



FEAR-BASED MARKETING OF PARENTAL MONITORING TOOLS: REINFORCING OVERCONTROL AND CHILD DEPENDENCE

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p>DOI: 10.52932/jfmr.v4i2ene.1107</p> <p><i>Received:</i> September 20, 2025</p> <p><i>Accepted:</i> February 24, 2026</p> <p><i>Published:</i> March 25, 2026</p> <p>Keywords: Advertising ethics, Fear appeals, Overcontrolling parenting, Parental monitoring, Surveillance technologies</p> <p>JEL codes: M31; M37; D91</p>	<p>In the context of digital parenting, many campaigns appeal to parental fears to promote monitoring apps and access-restriction devices. This study examines how such advertising strengthens overcontrolling tendencies and reshapes perceptions of “good parenting”. A qualitative content analysis was conducted on ten video ads coded for five fear themes (loss of control, cyberbullying, online predators, digital addiction, physical danger) and five solution strategies (monitoring, filtering, location tracking, screen time limits, and non-internet devices). The results show that fear of losing control was present in approximately 90% of the sample, often in relation to cyberbullying or physical threats. The two dominant solution strategies were monitoring apps and non-internet devices. Across the sample, these solutions framed parents as vigilant guardians and children as passive dependents. This threat–solution narrative turns anxiety into reassurance and implicitly normalizes tech monitoring as responsible parenting. The findings illustrate how fear appeals may be used to justify excessive surveillance and reconfigure parenting norms in the digital era, but they also emphasize the importance of conducting ethical marketing activities, informing users of potential privacy threats, and maintaining an appropriate balance between safety and independence.</p>

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1. Introduction

Parents' worries about their children's safety and wellbeing are increasingly addressed through monitoring technologies and restrictive devices in the digital age. This behavior has been referred to by academics as "parenting out of control" (Nelson, 2010), a pattern marked by increased worry, hypervigilance, and micromanagement of children's lives. However, these methods can limit children's freedom and strengthen parental authority in ways that make it difficult to distinguish between control and caring.

Many individuals associate "good parenting" with ongoing supervision. Despite being portrayed as protecting children, this watchfulness often restricts children's freedom and encourages reliance on parental consent. This ideology also reinforced by the advertising techniques. By amplifying parental insecurity, these messages construct hyper-controlling behavior as natural and even necessary, ultimately encouraging parents to purchase products or services that promise security, proximity, and authority.

Over the last two decades, the expansion of parental control technologies has coincided with a rise in advertisements that frame parenting through risk, vigilance, and constant supervision. What remains unanswered is how parent-child relations are discursively configured by a fear-based advertising logic that positions a watchful eye, or monitoring solutions, as a moral imperative to responsible parenting. In this light, the current study aims to investigate the indications of fear-based advertising that stimulate parental fears and emphasize responsible parenting, with particular emphasis on the Vietnamese's culture.

The study employs a qualitative content analysis of advertisements regarding three criteria: (1) parents are the primary intended

audience, (2) fear appeals are explicitly or implicitly embedded in the messaging, and (3) the promoted products or services enable or reinforce parental control over children. Each advertisement is coded using an analytic framework that captures fear appeals, portrayals of children, and proposed solutions, along with media characteristics, visual design, and linguistic strategies. The analysis examines how these elements resonate with parental insecurities, with attention to recurring motifs and persuasive strategies across the dataset.

2. Literature review

This study examines how marketing appeals to concerns associated with helicopter or overcontrolling parenting. Digital media's pervasiveness makes parental monitoring, which borders on overstepping, possible. In doing so, the study contributes to consumer research by showing how advertising links safety, authority, and care in ways that normalize monitoring and control.

Theoretical foundations: Parenting, control, and consumer influence

Family decision-making models

The U.S. Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA, 2022) defines a family as "a group of two or more people related by birth, marriage or adoption who live together." Within the consumer research, family has long been recognized as a central unit of decision-making with parental influence playing a pivotal role in shaping purchasing patterns and consumption behaviors.

