



DIGITAL CONTROL, SYMBOLIC POWER, AND THE SHIFT OF VIOLENCE: NON-PHYSICAL VIOLENCE IN URBAN PARENT–CHILD RELATIONSHIPS IN BENGKULU CITY

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Abstract

Violence against children in family settings is increasingly shifting from visible physical forms to more subtle non-physical and digitally mediated practices. Emotional neglect, verbal intimidation, and parental digital control are frequently normalized as discipline, despite their significant psychological consequences for children. This study examines the forms of non-physical and digital violence in parent–child relationships, analyzes the social factors driving this shift in violence patterns, and explores how symbolic meanings constructed through daily interactions shape differing perceptions of violence. Using a qualitative case study design grounded in the social definition paradigm and symbolic interactionism, this research was conducted in an urban residential area of Bengkulu City. Data were collected through participant observation, semi-structured interviews with 14 informants (parents and children aged 10–15), and documentation. The findings reveal that emotional, verbal, and digital violence dominate parent–child interactions, particularly through excessive monitoring, verbal threats, and unilateral restrictions on digital access. Parents interpret these practices as protective discipline, while children experience them as intimidation and distrust. Parental anxiety over digital risks, social pressure, and limited digital parenting literacy further contribute to the normalization of such practices. The study contributes to family sociology by conceptualizing digital control as a form of symbolic power, where authority is exercised not through physical force but through control over digital access and communication. It extends symbolic interactionism by demonstrating how digital infrastructure devices, messaging platforms, and internet access mediates the production and normalization of non-physical violence in everyday family interactions. These findings highlight the need to reconsider child protection and digital parenting frameworks to account for subtle forms of symbolic and relational violence within families.

Keywords: *Non-Physical Violence; Digital Control; Symbolic Power; Parent–Child Relationships; Symbolic Interactionism*

A. Introduction

Violence against children is a profound violation of human rights with long-term impacts on individual development and social stability. While early research often emphasized physical violence, recent studies indicate a shift toward non-physical forms—emotional, verbal, neglectful, and digitally mediated practices—that are

frequently normalized as discipline despite their significant psychological consequences (Prastini, 2024). In the digital era, violence increasingly operates through relational and symbolic mechanisms, not only through direct physical force. Globally, the Childlight Global Child Safety Institute reports that 12.6% of children have been exposed to non-consensual sexual images or videos and 12.5% have experienced online sexual solicitation (Fry, 2024), indicating that digital space has become a new arena where harm is produced and circulated within social relations. Relatedly, Machado et al. (2024) show rising cyber interpersonal violence in urban environments with high technology penetration.

In Bengkulu Province, reports of violence against children have increased. Data from the Office of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection (DP3A) recorded 298 cases involving women and children as of August 2024, including 169 child victims. In the first half of 2024, 86 children were reported as victims of violence, dominated by sexual violence (64 cases) and physical violence (13 cases) (Annur, 2024; Bengkulu Ekspres, 2024; Harian Rakyat Bengkulu, 2024). At the city level, cases reportedly increased from 20 in 2020 to 40 in 2021, with sexual violence comprising around 80% of cases. However, the dominance of physical–sexual categories in official reporting does not necessarily capture the full reality of children's everyday experiences. Visible and reportable forms of violence are easier to document, while subtle non-physical and digital forms—emotional neglect, verbal intimidation, and digital restriction—often remain outside formal systems because they are framed as “normal” parenting or discipline (Madigan et al., 2018). This creates an institutional and analytical blind spot toward violence that is relational, symbolic, and embedded in daily interactions within families.

This condition is evident in urban family contexts in Bengkulu City, including the Pinang Mas Housing Complex, where high technology access, economic pressure, and changing interaction patterns reshape parenting practices. Field indications suggest that many parents rely on smartphones to “calm” children from an early age, while at the same time using monitoring, restrictions, and threats through digital communication as disciplinary tools. In such settings, violence can shift from physical acts to symbolic and relational acts: emotional withdrawal due to gadget-centered routines, negative verbal labeling, and control over digital access and communication that may be experienced by children as fear, intimidation, or distrust.

