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"Rest easy": Subjectivity and the Cultural Embeddedness of Surveillance Capitalism

Christopher Dorn [1]

[1] Bielefeld University, Department of Sociology, Bielefeld-Germany,

Abstract This article examines how parental surveillance apps (PSAs) exemplify the cultural embeddedness of surveillance capitalism. While surveillance capitalism is often seen as primarily driven by technological infrastructures and operating independently of human subjectivity, this paper argues that PSAs gain traction precisely because they reinforce neoliberal ideals of responsible parenting. These apps promise to help parents fulfil cultural expectations of "good parenting" through digital monitoring, making them attractive not only for their technical functionality but also for their alignment with morally valued identities. Drawing on discourse analysis and theories of neoliberal subjectivity, the article shows how surveillance capitalism depends not only on data extraction and behavioural control but also on the mobilisation of culturally embedded norms around risk, responsibility, and care. PSAs are not merely tools; they help construct the figure of the self-governing, responsible parent, invested in their child's safety and success. At the same time, the analysis identifies counter-discourses that resist these dominant norms and question the ethics, efficacy, and long-term developmental impact of such surveillance. Ultimately, the article offers a more culturally grounded account of how surveillance capitalism becomes embedded in everyday life, particularly within familial relationships, arguing that subject formation is central to the value and legitimacy of its products.

Keywords surveillance capitalism · parental surveillance · neoliberal subjectivity · digital parenting · cultural embeddedness · datafication · children and technology

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Corresponding author: Christopher Dorn christopher.dorn@uni-bielefeld.de

Introduction

Children hold a distinct status in Western societies, marked by sentimental value and removal from many of the economic, political, and legal rights and responsibilities associated with adulthood (Zelizer, 1985). For instance, children are generally not expected to work or contribute to economic production. However, this does not mean that they are excluded entirely from the economic sphere. Consumption—particularly of products targeted specifically at children—has become a key avenue for integrating children into the market, making them economically significant in ways that often go unnoticed (Cook, 2004, p. 23).

With the rise of surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2019), children have acquired further economic relevance as sources of valuable data. Through baby wearables, fitness trackers, connected toys, smartphones, and smartwatches (Holloway, 2019, p. 31), children generate vast quantities of data that tech giants such as Amazon, Apple, Facebook, and Google exploit for targeted advertising. By the time a child turns thirteen, 72 million data points may have already been collected about them (Harris, 2017, on the datafication of children's lives, see also Barassi, 2017). Thus, children are not only consumers but also significant producers of data in the digital economy.

This article argues that children's importance for surveillance capitalism extends further still. Their perceived sentimental and non-economic value underscores strong social norms around care and responsibility, especially as they relate to ideals of "good parenting." These cultural expectations create incentives for parents to purchase products, such as parental surveillance apps (PSAs), that promise to help them fulfil these normative roles. As such, these products not only form new markets but also participate in shaping what it means to be a "responsible parent."

Parental surveillance apps offer a particularly revealing lens for examining the cultural and moral foundations of surveillance capitalism. Parenting is a domain deeply infused with moral expectations (Zelizer, 1985), and PSAs highlight the tensions between child safety, autonomy, privacy, and parental responsibility. These technologies reveal the everyday labour through which surveillance practices are legitimised, showing how cultural and moral norms shape their adoption and use.

Compared with other consumer surveillance technologies, such as smart-home devices or fitness trackers, PSAs particularly illuminate these moral and cultural mechanisms.

By highlighting why PSAs are particularly revealing, we can see how the cultural meaning attached to such products is crucial to their value. Consumers form what Callon, Méadel, and Rabeharisoa (2002) describe as an *attachment* to a product when it resonates with broader cultural norms and moral frameworks, allowing them to solve everyday problems while performing a culturally valued identity. As McGushin (2014, p. 132) puts it, such products "tell me who I am, how I am doing, what I am worth." Although many cultural logics can create this kind of value, this article focuses on the domain of parenting and the culturally prescribed ways of caring for and protecting children.