Parenting styles and control orientation

Baumrind's (1966) typology, later refined by Maccoby and Martin (1983), identified four primary parenting styles: authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, and uninvolved. Later research (Nelson, 2010; Segrin et al., 2012)

has focused on how increased psychological control is a manifestation of authoritarian and overcontrolling tendencies. Pervasive surveillance, stringent rule enforcement, and frequent intrusions into children's autonomy are characteristics of this type of control (Padilla-Walker & Nelson, 2012). These actions are a reflection of both parental fears that conflate dominance and guidance with efforts to protect children.

Parental mediation theory

A helpful lens for analyzing how parents control their children's interaction with media, technology, and consumer contexts is Parental Mediation Theory (Clark, 2011). While restrictive mediation implies the imposition of norms and limits, which are similar to authoritarian control tactics, active mediation places an emphasis on communication and cooperative meaning-making. Restrictive mediation in the context of overcontrol goes beyond media regulation to include consumer decision-making, restricting children's freedom and bolstering parental power in material and digital spheres.

Cultural variations in parental norms and control

In addition to those described above, Eastern parenting practices have certain unique cultural constructs that shape the way parental control can be characterized. In this context, one may refer to such a phenomenon as paternalism, which serves as an important aspect of many Asian families. Paternalism, in turn, implies the inherent connection between love and management (Chao, 1994), making it difficult to distinguish between protection and surveillance (Ng et al., 2022). For instance, in Vietnamese families, filial piety, a traditional Confucian value, has a complex structure involving the concepts of reciprocal filial piety (based on gratitude and affection) and

authoritarian filial piety (centered around respect for parents' decisions and opinions) due to the hierarchical organization of the roles within a family (Mestechkina et al., 2014). This blending of cultural values regarding protection and surveillance makes it possible for companies to use fear-based marketing practices, in that ads can exploit these existing cultural values and cast the surveillance tools as an inevitable and even necessary part of "good parenting."

2.1. Distinctive traits of overcontrolling parents

Overcontrolling parents often perceive the world as highly threatening, unpredictable, and morally risky (Nelson, 2010). Such perception leads to a need to use monitoring instruments such as GPS-tracking programs, monitoring software for computers, and video surveillance systems (Clark, 2011). In this case, small risks are perceived as important threats requiring vigilant attitude and control.

These parents tend to be especially attracted by services aimed at protection, control, and prevention. Moreover, their decision-making process is influenced by confirmation bias when they pay attention only to those pieces of information supporting their initial belief in the importance of constant control. This study therefore focuses not on individual parents' psychology, but on how advertising constructs an idealized parental subject defined by anxiety, vigilance, and control. In other words, this study examines how advertising shapes consumer subjectivity without making claims about the psychology of parents.

2.2. Fear appeals in parenting-related advertising

Fear appeal theory and Protection Motivation Theory

The fear appeals method works by using fear as well as offering some form of protection

from the potential hazard. In many cases, such a form of protection can be in the use of certain products or services aimed at preventing the undesirable outcome (Witte & Allen, 2000). According to the Protection Motivation Theory (Rogers, 1975; Maddux & Rogers, 1983), fear-based communication is likely to succeed in convincing an individual if the danger being communicated about is viewed as both severe and credible. Such individuals will easily buy into the idea because they have a high predisposition towards fears.

Parenting context

Advertisers have often capitalized on parental anxieties through advertising campaigns portraying parenting, especially motherhood, to be a highly precarious undertaking. As highlighted by VOICE Group (2010), advertisers have used such campaigns to portray mothers as being worried about the welfare of their offspring and therefore having to constantly protect them from threats like getting ill, injured, or failing at school. They have also portrayed consumption behaviors as ways of overcoming such dangers.

Message strategies

The fear appeals directed at parents are likely to use a set of visual techniques that include emotional appeal, where one is shown an unhappy kid who lacks the product, while another kid who has the product appears happy, authority appeal, where one sees expert endorsement for the product, urgency appeal, which stresses the need for prompt action to avoid danger, and social judgment appeal, where one infers that good parents take measures to safeguard their kids.

Such tactics do not only promote product usage but also perpetuate the idea of over-surveillance.