Existing scholarship provides useful foundations but also leaves an important gap. Studies on child abuse have long been dominated by legal and protection frameworks that prioritize physical and sexual violence, which can marginalize emotional, verbal, and symbolic forms of harm despite their serious impacts on children's security and identity formation (Rahmat Ismail, 2023). At the same time, research on digital parenting often treats technology mainly as an external risk to children (e.g., gadget addiction and reduced parent–child interaction), frequently positioning children as passive recipients rather than examining how parents actively deploy digital tools as instruments of supervision and behavioral control (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008; Zhang et al., 2025). Consequently, practices such as constant monitoring, unilateral restrictions, and threats via messaging

platforms are commonly legitimized as responsible parenting, even though they may function as symbolic control that produces psychological pressure.

From a sociological perspective, symbolic interactionism highlights that social actions acquire meaning through interaction and interpretation. In parent–child relationships, the same act—silence, shouting, confiscating a phone, restricting internet access—may be defined by parents as care and protection, while children may define it as rejection and intimidation (Santoso & Rakhmad, 2020). Yet, studies rarely connect symbolic interactionism with digitally mediated family communication in a way that explains how digital infrastructures themselves—devices, connectivity, and platforms—become part of symbolic power processes that normalize non-physical violence.

Therefore, this study addresses the gap by examining non-physical and digital violence in parent–child relationships in an urban context in Bengkulu City, and by conceptualizing digital control as a form of symbolic power embedded in everyday interaction. The study asks: (1) What forms of non-physical and digital violence occur in the Pinang Mas Housing Complex? (2) What social factors drive the shift in violence patterns in the digital era? (3) How do symbolic meanings in family interactions shape differing perceptions of violence between parents and children? Theoretically, this study contributes to family sociology by extending symbolic interactionism into digitally mediated family communication and clarifying the “meaning gap” that supports normalization of symbolic violence. Practically, it offers inputs for community-based child protection and digital parenting literacy frameworks that recognize subtle forms of relational violence within families.

B. Methods

This study employs a qualitative approach within the social definition paradigm to understand how meanings of violence against children are constructed and normalized through family interactions in the digital era. This paradigm draws on Max Weber’s emphasis on subjective meaning in social action and is further developed through Herbert Blumer’s symbolic interactionism, which views social reality as the product of interpretative processes involving symbols, language, and communication (Ritzer, 2012). Through this perspective, violence is not treated solely as an objective act, but as a socially constructed phenomenon shaped by interaction, interpretation, and power relations within everyday family life.

A case study design was used to enable an in-depth examination of digitally mediated parenting practices and parent–child interaction in an urban context. The research site was Bengkulu City, specifically the Pinang Mas Housing Complex, which represents an urban residential setting characterized by intensive gadget use and increasing digital mediation of family communication. This setting was selected to capture contextual complexity and the interactional processes through which digital control practices are defined as either discipline or violence.

Fourteen informants participated in the study, consisting of 10 parents and 4 children/adolescents living in the same households and directly involved in daily digital

parenting practices. Informants were selected purposively using the following criteria: (1) parents with children aged 10–15 years; (2) active use of gadgets and internet-based communication in family life; and (3) willingness to share experiences related to parenting interactions and digital control. Variation in gender, age, and socioeconomic background was considered to enrich perspectives. Participation was voluntary and based on informed consent. For interviews with children, consent was also obtained from parents/guardians. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by using coded identifiers (e.g., P1, A1).

Data were collected through moderate participant observation to capture interaction patterns and symbolic practices in everyday life, semi-structured interviews to explore experiences and interpretations of emotional, verbal, and digital violence, and documentation in the form of field notes and relevant supporting materials (Sugiyono, 2022). Interview questions focused not only on observable practices but also on the meanings attributed to digital control, discipline, and fear within parent–child relationships.

To enhance credibility, the study applied triangulation of sources and techniques, member checking, and systematic documentation of the research process. Reflexivity was maintained through continuous reflection on the researcher’s positionality and potential interpretive bias during analysis. Data analysis followed qualitative case study procedures adapted from Yin, including data organization and reduction, thematic categorization, pattern matching between empirical findings and the symbolic interactionism framework, explanation building, and conclusion drawing (Sapto Haryoko, 2020).

C. Results and Discussion

1. Results

Violence in parent–child relationships in the studied urban families does not primarily manifest through physical acts, but through everyday interactional practices that acquire meaning within communication processes. Emotional withdrawal, verbal reprimands, digital restrictions, and mediated threats appear as routine forms of discipline, yet their meaning differs between parents and children. These findings show that violence operates through symbolic and relational processes rather than visible physical force.