The case of PSAs illustrates how cultural expectations shape markets under surveillance capitalism and contribute to constructing the figure of the "responsible parent." These apps—designed to support "better" parenting by enabling the tracking of children's locations and behaviours—demonstrate that surveillance capitalism is deeply embedded in cultural norms. Drawing on Zukin and DiMaggio's (1990) notion of *cultural embeddedness*, I argue that these products embrace and extend the neoliberal ideal of self-governing individuals to the domain of parenting.

Contrary to Zuboff's framing, subjectivity is not peripheral to surveillance capitalism. While subjectivity may appear irrelevant to its behavioural modification objectives, it is central to the appeal of its products and their capacity to shape how individuals understand themselves. Surveillance capitalism does not merely act on pre-existing subjects through repressive mechanisms. As the case of PSAs shows, it draws on and reinforces cultural understandings of the neoliberal subject. Following Foucault (1983, 1988), I argue that subjectivity is not innate but historically contingent, constituted through power relations. Importantly, this power is not only coercive but also enabling (Foucault, 1978), legitimising the use of surveillance technologies by framing them as tools to fulfil the expectations of "good parenting." In this process, the responsible parent becomes a surveillant of their children, actively reproducing normative cultural scripts via digital means.

This investigation thus reverses the typical direction of surveillance capitalism studies, which often emphasise that "our devices and appliances are not just commodities; they are also a means

of producing data" (Maalsen & Sadowski, 2019). Here, PSAs are treated as commodities first: how they are legitimised and rendered desirable within normative frameworks is central.

The article proceeds as follows: the next section critiques Zuboff's concept of surveillance capitalism, focusing on its limited attention to subjectivity and cultural meaning. The subsequent section develops a theoretical framework linking consumption, cultural understandings, and subject formation. Next, the paper explores how neoliberal subjectivity is articulated in the realm of parenting, producing specific notions of value and risk associated with raising children. The following section introduces PSAs and situates them within the broader dynamics of surveillance capitalism. After a brief discussion of the methodology, the empirical analysis examines the discourse surrounding PSAs to assess how it incorporates cultural understandings of parenting. The penultimate section identifies counter-discourses that challenge dominant understandings, highlighting the contested nature of this field. The conclusion summarises the findings and situates them within the broader context of research on neoliberal subjectivity and ongoing analyses of surveillance capitalism.

Surveillance Capitalism and Subjectivity

As Zuboff and others (e.g., Sadowski, 2019) observed, surveillance capitalism operates through a "new commodity invention" (Zuboff, 2019, p. 94): data extracted from individuals. This data encompasses information about bodies, emotions, and social relations, as well as digital traces such as "Facebook 'likes,' Google searches, emails, texts, photos, songs, and videos, location, communication patterns, networks, purchases, movements, every click, misspelt word, page view, and more" (Zuboff, 2015, p. 79). Given this extensive engagement with people's lives, one might assume that subjectivity is central to the logic of surveillance capitalism. In some ways, surveillance capitalism penetrates deeply into personal spheres, far more intimately than prior forms of capitalism.

Yet paradoxically, surveillance capitalists are not concerned with how individuals conduct their lives. As Zuboff notes, "What matters is quantity, not quality… Google is 'formally indifferent' to what its users say or do, as long as they say it and do it in ways that Google can capture and convert into data… individual users' meanings are of no interest" (Zuboff, 2015, p. 79). Subjectivity, in this view, is not valued in its own right but becomes raw material to be processed: "subjectivities are

converted into objects that repurpose the subjective for commodification" (Zuboff, 2015, p. 79). This logic aligns with Deleuze's "dividual," a fragmented subject governed by data (Simon, 2005; Cheney-Lippold, 2017).