Existing empirical research and the content analysis approaches

A substantial body of scholarship has focused on advertising to both parents and children. In child-directed advertising studies, content has been analyzed to examine message framing, visual communication, and emotional information (Lapierre et al., 2011). In health communication research, fear messaging has been examined, raising issues of concern but also of its persuasiveness (Hastings et al., 2004). The present study contributes to this tradition by using content analysis to examine how visual, verbal, and emotional elements combine to create persuasive meaning in advertising.

2.3. Research gaps

Theoretical gaps

While Family Decision-Making Models (Beatty & Talpade, 1994) and Protection Motivation Theory (Rogers, 1975; Witte & Allen, 2000) provided valuable frameworks for analyzing parental influence and the persuasive function of fear appeals, their integration remains rare in studies of overcontrolling parents. Most parenting research considers parental control within the broader typologies rather than as an independent lens through which analyze the advertising strategies.

Empirical and methodological gap

While existing literature leans towards the consequences of overparenting (Van der Bruggen et al., 2008; Padilla-Walker & Nelson, 2012), or the effectiveness of fear appeals generally for health/safety campaigns (Tannenbaum et al., 2015), few studies actually extend the analysis to the effectiveness of fear marketing for the design and intent behind appealing to overcontrolling parents. While studies on digital parenting and the literature on parental mediation does discuss over-

monitoring and surveillance by parents (Clark, 2011), few studies actually examine how marketing communication actively normalize over-monitoring.

Practical and ethical gaps

For marketers, educators and policymakers, The limited research base constrains marketers, educators, and policymakers in developing informed and ethical forms of parent engagement. This gap limits our ability to understand which of the persuasive strategies appeal to the overcontrolling parents, which bars developing standards for ethical advertisement and makes moral implications of commercializing invasive surveillance an underexamined aspect. This means that the most important ethical debates on these issues remain highly speculative at best, without sufficient grounding in empirical findings.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research approach: Qualitative content analysis

This study uses qualitative content analysis to explore the meaning in the communicated messages beyond simple frequency or straightforward assessment (Krippendorff, 2019; Schreier, 2012). Accordingly, following the guidelines suggested by Schreier (2012), a coding frame has been created, which not only includes the category of data and its definition but also the decision rules. This approach is well suited to advertisements because it captures how visual and narrative devices work together to produce meaning. (Lapierre et al., 2011). The framework also relies on the fear appeal study literature in health communication, including the Extended Parallel Process Model and the fear appeal effects through a series of meta-analyses (Witte & Allen, 2000; Tannenbaum et al., 2015), as well as how monitoring is framed as part of a “responsible parenting” logic.

Even though the data used for this study were taken from ads in international markets, the model can decode complicated emotional and cultural techniques and will likely be effective in studying Vietnam in the future. The use of qualitative methodologies gives the flexibility required to identify the way ads relate to certain cultural circumstances, including those found in the highly digitized world of Vietnamese youth (Nguyen et al., 2022). This interpretation is important in order to reveal the cultural scenario and logic underpinning the transition of concerns about child safety into the need for technological control.

Coding scheme and analytical categories

A coding scheme with nine analytical categories was developed to capture different dimensions of fear-based advertising appeals: (1) Product or service type, (2) Fear appeal exploited, (3) Threat intensity, (4) Child description (age, gender), (5) Role of the child in the narrative, (6) Emotional expression, (7) Level of child agency, (8) Proposed solution offered by the product/service, (9) Emotional outcome after product adoption

These categories were consistently applied across all sampled advertisements to ensure the systematic comparison and the identification of recurring patterns.

3.2. Sample and analytical framework

The targeted sampling method was used for selecting those advertisements that would contain valuable information and context related to the research objectives, giving preference to conceptuality over generalizability (Palinkas et al., 2015; Campbell et al., 2020). Such a method proves efficient and appropriate for conducting qualitative studies where comprehension of mechanisms and implications of interest is essential, while frequency remains secondary.

Ten advertisements were chosen to be analyzed in the study according to the criteria

elaborated to ensure their direct relevance to the topic of fear-based marketing. First, all selected advertisements had to be directed at parents whose children attend schools or colleges as they represent a population whose interests lie in children's safety both online and offline. Secondly, the inclusion of fear-based techniques into the advertisements was essential for analyzing the way anxiety is created by marketers and then exploited for promotional purposes. Thirdly, it was necessary for the selected advertisements to relate to those products that help to control the child. Lastly, the advertisements chosen are publicly available on video sharing platforms such as YouTube, making it possible to conduct an in-depth qualitative analysis.