Non-physical violence emerges through interactional practices interpreted differently by parents and children

Emotional and verbal practices such as silence, shouting, and labeling function as part of daily discipline. However, these actions gain meaning through interaction rather than intention alone.

"When my child does something wrong, I just ignore them. I let them think about it themselves,"(P1).

"When I am ignored, I feel sad and confused about what I did wrong," (A1).

"If my child plays with their cell phone too much, I get angry and immediately yell at them to stop,"(P2)

"I'd rather stay in my room than go out, afraid of being scolded again," (A2).

These responses show that parental silence and shouting operate as symbolic actions. While parents frame them as corrective discipline, children interpret them as emotional rejection and intimidation. Meaning is therefore negotiated in interaction, illustrating how non-physical violence can function through emotional distance and fear rather than physical punishment.

Digital control functions as a medium of symbolic power

Control over digital access confiscating phones, restricting internet use, or sending threatening messages emerges as a central mechanism of authority in digitally mediated families.

"If he misbehaves, I immediately take his cell phone and keep it," (P4)

"My phone was taken suddenly without warning, I became afraid and didn't dare to ask," (A3).

"If you don't come home now, sleep outside and I'll take your cell phone!" (P5).

"I'm scared when my dad sends a message like that, even though I was just playing for a little while," (A4).

Because digital devices carry social and emotional significance, restricting access becomes a powerful symbolic act. Authority is exercised not through physical force but through control over connection, producing fear and compliance. Technology thus mediates symbolic power within family relationships.

The empirical boundary between digital discipline and digital violence lies in interactional meaning

Findings indicate that control itself is not inherently violent. The boundary between discipline and violence is shaped by communicative processes and psychological impact. Digital discipline is characterized by explanation, dialogue, and consistency, while digital violence involves unilateral decisions, threats, repeated emotional pressure, and children's fear or withdrawal.

"If it's explained slowly, I understand. But if I'm threatened directly, I'm scared," (A3).

This distinction shows that violence emerges when authority is exercised through fear rather than mutual understanding. Establishing this boundary prevents overgeneralization and demonstrates that symbolic meaning, not control alone, defines violence.

Social anxieties and norms legitimize repressive digital control

Parental practices are shaped by fears about online risks and community expectations, which legitimize strict control as responsible parenting.

"Now children are vulnerable to the influence of cell phones, one of which is the risk of falling into online gambling, so we have to supervise them more strictly," (P5)

"I see that many children today go too far because of their cell phones, so I'm afraid my child will do the same," (P6).

Anxiety and social comparison transform surveillance and restriction into moral obligations, obscuring their potential as non-physical violence. Across the findings, a consistent difference appears in how parents and children define the same practices. Parents frame control as protection and responsibility, while children interpret it as distrust and domination. This "meaning gap" demonstrates that violence is socially constructed through unequal interpretive power, where parental definitions dominate interaction and children's meanings become marginalized. This dynamic enables the normalization of symbolic violence in everyday family life.

2. Discussion

The findings show that violence in parent-child relationships in the digital era increasingly operates through non-physical and digitally mediated interactional practices rather than through physical force. Emotional withdrawal, verbal reprimands, and digital restrictions become consequential not simply because they occur, but because they acquire meaning within everyday interpretive processes between parents and children. This aligns with evidence that psychological aggression (e.g., harsh verbal discipline) is a prevalent form of harsh discipline and can shape children's emotional responses depending on how parenting actions are interpreted within the relational climate (Wang et al., 2018). Parents tend to define such practices as legitimate discipline aimed at protection and moral guidance, while children often experience them as rejection, intimidation, and distrust. In digitally mediated contexts, restrictive parental monitoring—often framed as prevention—can also function as a control strategy that is closely tied to broader family dynamics and perceived problematic outcomes, underscoring how "protection" may be experienced by children as intrusive or mistrustful (Hernandez et al., 2024). This divergence indicates that violence is produced not only by behavior but also by conflicting definitions of the situation, where the same act is interpreted differently within unequal family power relations (Nugroho et al., 2020).