Surveillance capitalism's goal is to bypass conscious subjectivity altogether, using algorithms and environment design to modify behaviour and produce predictable, automatic consumer responses (Zuboff, 2019, p. 200; see also Sadowski, 2019). From Zuboff's standpoint, cultural meaning and subjectivity play a minimal role in the operational logic of surveillance capitalism. While this may describe its behavioural modification apparatus, it does not explain how markets for data-collecting products are constituted or made meaningful to consumers. Zuboff acknowledges that the "burdens of life" (2019, p. 36) contribute to the appeal of digital technologies, but the power she describes is primarily repressive and extractive, leaving open questions about the cultural and moral infrastructures shaping these markets.

While this discussion draws on Zuboff, it also engages a broader field of critical scholarship on datafication and informational power. Work on data colonialism (Couldry & Mejias, 2019) has highlighted how asymmetries of extraction and appropriation reproduce colonial relations in the digital sphere, while legal and political-economic accounts of informational capitalism (Cohen, 2019) foreground the institutional and regulatory conditions under which data markets expand. Research on intimate and domestic surveillance, including studies on digital parenting (Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2020), explores how data-driven technologies reshape everyday family practices and power relations, providing a descriptive account of parental negotiation and engagement with these tools. Rather than contradicting these perspectives, the present analysis complements them by emphasising the cultural and moral infrastructures through which surveillance capitalist products become meaningful, desirable, and normalised, showing how subjectivity is actively shaped in relation to these technologies.

Specifically, I argue that surveillance capitalism also depends on an enabling and productive form of power (Foucault, 1978); one that not only stimulates demand for its products but actively shapes the subjectivities that render these technologies meaningful, desirable, and even necessary. Surveillance capitalism, in this reading, does not merely act upon a pre-existing subject but

participates in the formation of subjectivity itself. It draws on and reinforces existing cultural logics, particularly those of neoliberal self-governance, to legitimise and valorise its products. Subjectivity is not a stable or innate foundation; it is a historically contingent formation produced through power relations, and surveillance capitalism plays a key role in this ongoing process.

Consumption, Cultural Understandings, and Subjectivity

Applications enabling surveillance capitalism are also commodities. Attachment (Callon et al., 2002) is cultivated by aligning products with cultural understandings, conveyed through advertising, intermediaries, and broader social norms (Pfeiffer, 2021; Bessy & Chauvin, 2013).

This cultural dimension of consumption highlights that consumption is not only about acquiring material goods but also reflects and shapes the individual's sense of self and social positioning (Douglas & Isherwood, 1996; Ravasi et al., 2011). Consumption links "human passions, hopes and anxieties" to the specific features of goods (Miller & Rose 2008, p. 115).

Consumers interpret market offerings, including PSAs, through culturally shaped understandings, assessing how products enhance social identities for themselves and others. Their value depends on the "cultural embeddedness" of the market (Zukin & DiMaggio, 1990, p. 17), as cultural frameworks shape perceptions of both products and users, regulating ideals and values associated with consumption (Spillman, 1999; Zelizer, 2011).

Cultural meanings are encoded in discourses that shape what is considered appropriate knowledge, practice, and subjectivity within a domain (Hall, 2009). Within this framework, discourse gives products cultural significance by presenting them as suitable solutions to everyday problems (Keller, 2006, p. 229). In the case of PSAs, these discourses align with neoliberal ideals of subjectivity: managing life efficiently, assuming personal responsibility, and acting self-reliantly (Bröckling, 2016; Foucault, 2010; Miller & Rose, 2008). These norms extend into parenting, defining how a "responsible" parent should behave.

These pre-established cultural models help the subject "form an idea of who I am and how I am supposed to feel things and do things" (McGushin, 2014, p. 134). Both governmentality studies and

new institutionalist theory[1] view these understandings of the subject as products of modern liberalism: cultural systems defining norms of reality and ideal subjecthood (Meyer & Jepperson, 2000; Hall & Lamont, 2013). These ideals are embedded in language, practices, and social expectations, shaping what individuals should be and do (Rose, 1992, p. 141).