Sample size selection involved an iterative process of data gathering and analysis until theoretical saturation was achieved (Saunders et al., 2018). In empirical terms, saturation has been described as the point where analysis of the ads no longer yields any additional themes concerning the main fear appeals (F1-F5) and control solutions (S1-S5) described in the coding template. As such, it can be said that the chosen sample size provided adequate coverage of all the rich persuasion methods employed in the genre, serving as a good base for further analysis. Three product models were identified: monitoring/filtering software programs, geolocation-based technology, and hard-restriction access systems.

Such an approach makes comparison between the product models and the fears/solutions employed easier.

Analytical Framework: This three-part framework serves as a primary tool in analyzing how several advertisements create a link between certain fears and technology-based solutions. The spectrum of controls, from monitoring to restriction, is a crucial component that allows an examination of normalization of

controls with regards to proper parenting. The framework also allows for cross-product comparisons, such as how a fear, such as F3, is addressed by monitoring solutions versus restriction solutions, which ultimately creates a link towards purchase motivation. Although there is a relatively low chance of generalizing the data from a larger statistical point of view, it offers a conceptually rich framework from which in-depth exploratory themes can be analyzed with regards to common rhetorical devices within this type of advertisement.

Data analysis procedure

The advertisements were then coded according to categories designed to capture explicit and implicit fear appeals conveyed through language, tone, visuals, and narrative structure. The portrayal of children in various forms, by age, gender, representation, and level of autonomy, was particularly scrutinized. The advertising was further assessed on the level at which the product was presented as a solution to address and prevent fear, empower the parents, and protect the children. This process allowed recurring fear-based persuasive patterns to be identified across the sample

The qualitative data analysis process was conducted through a systematic procedure, which involved two linked processes: (1) Coding and Reliability Testing, and (2) Analysis and Theme Interpretation.

Phase 1: Coding and reliability assurance

The author employed a pre-defined coding scheme over the entire sample set. Additionally, to guarantee rigor, the internal reliability of the coder was checked as well. To assess intra-coder reliability, the author recoded a randomly selected 30% subsample after a four-week interval to reduce memory bias. The consistency between two codings, as calculated by the Kappa coefficient, which equals 0.86, is within the "near perfect agreement" range, as

defined by Landis and Koch (1977). The audit trail for this entire process facilitates enhanced transparency, as explained by McHugh (2012).

Phase 2: Topic analysis and interpretation

After conducting a reliability analysis, the coded data were analyzed for pattern recognition, relationships among the codes, and broader thematic concerns. This stage moved beyond categorization to interpret how combinations of fear and solution codes (e.g., F1 with S1) framed surveillance as a caring form of parenting

3.3. Research contributions

This study offers valuable contributions. First, it combines elements of parenting psychology and marketing literature by elucidating fear appeals from a unique perspective concerning highly controlling parental target groups. Secondly, it imparts useful findings to marketers on the significant differences in terms of demarcating ethics related to fear appeals, with implications for policymakers, educational institutions, and child advocacy groups on strategies to equitably relate to parents. Finally, this study illustrates utility within the qualitative content analysis approach, which elucidates fear appeals within critical scenarios related to purchaser behavior,

where parental fear may be highly influential. Information about the analyzed advertisements, in general terms (*see Appendix 1*).

Appendix 2 (*see Appendix 2*) below complements this by describing how children are depicted, both explicitly and implicitly, highlighting their roles, emotional expressions, and levels of agency.

Appendix 3 (*see Appendix 3*) below summarizes the solutions offered in each advertisement and the corresponding emotional outcomes promised to parents.

Appendix 4 (*see Appendix 4*) below outlines the tone of voice used in narration and visuals, clarifying how different communicative styles influence audience reception.

