The Risks of the Digital Environment on the Child:

Despite the many advantages that modern technology devices carry the changes in the individual's behavior pattern and their entry into virtual communication, and their provision of facilities in many areas of cognitive and practical life for different segments of society, especially for the child, from entertainment, recreation, culture, and knowledge, the excessive and unconscious use of them by children may result in serious risks, which civil society institutions and international organizations for child rights have previously sounded the alarm about. Among the risks that threaten the physical, psychological, educational, cultural, and religious growth, health, and safety of the child are:

Physical, Mental, and Psychological Risks :

Sitting for long hours in front of a computer, or excessive use of iPad devices, smartphones, tablets, videotapes, and other technological means leads to physical problems that greatly affect the child's physical growth.

First: The problem of addiction: Among the risks of using digital environment tools repeatedly, especially if this use is accompanied by the absence of family control, the problem of addiction to these tools arises.

Second: Risks of addiction to digital media and unconscious use of it

- Disruption of the child's daily life routine, such as refusing to eat meals due to being immersed in playing with various web devices, especially if the parents are at work or are ignorant of the concept and methods of control.
- Addiction to computer screens and smartphones leads to loss of appetite in children, which negatively affects their physical growth, and shows signs of weakness such as yellowing and pallor of the face, in addition to problems with the visual system due to the ultraviolet rays emitted from these unsafe smart devices.

- Contemporary research has proven that staying in front of these devices for long hours causes severe neck pain and affects the children's spine.
- These devices also negatively affect the mental and neurological development of children due to sleep disturbances, loss of appetite, and unhealthy nutrition, which negatively affect the children's nervous system, resulting in disorders such as mental retardation, hyperactivity disorder, and other health problems. It also affects the auditory system, especially if the child overuses the silencer during these uses. It is known that some children are more inclined to loud noises, and they do not realize the extent of the danger. This practice, due to its repetition, will negatively affect the eardrum to the point of losing the sense of hearing.
- From a psychological point of view, irrational consumption causes psychological cases in the child, such as depression, anxiety, personality disorder, and other mental illnesses.

Educational risks:

Research has shown that excessive use of electronic devices reduces the child's concentration and negatively affects the memory function and the child's intelligence, which results in these cases in weak academic results.

Social risks:

The child's continued use of digital technological resources, especially those connected to the Internet without censorship, leads to his attraction to the virtual digital world, and the child loses the practical mechanisms for communication and bonding with his peers on the one hand and even with his family members, which pulls him towards isolation and loss of connection with the real world.

Risks of Electronic Content:

The risks of the digital environment are not limited to physical, mental, and psychological risks, but rather extend to other risks represented by the digital content that contains manifestations of violence, sexual abuse, and electronic crime, in addition to some fake accounts by electronic crime gangs that children fall victim to.

Mechanisms of social control within the family to protect the child from the risks of the digital environment

To reduce and limit these risks, conscious families who are knowledgeable in the balanced parenting style resort to controlling the consumption behavior of their children by employing a set of social control mechanisms.

The Family: Concept, Forms, Functions, and Characteristics

The family is the first reference point that receives the child from the moment of his birth. As stated in the book by Dalal Malhas Istitieh and Omar Moussa Sarhan, Cooley defines it as the groups that influence the growth of individuals and their morals from the early stages of life until the person becomes independent with his personality and becomes a responsible person and an active member of society. As for Bell and Vogel, they consider the family to be a structural unit consisting of a man and a woman who are linked in an organized social way with their children, either biologically or by adoption. Murdock defines it as a social group that is characterized by a common place of residence, may be exposed to economic problems, and has a reproductive function through which it provides the society with individuals who have promising fingerprints on its richness (2012, p. 267).

From the functional perspective, according to T. Parsons, it can be defined as a set of formats: such as the mother-child format, the sibling format, and the couple format. The format usually consists of two people between whom a set of social values are organized, and the mother-child format is the most specialized in society. (Al Khashab, Mustafa, 1981, p. 88).

And also as A social system because it is the one that forms the social structure with the personality. Values and roles are social elements that organize relationships within the structure and emphasize these elements the relationship of overlap and interaction between the personality and the social structure. (Fatiha, Hafhouf Tyayiba, 2018, p. 88).

In the book of Abdullah Zahi Rashdan, Burgess and Locke define it as a group of people who are linked together by ties of marriage, blood, or adoption, live under one roof interact with each other according to specific social roles, and create and maintain a cultural pattern (2005, p. 116).