Crucially, these models function not by restricting individual freedom but by enlisting it.[2] They constitute a form of disciplinary power that operates through enabling, educating, and producing desirable effects, "making it very hard to resist since it seems to be on my side, it provides me with resources to live my life" (McGushin, 2014, p. 133). The modern individual is expected to aspire to autonomy, personal fulfilment, and responsibility for their choices (Rose, 1992, p. 142). While "free" to choose, individuals are guided by authorities, knowledge systems, and technologies that encourage self-governance in line with social expectations, a "well-regulated and 'responsibilized' liberty" (Barry, Osborne, & Rose, 1996, p. 8).

Subjectification refers to "the way subjects are brought to work on themselves guided by scientific, medical, moral, religious and other authorities" (Lemke, 2011, p. 120). While "helplessness, ignorance, and passivity may be very natural human properties" (Meyer & Jepperson, 2000, p. 107), they are at odds with the cultural ideals of the efficient, capable, and responsible person, leading them to seek expert advice. Choices in domains such as family, education, and leadership increasingly depend on "technologies for fabricating and maintaining self-government" (Miller & Rose, 2008, p. 52). These technologies are infused with expert knowledge and allow individuals to act efficiently, responsibly, and socially recognised in realms such as productivity, happiness, security, sexuality, and parenting.

Through this rationalisation of life (Weber, 1968), the individual can become an efficient and moral subject, culturally positioned within a problem space defined by "technical questions of the most effective ways of managing malfunction and improving 'quality of life'" (Rose, 1992, p. 142).

[1] Indeed, in their seminal article, Meyer and Jepperson (2000, p. 102) explicitly connect their work to Foucault's concepts of governmentality and the self.

[2] From a longer-term perspective, Norbert Elias's theory of the civilising process (1994) can also be mentioned; it identifies a broader trend in societal modernisation in which external coercive mechanisms are gradually replaced by structures of self-restraint.

The Modern Subject as a Parent: The Value and Risk of Raising Children

To understand how broader ideas about the modern subject manifest within the specific realm of parenting, we must consider how subjectivity extends beyond self-relation to encompass responsibility for others (Meyer & Jepperson, 2000, pp. 107–108; McGushin, 2014, p. 130). Chief among these "others" are children, who hold a "special social status" in modern society (Boli-Bennett & Meyer, 1978, p. 798). As Zelizer (1985) argues, Western cultures have sacralized children, rendering them objects of emotional devotion and moral concern. Ariès (1962, p. 412) famously described this shift as a form of "quarantine" that normatively separates children from the adult world of labour, politics, and sexuality.

This cultural withdrawal from economic productivity has made children "economically worthless but emotionally priceless" (Zelizer, 2011, p. 16). Like other sacred entities (Healy & Krawiec, 2017), legitimate economic considerations of children require specific social arrangements, which highlight their emotional and moral value (Zelizer, 2011, p. 54). Although children may no longer contribute productive labour, they are often understood in terms of general utility, offering "love, smiles, and emotional satisfaction but no money" (Zelizer, 2011, p. 42). In this sense, they can be seen as a form of consumption good, "a source of psychic income or satisfaction" (Becker, 1976, p. 172).

Given this cultural significance, a key task of the modern subject is to parent efficiently and responsibly, maximising the outcomes of raising a child. Parenting abilities are construed "as scarce resources requiring investment in order to be developed, maintained and increased" (Bröckling, 2016, p. 51), often guided by expert advice from educational, legal, medical, and psychological authorities. Acting as a responsible parent also entails investing in the child's human capital to enhance their utility and produce a "higher quality" child (Becker, 1976, p. 173).

This logic shapes everyday parenting practices, from ensuring children eat healthily (Ristovski-Slijepcevic, Chapman, & Beagan, 2010) to imparting skills and knowledge. Investments in parenting skills and children's education (Aurini, Dierkes, & Davies, 2013) demonstrate the modern subject's capacity to govern both their own life and the lives of their children. In doing so, both parents and children may achieve social success.