3.4. Coding scheme and binary coding explanation

Codes like F1 and F2 depict particular fears, whereas codes like S1 and S5 illustrate potential solutions. Every code presented in Table 1 is explained so that it can be consistently interpreted throughout various advertisements. There is a definition associated with each code as well as an example to assist in maintaining consistency while analyzing the content. The coding procedure utilized in this study is illustrated below in Table 1.

Table 1. Coding categories for fear appeals and advertising elements

Code	Theme	Brief description
F1	Fear of losing control	Parents' fear of losing control over their children
F2	Cyberbullying	Fear that children will be bullied online
F3	Exposure to predators	Fear that children will contact online predators
F4	Online addiction	Fear of children becoming addicted to technology
F5	Physical danger	Fear of physical harm or accidents
S1	Surveillance	Presence of parental monitoring apps/devices
S2	Blocking/filtering	Blocking or filtering inappropriate content
S3	Location tracking	GPS tracking or location monitoring features
S4	Limiting device use	Limits on device usage (screen time)
S5	No internet device	Devices without internet or social media access

After defining the categories, the next step is to use the coding system on the advertisements to see if the theme appears. This method of coding is binary (1 or 0) coding, where the code 1 shows the presence of the element within

each advertisement, while code 0 stands for its absence. The following table (Table 2) shows the results of binary coding with respect to each of the fear appeals (F1-F5) and solution strategies (S1-S5).

Table 2. Binary coding matrix of fear appeals and solution strategies across advertisements

Advertisement	F1	F2	F3	F4	F5	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5
Bark	1	1	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	0
Qustodio	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	0
Norton Family	1	0	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	0
Canopy	1	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	0
Gabb Wireless	1	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	1
Find My Kids	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	1	0	0
Mobicip	0	1	0	1	0	1	1	1	1	0
Net Nanny	1	1	0	1	0	1	1	0	1	0
mSpy	1	1	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	0
TackGPS	1	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	1

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Results

It becomes clear from these results that fear appeals serve as the principal method of persuasion within the selected ads. In these ads, the idea of fear is constantly associated with technological products promising safety, security, and regained authority for parents. Based on Nelson's (2010) parenting out of control concept, fear appeals can be said to exploit people's insecurities and fear of not being able to keep track of their children.

A major research question that guided the analysis was: How do fear-based advertisements influence overcontrolling parents' purchasing decisions, and what kinds of emotional, verbal, and visual strategies are employed? Results indicated that advertisers purposefully deploy a combination of emotional triggers, narrative framing, and symbolic imagery to amplify parental concerns.

Fear of loss of control was one of the most common themes among the sample, which appearing in 90% of all advertisements used in this study. Verbal appeals consisted of dangerous, urgent, or even destructive wording, for instance, "never lose sight again" or "protect them before it is too late." In addition, visual techniques were aimed at increasing fear by means of contrast (dark shadows, flashing lights, fast pace, and worried child faces).

However, in order for the fear appeals to be effective, they needed to follow a certain structure, namely, after raising parental fears, an advertised product was presented as a solution to their problems. As a rule, the conclusion phase would involve warm lighting, family reunion scenes with voice-over stressing regained control and safety for their children. Thus, in this regard, fear appeals could prove especially effective for overcontrolling parents.

RQ1 – To what extent do emotional and linguistic appeals in advertising trigger parental anxiety or fear?

Findings demonstrate that fear-based appeals were not incidental but served as the central persuasive mechanism across the dataset. Advertisers used psychological triggers and language to escalate parents' fears, using combinations of different fears to increase urgency and reduce deliberation.

F1 – Fear of losing control emerged as the dominant theme, appearing in nine advertisements. They were often represented by situations where the parents failed to connect or find their children, or by the physical separation of the child from his/her parents at a time of uncertainty. The representations suggested that simply being present was not enough for the parents.

F2 – Fear of cyberbullying appeared in six advertisements, often conveyed through flashing on-screen threats, abusive text messages or distressed children unable to verbalize their experiences.

F3 – Exposure to predators featured in three advertisements with portrayals of children immersed in gaming or social media, reinforcing technology as simultaneously dangerous without parental control and manageable with the advertised product.

F4 – Online addiction was present in four advertisements, typically portrayed through children becoming excessively absorbed in screens, disengaged from their surroundings, or unable to regulate their device use.

