DIGITAL FAMILY DISCOURSE: HOW PARENTS AND TEENAGERS COMMUNICATE MORAL BOUNDARIES THROUGH MESSAGING APPS IN UZBEKISTAN AND ENGLISH-SPEAKING COUNTRIES

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Abstract: *With the rapid spread of digital communication technologies, family interaction has increasingly shifted to online platforms, particularly messaging applications such as WhatsApp, Telegram, and Messenger. This study explores how parents and teenagers construct and negotiate moral boundaries through digital discourse in Uzbek and English-speaking families. Drawing on pragmatic and discourse-analytic frameworks, the paper examines directive speech acts, moral evaluations, mitigation strategies, and relational positioning in parent–adolescent messaging. The findings reveal both culturally shared and culture-specific pragmatic strategies in digital moral guidance. While Uzbek parents tend to employ indirect moralizing, religious references, and honor-based appeals, English-speaking parents more frequently use autonomy-supportive language, collaborative framing, and emotional alignment. The study highlights how digital media reshape traditional authority relations and moral socialization practices in contemporary families.*

Keywords: *digital discourse, parent–teen communication, moral boundaries, pragmatics, Uzbek families, English-speaking families*

Introduction

Digital communication has profoundly transformed family discourse, particularly in parent–adolescent interaction. Messaging applications now function not only as tools for logistical coordination but also as spaces for moral instruction, emotional support, and behavioral regulation. Parents increasingly use text-based communication to guide, monitor, and correct adolescents' behavior, thereby constructing moral boundaries in digitally mediated ways (Herring, 2013; Tagg, 2015).

In culturally diverse contexts, these digital practices reflect deeply embedded moral values, authority structures, and communicative norms. In Uzbek families, moral discourse is traditionally grounded in collectivist ethics, religious values, and respect for elders, whereas in English-speaking families it is more closely aligned with individual autonomy and emotional expressiveness (Hofstede, 2011; Ting-Toomey, 2015).

This paper aims to examine how moral boundaries are pragmatically enacted through messaging apps in Uzbek and English-speaking families, focusing on directive speech acts, politeness strategies, moral framing, and relational positioning.
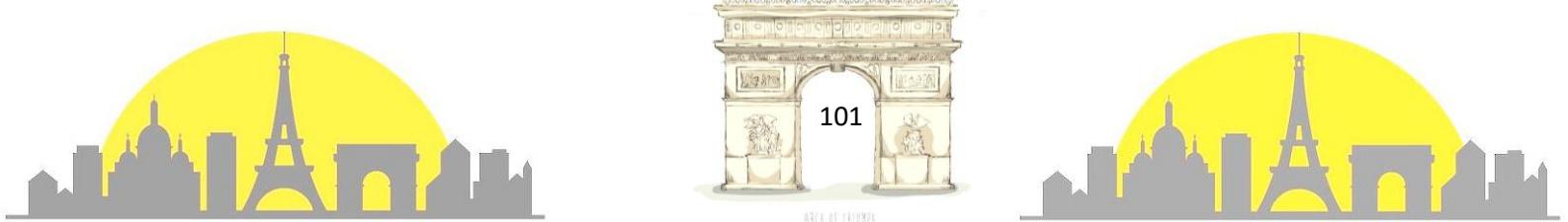
This study draws on three interrelated frameworks:

Speech Act Theory (Searle, 1975), particularly directives (advice, warnings, requests, prohibitions) and expressives (concern, disappointment, approval).

Politeness Theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987), focusing on face-threatening acts, mitigation, and indirectness.

Digital Discourse Analysis (Herring, 2013; Androutsopoulos, 2014), emphasizing how medium-specific features shape interactional norms.

Moral boundary construction is understood as a pragmatic process through which parents define acceptable and unacceptable behavior using linguistic, cultural, and emotional resources (Kuczynski & Parkin, 2007).

Methodology

The data consist of anonymized parent–teen message exchanges collected from:

20 Uzbek families

20 English-speaking families (U.S. and U.K.)

The messages were coded for:
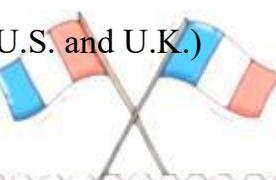
Types of directives

Moral framing strategies

Politeness markers and mitigation

Use of cultural and religious references

Emotional positioning

Qualitative discourse analysis was complemented by frequency-based pragmatic categorization.

Directive Strategies in Digital Moral Guidance

Uzbek parents predominantly employ indirect directives and moral reminders, often embedded in religious or honor-based language:

"Namozingni o'qishni unutma, bu sen uchun ham, biz uchun ham muhim."

(Don't forget your prayer; it is important for both you and us.)

Such messages reflect collectivist moral framing and the use of soft imperatives mitigated by moral justification.

In contrast, English-speaking parents favor autonomy-supportive directives:

"I'm not mad, but I think you should be home earlier next time for your own safety."

These directives emphasize personal responsibility rather than obedience.

Uzbek parents frequently use:

Endearments (bolam, jonim)

Religious appeals

Implicit authority

English-speaking parents rely more on:

Hedging (I think, maybe)

Emotional alignment (I'm worried about you)

Collaborative framing (let's agree on…)

This confirms Brown and Levinson's (1987) claim that politeness strategies are culturally variable.
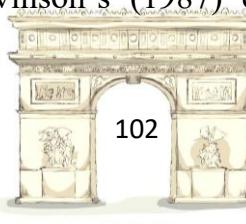
Conclusion

The study demonstrates that messaging apps have become crucial spaces for moral socialization in contemporary families. While both Uzbek and English-speaking parents use digital discourse to construct moral boundaries, they do so through culturally distinct pragmatic strategies.

Uzbek parents rely on indirect moralization, religious framing, and collectivist values, whereas English-speaking parents favor autonomy-supportive language and emotional alignment. These findings highlight the interplay between culture, pragmatics, and digital media in shaping family discourse.

Future research may expand the dataset and include multimodal features such as emojis, voice messages, and read-receipts.

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