Alongside these responsibilities lies persistent anxiety: parents must also protect their children and safeguard their investments. Cultural understandings of parenting frame this as risk management. Despite parents' best efforts, many factors threaten their children's well-being and their status as responsible caregivers, producing a sense of loss of control for the self-governing subject (Pyysiäinen, Halpin, & Guilfoyle, 2017, p. 217; Foucault, 2010, p. 66).

Risk and fear are central to the cultural model urging self-responsibilization (Lemke, 2011, p. 50), making parental responsibility a discourse of risk, where threats do not arise from a particular precise danger … but from a combination of abstract factors that render more or less probable the occurrence of undesirable behavior" (Castel, 1991, p. 287). Risks may originate from external actors or children themselves, whose behaviour may be deemed irrational or deviant.

Modern parenting demands continuous surveillance and correction: parents monitor, evaluate, and adjust strategies not only to optimise outcomes, but also to anticipate potential threats. Because risks are abstract and proliferative, the focus shifts from confronting "a concrete dangerous situation … to anticipate all the possible forms of irruption of danger" (Castel, 1991, p. 288). This leads to an ever-expanding scope of parental vigilance and a persistent "fear of failure" (Lemke, 2016, p. 49), which contributes to the widely held sentiment that "parents' work is never done" (Haines & Neely, 1987).

Parents are aided not only by "family technicians" (Rose, 1999, p. 160) but increasingly by commercial products and services. The "diagnosis and minimising of socially produced risks is … a profitable business" (Lemke, 2016, p. 52). Within surveillance capitalism, private companies offer tools to manage risks, driven by solutionist logics promising empowerment and efficiency (Morozov, 2013; Hasinoff, 2017, p. 497). The resulting rise in public and private surveillance of children (Holloway, 2019; Wrennall, 2010) reflects this cultural logic.

The critical question, then, is whether PSAs can be understood as "technologies of security" (Foucault, 2007, p. 10), functioning not only to aid in risk management but also to construct and affirm responsible parental subjectivity. The next section introduces the PSAs analysed here and examines how their discourse reinforces cultural understandings of parenting, risk, and responsible subjecthood.

Parental surveillance apps in the context of surveillance capitalism

To illustrate the cultural embeddedness of surveillance capitalism, this chapter focuses on the market for parental surveillance applications (PSAs). The term *parental surveillance apps* is used here because it captures the primary orientation and functionality of these technologies, despite their marketing under various labels such as "family social networks," "family tracking apps," or "parental control apps."[3] While individual apps differ in specific features, they share a common core: providing location-based services that rely on geographic data, typically through the Global Positioning System (GPS) via users' mobile devices.

Unlike conventional self-tracking apps (Selke, 2016), which focus on monitoring the user's own behaviour, PSAs are designed for tracking others, primarily children. These apps allow parents to monitor the current and historical locations and movements of family members. In addition to location tracking, many apps now offer features that monitor driving behaviour, including speed, braking patterns, and phone use while driving. More recently, PSAs have expanded to include tools for supervising children's digital activity, such as screen time and app usage.

This chapter focuses on three prominent apps: Life360, a pioneer in this sector available since 2008; and two more recent competitors, FamiSafe (launched in 2018) and GeoZilla (launched in 2015). Although all three are available globally, the analysis here concentrates on their usage and market presence in the United States.

These apps generate revenue through subscription models and premium features. However, they also participate in surveillance capitalism. A prominent example is Life360, which shares users' driving data with insurance companies for risk assessment and the creation of personalised insurance products.[4] While less is known about the data practices of its competitors, GeoZilla (2020)

[3]The apps differ in the extent to which they are marketed exclusively to parents versus being positioned more broadly for families or personal networks. Some promote inclusion not only of children but also of elderly family members (though there are separate products specifically designed for elder care), friends, and even pets. In certain cases, individuals use these or similar tracking apps to monitor romantic partners. However, for the purposes of this study, the focus will remain on parent–child relationships.