F5 – Physical danger appeared in three advertisements, usually dramatized through scenarios in which children were shown alone in unsafe environments, getting lost in public spaces, or facing potential offline harm.

Most advertisements combined such fears, most frequently combining either F1 with F2 or

with F4 to form an emotional climax. The latter approach is consistent with persuasion theories that show that high urgency levels decrease rational thinking and favor solutions offered.

RQ2 – How do advertisements portray the parent-child relationship in ways that reinforce ideals of “good parenting” through surveillance or control?

Across the sample, portrayals of the parent-child relationship were consistently asymmetrical, emphasizing parental authority and child dependency. Children were portrayed either as a passive victim (such as bullied, seduced, or facing inappropriate content on the internet) or as a protected object, which required protection through technology.

While some ads took this perspective even further by suggesting very controlling approaches, with Gabb Wireless providing only a means for calls and texts that prevented any online interaction, TackGPS made children an object that can be constantly tracked and monitored. In other products (Bark, Qustodio, Norton Family, Find My Kids, Mobicip, Canopy, Net Nanny, mSpy), children could do different things, yet parental control was at the forefront.

Throughout these narratives, the “good parent” is equated with vigilance and supervision. While “unvigilant” parents are associated with the risk of loss, the use of control technology is framed as a moral expression of love and responsibility, thereby legitimizing the act of supervision.

RQ3 – What visual cues are most frequently employed to depict parental authority, protection, or risk?

The visual rhetoric was crucial in shaping the audience's impression regarding the risk, authority, and need for intervention by the parents. Six of the ten advertisements visually emphasized surveillance features (S1),

often through simple interface animations highlighting content filtering (S2), location tracking (S3), and device-use limits (S4)

Conversely, previous ad sequences had illustrated children in a precarious state, either upset, exposed to risks, or at the risk of danger. For instance, Bark captured a scene of a child being bullied by nasty remarks online; mSpy had a teen hiding secret texts, implying that she was communicating in secret, posing a threat to her well-being; Qustodio had a shy child buried in the internet world.

Across the dataset, advertisements employed a consistent threat–resolution arc: scenes with dark lighting, tense pacing, and distressed child expressions in the “before” segment transitioned into warm lighting, smiling faces, and family harmony after the product’s introduction. This rhetorical pattern underscored the promise of restored safety and parental authority through technological adoption.

RQ4 – Which types of products are most marketed to overcontrolling parents and what underlying fears do these products address?

Comprehensive monitoring solutions, restricted use devices, and GPS tracking tools were the three most common types of products in the study. Comprehensive monitoring solutions like Bark, Qustodio, Norton Family, Mobicip, Net Nanny, and mSpy combined geolocation, content protection, messaging, and screen time management services. These types of products dealt with F1 (fear of losing control), F2 (cyberbullying), and sometimes F3 (risk from predators). Restricted-use devices were represented in the study by products such as Gabb Wireless, which minimized risks using devices without empowering children. Finally, GPS tracking tools like TackGPS and Find My Kids focused on solving F1 (losing control) and F5 (physical danger). All three types of products had one core idea in common – any activity of a

child unattended by technology was dangerous, and thus, it is natural for parents to monitor their kids using technology.

Mapping of Research Questions to Findings

The insights gained from the four research questions show how the fear appeal advertisements leverage the combination of emotional arousal, product classification, and narrative structure. The findings indicate that emotional appeal (such as the fear of losing control and the fear of cyberbullying), product classification (monitoring applications and restriction tools), and narrative structures (threat-resolution structures) continuously reinforced each other to create compelling arguments. Collectively, these factors demonstrate how the advertisements not only capitalize on the anxieties of the parents but also perpetuate the notion of surveillance as a characteristic of “good parenting.”

Appendix 5 (*see Appendix 5*) summarizes the research questions, the key findings associated with each, and illustrative evidence from the analyzed advertisements.

4.2. Discussion

Synthesis of Key Findings and Evidence

Answering the general research question: What role does fear play in advertising products to overcontrolling parents, and how does this affect parent attitudes and child autonomy? The following three dynamics have been consistently observed in such advertisements:

- ✓ Fear appeals, particularly fear of losing control (F1), frequently compounded with fears of cyberbullying (F2) or physical safety risks (F3–F5), serve as the central persuasive strategy.
- ✓ Children are consistently depicted as weak, vulnerable, and lacking agency, reinforcing the narrative of parental indispensability.