This pattern helps explain why non-physical violence is frequently normalized in family life. When public and institutional attention remains focused on visible categories—especially physical and sexual violence—subtle emotional, verbal, and symbolic forms of harm can be obscured and treated as "ordinary" parenting practices (Ismail, 2023; Prastini, 2024). In the Pinang Mas context, digitalization does not merely introduce external risks to children; it reshapes how authority is exercised and communicated inside the household. Technology becomes embedded in daily discipline practices, including monitoring, unilateral restrictions, and threats mediated through messaging platforms. This confirms critiques of digital parenting perspectives that focus primarily on technology as a risk factor for children while paying less attention to how parents actively deploy digital tools as instruments of control in everyday power relations (Amelia Putri & Munawar, 2023).

Symbolic interactionism clarifies the mechanism through which authority and violence are produced. Parental authority is sustained through repeated interpretive claims that define what counts as “care,” “discipline,” and “protection,” while children’s interpretations—fear, confusion, and emotional hurt—may remain unrecognized. When meaning-making becomes unilateral and dialogical exchange diminishes, discipline shifts into symbolic domination. This interactional shift is crucial: it shows that the boundary between guidance and violence is not determined solely by parental intention, but by the communicative structure and psychological impact of the practice within the relationship.

A key analytical contribution of this study is the distinction between digital discipline and digital violence. The findings suggest that digital control is not inherently violent. Digital discipline is characterized by explanation, dialogue, and consistency that allow children to interpret restrictions as guidance and protection. Digital violence, in contrast, is marked by unilateral decisions, threats, repeated emotional pressure, and children’s outcomes such as fear, withdrawal, and distrust. This distinction aligns with digital parenting literature that emphasizes dialogical mediation and relational competence in managing children’s technology use, particularly to prevent harmful psychological effects (Putri et al., 2025; Sisbintari & Setiawati, 2021).

The findings also extend family sociology by conceptualizing digital control as symbolic power. Digital devices mediate children’s access to social connection, communication, and emotional security; therefore, restricting access operates as a symbolic act of authority—control over connectivity becomes control over relational participation. In practice, parental anxiety over digital risks and social pressures to demonstrate “responsible parenting” can legitimize restrictive practices as moral obligations, even when children experience them as intimidation. This helps contextualize why digital control may be normalized despite its psychological consequences, especially amid heightened concerns about online harms (Cholimah et al., 2025).

Practically, these findings imply that prevention should focus on improving communication processes rather than simply reducing parental control. Non-violent communication in digitally mediated parenting requires clear explanations of rules, opportunities for children’s voice, and avoidance of threats or humiliating labels. Digital parenting literacy programs should therefore move beyond technical monitoring toward relational and communicative competence, including awareness of power dynamics and children’s lived experiences, so that protection does not transform into symbolic domination (Cholimah et al., 2025).

D. Conclusion

This study shows that violence in urban parent–child relationships in the digital era increasingly shifts from visible physical acts to more subtle non-physical and digitally mediated practices. Based on a qualitative case study in the Pinang Mas Housing Complex, Bengkulu City, involving participant observation, semi-structured interviews with 14 informants (parents and children aged 10–15), and documentation, the findings indicate that emotional withdrawal, verbal intimidation, and digital restrictions dominate

everyday interactions. These practices frequently appear as routine discipline, yet they produce different psychological meanings for parents and children.

The study further demonstrates that the shift and normalization of these practices are driven by social factors, particularly parental anxiety over digital risks, social pressure to display “responsible parenting,” and limited digital parenting literacy. These factors legitimize excessive monitoring, threats, and unilateral restrictions as protective measures, even when children experience them as fear, intimidation, and distrust. The most consistent pattern across cases is a meaning gap: parents interpret digital control as care and responsibility, while children interpret the same practices as domination and relational insecurity.

Theoretically, the study contributes to family sociology by conceptualizing digital control as a form of symbolic power—authority exercised not through physical force, but through control over access to devices, internet connectivity, and communication. In doing so, it extends symbolic interactionism by showing how digital infrastructures (devices, messaging platforms, and internet access) mediate meaning-making processes that can normalize non-physical violence in everyday family life. Practically, these findings suggest that child protection and digital parenting frameworks should move beyond a narrow focus on physical–sexual violence and incorporate recognition of symbolic and relational harm, emphasizing dialogical rule-setting, children’s voice, and non-violent communication so that protective intentions do not transform into symbolic domination.

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