[4]Life360's privacy policy explicitly states that it "share[s] your personal information with Arity" and that "Arity may use this information to provide personalized content including targeted advertising, offer discounts, rewards or pricing offers by third parties such as insurance companies, and for other commercial purposes" (Life360, 2022a). Arity is a subsidiary of the U.S. insurance company *Allstate*. See also Hill (2024).

states that it may display targeted advertisements and permit third-party services, including ad networks and social media platforms, to collect user data across platforms and devices. Similarly, FamiSafe uses multiple industry-standard tracking tools, including Google Analytics, to monitor user engagement. As noted by Mühlhoff (2018), Google Analytics enables granular user prediction and behaviour modification, reinforcing the commercial logic of surveillance capitalism.

Methodology and Materials

To examine how the discourse on parental surveillance apps addresses parents as responsible subjects, I analysed apps, their websites, media reports, and sources of parental expertise. This approach draws on the concept of discourse as "a system of statements which constructs an object" (Parker, 1992, p. 5). Such discourse can be found in the form of texts; however, in discourse analysis, texts refer not only to written statements, such as stories or reports but also to speech, images, symbols and artefacts (Phillips, Lawrence, & Hardy, 2004, p. 636). Each text functions as a *discourse fragment*, that is, an individual text gains meaning through its relation to a broader discursive formation. The goal is to understand how such statements, as discursive inscriptions, resonate with cultural ideals of efficient and responsible parenting and what benefits they claim to offer the subject.

Data collection began with an exploratory *digital ethnography* (Kaur-Gill & Dutta, 2017) that included newspaper and magazine articles, PSA Twitter accounts, app screenshots, and Google Play Store content to gain an initial sense of the field and its meaning structures. This was followed by a focused analysis of the apps' official websites and a systematic document search using the NexisUni database. The search included U.S.-based newspaper and magazine articles, foreign newspapers referencing U.S. events, online publications, press releases, and blog posts from 2008 to 2024. After removing duplicates and texts that mentioned the PSAs only in passing or focused on stock market data, 137 relevant texts remained. These were supplemented by the data mentioned at the beginning of this paragraph, websites awarding accolades to PSAs, and the apps' privacy policies and terms of use, resulting in a total corpus of 165 texts in addition to the PSA websites.

Text selection for detailed analysis emphasised contrastive materials (e.g., supportive vs. critical). The discourse reconstruction followed a hermeneutic approach, using abductive reasoning grounded in close engagement with the data (Keller, 2013; Reichertz, 2007). As such, the resulting interpretations do not claim objective truth but aim for comprehensibility and reasoned insight. This analysis focuses on the *interpretive schemes* (Keller, 2013) through which PSAs are constructed as parenting solutions and the subject positions these discourses afford to parents.

Analysing the Discourse on Parental Surveillance Apps

The relevance of parental surveillance apps is conveyed through awards, blogs, testimonials, and other forms of public recognition that valorise their features. These awards fall into two categories: one emphasising technical innovation, such as the Google Android Developer Challenge or the Webby Awards, and another focusing on parenting, including endorsements like the *Coolest Parenting Teens Gadget*, the *National Parenting Product Award*, or the *National Center for Parenting Seal of Approval*. As such, these apps are framed not only as technically sophisticated tools but also as legitimate instruments of good parenting, sanctioned by experts.

Some apps explicitly bolster their credibility through affiliations with parental expertise. For example, FamiSafe employs a child psychologist who blogs about parenting and how the app supports this role (FamiSafe, 2022c). Testimonials from influencers and everyday users further promote the apps by emphasising their practical benefits and emotional resonance. One reviewer, for instance, remarks: "Have an emotional connection with this app." This statement is ambiguous: it is unclear whether the emotional connection is with the child, facilitated by the app, or with the app itself. This blurring of meanings illustrates how the app's value to the "responsible" parent becomes entwined with the perceived value of the child.