- ✓ Advertisements employ a fear-to-solution rhetorical framework, amplifying risk perceptions and then offering immediate technological remedies (S1–S4).

These elements make the product not only effective, but also morally justified as an instrument used by parents who take their responsibilities seriously. For conscientious parents who are excessively controlling, such messages reinforce their concerns and increase surveillance.

Quantitative coding reinforced the centrality of fear-based appeals across the dataset:

- ✓ F1 (Fear of losing control) was present in 9 of the 10 advertisements (90%).
- ✓ S1 (Surveillance) and S3 (Location tracking) were featured in 8 of the 10 advertisements (80%).
- ✓ S2 (Content filtering) appeared in 8 of the 10 advertisements (80%).

These results have shown that advertisers effectively exploit the fear associated with overcontrolling parents by incorporating multiple fears, adopting an emotional tone, portraying children as vulnerable and needy, and providing technical solutions for ensuring protection and surveillance.

The Constructed Subject of the ‘Responsible Parent’

The findings suggest that fear-based advertising constructs an idealized image of the “responsible parent” as anxious, vigilant, and technologically equipped. This subjectivity is most clearly reflected in the dominance of fear of losing control (F1), which appeared in 90% of the advertisements, as well as in the repeated portrayal of surveillance and restriction as legitimate expressions of care. Across the sample, children were often depicted as vulnerable, passive, or lacking agency, while parents were positioned as the primary guardians responsible for anticipating and

managing risk. In this way, monitoring and control were not presented as excessive, but as morally appropriate responses to parental concern. This framing may be particularly resonant in cultural contexts such as Vietnam, where family hierarchy, parental responsibility, and sacrifice are strongly emphasized, and where care can be closely intertwined with guidance and control (Mestechkina et al., 2014). As a result, these advertisements do not simply sell protective products; they also promote a consumer identity of the parent as a “digital protector,” for whom technological vigilance becomes a normalized and responsible form of parenting.

5. Conclusion and implications

5.1. Theoretical contributions

This research makes a new contribution to the marketing discipline with its in-depth examination of the persuasion structure of fear-based advertisements of parental control tools, including their underlying persuasion mechanism: the creation of an understandable “threat–solution” narrative through a strategic association of parental fears, mainly the fear of losing control (F1), with technology-based surveillance, thus transforming the notion of over-controlling with a moral imperative of “good” parenting in the digital world. Going beyond the contribution to persuasion science, this research provides a new synthesis in terms of theory and methodology with the application of Parental Mediation Theory (Clark, 2011), including the creation of an replicable analytical model where fears (F1 to F5) correspond to solutions (S1 to S5).

An examination of each of ten advertisements shows that the modus operandi for all of them is, indeed, a fundamental approach based on the widely-presented theme of losing control, combined with other fears (thus, current events such as cyber-bullying and addictions from

technology abuse), culminating in a logical argument for product use, whose overall message is that a proper parental role always entails control of technology. In particular, analysis of Vietnam, as a culture heavily based on familial roles, can draw from these findings. However, the small qualitative sample supports conceptual insight rather than statistical generalization; future research should apply the framework to larger, culturally localized corpora and test downstream effects on parental attitudes, purchasing decisions, and child autonomy (Saunders et al., 2018).

5.2. Integration with Parental Mediation Theory

This paper adds to the existing literature on Parental Mediation Theory (Clark, 2011) by investigating the mechanisms through which fundamental aspects of parental mediation are marketed. Although the Parental Mediation Theory posits both restrictive (through rules) and active (through dialogical interaction) mediation as two competing yet equal strategies in parents' hands, we show how fear-driven advertisements pervert such an idea into something that not only "reinforces" restrictive mediation but even sells it to parents as a strategy that, via monitoring software (S1-S5), serves as the most direct, necessary, and responsible way of enhancing the threats posed (F1-F5). At the same time, active mediation does not feature in such advertising and is consistently ignored as an option, never being sold as an alternative way of dealing with the issues. What is more, fear marketing not only sells a product but, in fact, a certain relational approach which leads parents to adopt a controlling approach to parenting facilitated by technology.