Based on the previous definitions, the characteristics of family functions can be identified as follows:

Characteristics of the Family:
- The family is a social system and a primary social group for building society. It is the first social bond that individuals interact with and the basic structure that they rely on in the early stages of their lives for food, clothing, care, and upbringing (Fadia Omar Al-Jolani, 1995, p. 17).
- The family is not only a social system, but it is also the first social structure that teaches the individual different social norms. It also represents the main pillar and the solid foundation on which other social systems are based because it is the main pillar of the social structure. It is one of the most interactive social systems in society with other social systems because it is the axis of all systems, whether economic, political, or educational. Therefore, we find educators pinning great hopes on the role of the family and its cooperation with the school in raising the child and preparing him. (Fadia Omar Al-Jolani, previous reference, p. 19).
- The family is the first cradle responsible for instilling and strengthening individual values and social norms for individuals to deal with each other. The family is also the most important source for satisfying the individual's emotions of love, affection, security, and reassurance. The individual needs these feelings to achieve comfort and psychological stability. It is also a source for satisfying the biological and necessary needs of the individual from housing, clothing, food, and shelter, in addition to health services (Jaafar Al-Amin Al-Yassin, 1981, p. 21).

Functions of the Family in the Light of the Digital Environment:
According to Dr. Talaat Ibrahim, the family used to be self-sufficient in the various necessities of life, such as food, drink, clothing, and shelter. It used to produce everything it needed, and it also legislated for itself clarified rights and duties, and determined its relations with families. This is in addition to what the family used to do towards its members of setting the known moral values. Thus, the family used to perform all social functions, almost within the limits that its scope allows (1993, p. 181).

With the economic changes the expansion of the scope of social life and the emergence of independent and intelligent villages and cities, the functions of the family began to shrink. Schools were built to perform the function of education and teaching, and factories established independent bodies to reduce the functions of the family and enter into new functions related

to the social model that differs from one society to another according to its cultural, social, and religious environment.

The digital revolution and the transformation from post-industrial societies put the family in front of the inevitability of opening up to the manifestations of globalization and technological stereotyping, and this resulted in a change in the structural and functional structures of the family to include the digital and virtual systems. In addition to the inevitability of acquiring these electronic resources related to the digital environment, the family must constantly learn and discover the secrets of these resources to meet the basic needs of the individuals who make up the family structure.

It is worth noting that some families have been able to overcome this challenge, and there are families, due to some cultural determinants and electronic illiteracy, we find that their children are victims of the aforementioned risks.

Social Control

Before discussing the identification of social mechanisms of control, it is important to define the concept. According to Gordon Marshall, social control is a term used in sociology to refer to the social processes by which the behavior of individuals or groups is regulated. All societies have norms and rules to regulate behavior (2000, p. 887).

Social Control Mechanisms in the Family:

In the family, social control mechanisms are used to maintain family balance and harmony and to meet the needs of children. Some of these mechanisms include:

➢ **Talking to the child in their modern language through participation**: Some mothers and fathers resort to opening accounts that they share with their children on social media and send them text messages to communicate, i.e. parents speak the language of the child's age, which enhances the child's trust and enhances the feeling of protection and security.

➢ **Rationalizing the time of use of digital environment resources:** One of the social control mechanisms is to set family laws for all children regarding the duration and time of use of these electronic resources. Some families do not allow the use of these resources except on holidays, others when they get good results or improve their academic results, and others link playing time after performing school and religious duties as a motivating factor.

➢ **Adopting critical education instead of the preventive approach**: Critical education as an educational and educational approach is to explain to the child the risks of excessive use of digital environment tools, by citing real-life incidents of children, for example, who failed in school because of their addiction to electronic devices and their addiction to them affected their academic results, and so on. The child in the first age level is more receptive to tangible, experienced things, and the social reality is not free from the experiences of daily life.

➢ **Promoting the guidance of children towards positive consumer behavior**: This mechanism means adopting an upbringing based on the use of technological resources, whether in play or study, according to the consumption need in its positive dimension.

➢ **Putting digital devices in common facilities not in the child's rooms:** Electronic devices, especially those connected to the Internet, negatively affect the child's brain cells. To protect the child from its dangers and the dangers of staying alone and away from parental supervision, it is preferable to place electronic devices in common areas.

➤ Educating the child about the risks of excessive use by sharing real events about the cybercrimes that are prevalent over the Internet

Conclusion

Modern information and communication technology has caused the expansion and change of the family's vision of the concept of social control, which used to exceed the limits of the walls. Today, it is within the scope of the family. The family has transformed its central issues around the concept of social control and placed it within deep challenges represented by continuous education about parenting methods to preserve its social entity.

This awareness of these challenges is considered the first step towards the success of the family in adopting strategies and plans to protect its children from the dangers of the digital environment, and thus protect its structure and composition from loss and disintegration.

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