Across these texts, a discourse of positive *responsibilization* of parents to guide their children's conduct emerges. The apps are portrayed as instruments for instilling "proper habits" in children, for example, concerning digital device use, health, education, or driving. Appeals to responsible parenting emphasise the apps' role in enabling parents to "make the right choices." Thus, both the freedom of the parent as well as the expectation to act responsibly are confirmed. PSAs are thus

framed as technologies that support appropriate and prudent parenting. As one article puts it, using them "seems as rational as using a baby monitor for an infant in a crib" (Sultan, 2019).

Given the extensive surveillance capabilities of these apps, their perceived benefits are strongly tied to managing risk and alleviating parental anxiety. A recent Life360 advertising campaign powerfully dramatises this connection. In the ad, a mother sings lovingly to her daughter, only for the tone to shift into a litany of vividly described fears. This is visually reinforced by animated sequences that depict various harms that could befall the child, some rendered with unexpected graphic and visceral detail. The lyrics unfold as follows (Life360, 2025):

You are my whole wide world.

My heart, my joy, my baby girl.

You'll never know how much I love you.

When you're gone, I just think of you–dying.

Every time you leave my sight,

When you drive to school or stay out at night.

This is where I go to the million ways inside my brain in which you could die,

At any given time.

You could bleed out on the street or get stuck in a mine.

You could get kidnapped by bandits.

Some could harvest all your organs and then sell them online.

There are a million ways inside my brain in which you could die,

At any given time.

You could be flattened like a [indiscernible] by a hydraulic machine.

To be sucked into a wood chipper by the leg of your jeans.

It happens all the time.

You could go on a road trip even though I said no road trips,

You could hit a deer and get stranded in the woods,

and you'd find a little cottage like the one in Hensel and Gretel,

But the witch would be there.

Now you can't go to college cause you're just bones in an oven.

This emotionally charged narrative presents parental love as inseparable from fear and positions the app as a rational, even necessary, response to that fear.

In line with contemporary risk discourse, these apps emphasise not specific dangerous individuals but risky *locations* and *behaviours* (Lemke, 2016, p. 53; Rose, 2001, pp. 7–8). Their location-tracking features define "territories of security" (Rose, 2000, p. 328), such as the home, school, or other familiar places.[5] Maps within the apps visually track family members in real time, often accompanied by avatars or profile photos. Geofencing features allow parents to set up virtual boundaries, triggering alerts if a child enters or leaves designated areas. For example, FamiSafe notifies parents if children are “secretly leaving school.” Similarly, GeoZilla (2019) promotes its "Places" feature for setting geofence zones for home, school, work, or the gym.

These geospatial controls draw on cultural associations between certain places and heightened crime risk (Luo, Ren, & Zhao, 2016). Life360 even provides localised crime data, including the type and location of reported crimes and sex offender registries. In a further expansion of surveillance, FamiSafe now offers remote audio monitoring, claiming that this feature “strengthens parent-child relationships by promoting attentive and caring parenting, fostering feelings of love and care in children, and building trust between parents and children” (FamiSafe, n.d.-a). Thus, responsible parents “definitely want kids in the right and safe places” (FamiSafe, 2022a), where risks appear manageable to them.

Risky behaviour is also a major concern, particularly with regard to teenage driving. In the U.S., where the legal driving age is often 16, driving is a key developmental milestone and a major source

[5] Hasinoff (2017) and Simpson (2014) argue that, in the case of the PSAs, this spatial logic creates a false sense of security and misrepresents the empirical realities of where child victimisation actually occurs.

of parental anxiety. One parent expressed, "My daughter is 16 and just about to get her driver's licence. She's thrilled. I'm terrified" (Jolly, 2017). The apps aim to mitigate this fear by enabling parents to monitor not only location but driving behaviour, including speed, phone usage, and harsh braking, as well as notify emergency contacts and emergency services. GeoZilla (2022) promises to report "every time a risk-inducing situation occurs" and inform the user "if family members use their phone while driving, if they are speeding, or driving aggressively."