5.3. Consideration of alternative explanations

Other alternative interpretations can also be taken into account. For example, the low level of children's agency might have been

employed merely to fit into the narrative and dramaturgical demands of storytelling, rather than for any purposeful overcontrol reinforcement. Moreover, the high levels of fear framing might have been chosen just to comply with the norms of general advertising and security product marketing rather than the particularities of overcontrolling parents' strategies.

The second possible interpretation would state that the depiction of children's passivity and the prevalence of fear are conventional traits of advertisements or security product marketing in general, rather than an intentional strategy. Yet, our findings indicate that they are being utilized in a strategic manner. Specifically, the clear and functional connection between children's vulnerability/threat and technological solutions (S1-S5), in addition to the lack of examples showing children's agency and/or alternative solutions that do not involve technology, demonstrates a logical explanation.

5.4. Practical, ethical, and broader implications

Practical implications for marketers

The results suggest that marketers must exercise caution when deploying fear-based strategies. Effective approaches include:

- ✓ Balancing fear appeals with empowering solutions to avoid backlash and build consumer trust.
- ✓ Pairing emotional triggers with credible, evidence-based demonstrations of product efficacy.
- ✓ Leveraging trusted parental platforms (such as parenting forums, Facebook groups) for targeted outreach.
- ✓ Continuously testing messaging for ethical resonance, cultural appropriateness, and responsiveness to evolving parental concerns.

Ethical considerations

However, while such techniques are quite effective in terms of commercial success, they present a great number of ethical dilemmas. The excessive use of fear tactics can lead to increasing distrust within families and the reinforcement of overbearing parenting. An excessive focus on the vulnerability of children can result in their further disempowerment, discouraging parents from teaching their kids to be more independent. The use of high threat communication can provoke excessive monitoring of children, hindering the development of their ability to regulate themselves.

Long-Term impact and broader implications

The long-term impact of fear-driven advertising are concerning. Continued messages of danger could contribute to the insecurities of parents, leading to increased surveillance of the child. This could hinder children from becoming independent and responsible adults in the future. It might also lead to deterioration of relationships among family members because of the distrust that will develop.

These types of advertisements are successful from a business standpoint, but they pose many issues when viewed from a broader perspective. There are policy issues regarding these marketing strategies, especially since there is a need for proper regulation to prevent any abuse of children's right to privacy.

5.5. Limitations and future directions

Firstly, although ten advertisements were enough for reaching the conceptual saturation for the F1-F5 and S1-S5 codes as well as for making a rich comparative analysis of three different types of products, this limited number does not provide the opportunity to look at the marketing strategies in their whole variety. Further research can prove and expand the effectiveness of the offered analytical scheme on a much larger sample of advertisements.

Secondly, as all chosen advertisements are presented on YouTube and in English, the research perspective is culturally narrow. However, as mentioned above, this choice was intended to capture globally circulating advertising patterns, but it also limits direct cultural transferability. At the same time, the results provided herein cannot be transferred to other cultural contexts directly since there might be more refined marketing campaigns in other cultural settings, where local norms and symbols might be used for manipulating consumers' fears. The developed F1-F5 and S1-S5 schemes offer researchers an approach to analyze advertisements in the target culture, e.g. Vietnamese one, for which further research may be needed. *Third*, the methodological choice to analyze publicly available video ads, while essential for accessing narrative and visual rhetoric, means the study does not capture more personalized or ephemeral ad formats (e.g., targeted social media feeds). This limitation underscores the need for multi-method approaches in future work.

Finally, this paper seeks to unravel the process of constructing persuasive messages without measuring their impact on parental behavior. Examining the effect of these fear-inducing stories on the attitudes of the parents and their decision-making as well as how these influence family relationships is a crucial step in future research directions.

AI-assisted translation statement

The author used an AI-based translation tool solely for language support and translation refinement. The tool was not used to generate ideas, analyze data, interpret findings, or make substantive intellectual contributions. All content, arguments, and final revisions were reviewed and approved by the author.

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