A further area where risk is conceived both in terms of space and behaviour concerns the online world. The digital space is itself seen as offering certain locations in the form of websites that are deemed unsuitable for children. Whereas in previous times parents feared "sabre-toothed tigers," "the plague," or "the dangerous influence of rock and roll," now "the biggest concern by a million miles … is the internet" (AppAdvice, 2019). Therefore, the apps let parents prevent their children from visiting or even searching for websites related to, for example, gambling, pornography, or online crime. Additionally, the children can be protected from viewing, sharing, or receiving content deemed inappropriate in chat messages, pictures, or videos. FamiSafe can even automatically take periodic screenshots and analyse these, a feature intended to "ensure your children stay protected from potential risks" and "nurture their growth" (FamiSafe, n.d.-b). These features automate the surveillance of children's online lives, helping parents manage risks that might otherwise go undetected: "Even the most attentive parents can't check every message flying on social networks" (FamiSafe, 2022a).

Digital overuse is also framed as a risk, both to children's physical health (e.g., back pain, poor eyesight, sleep deprivation, and online addiction) and to their long-term productivity. PSA discourse often contrasts screen time with time spent developing human capital through education or other productive activities. As one FamiSafe blog (2022b) warns, children are "wasting their precious time on WhatsApp which they need to spend on making their career."

Because "the world outside the house is not safe for our kids" (FamiSafe, 2022a), PSAs are promoted as efficient and responsible parenting tools. The apps predefine domains of risk but preserve parents' autonomy by allowing them to make specific decisions, such as setting geofence boundaries, based on local knowledge or data. Once configured, the apps alert parents to violations,

thus relieving them from constant vigilance and having to gauge these risks on their own and in an unstructured way.

Historically, parents monitored children through knowledge of their schedules, informal checks, and communication (Davis et al., 2024). Mobile phones extended this capability but still required active effort.[6] In contrast, Life360 users describe the benefit of not needing to call or text: “It really changed our lives” (Life360, 2021). Unlike outsourcing childcare to professionals (Hochschild, 2003), PSAs are affordable, accessible, and allow parents to feel directly in control, even as they remain passive until alerted. According to Life360 (2019), the apps help parents “stay on top of [their] child’s need for guidance and involvement,” offering a form of “leadership” that children “love.”

The PSAs facilitate parental connection to their children while also avoiding the messiness and negotiations involved in direct communications (Turkle 2011). Since the app producers have “thought of everything so you can focus on the good stuff” (Life360, 2022b), these technologies are framed as “magical solutions” (FamiSafe, 2022c) that reduce parental stress and shield them from the guilt or judgement of being insufficiently responsible. They allow parents to not only achieve a sense of having successfully optimised their children but also free up time for self-optimisation in areas like health or work. Thus, the apps do “not interfere with busy schedules or personal freedom” (Life360, 2014). Overall, the apps’ value lies in their ability to let the responsible parent “rest easy” (Life360 2022b).

The Other Side of the PSA Discourse

The previous section examined how parental surveillance apps align with and reinforce a dominant cultural model of the responsible parent. This model appears pervasive and legitimised through a range of discursive mechanisms, making resistance seem difficult. Yet, even within powerful regimes of subjectification, resistance is always possible. As Pickett (1996, p. 458) argues, individuals are not merely passive recipients of cultural norms, or “cultural dopes” (Garfinkel, 1984).

[6]Turkle (2011, pp. 173–174) observes that mobile phones grant children greater freedom to engage in activities beyond the home, freedom they might not otherwise enjoy, but at the cost of being constantly "on call" for their parents, which can cause significant stress. Parental surveillance via PSAs is more extensive but also more indirect, as it reduces the need for ongoing communicative responsiveness from children. This dynamic is vividly illustrated in the Life360 ad campaign featuring the singing mother: in a notable role reversal, it is the daughter who calms the anxious parent by suggesting the app's use so there will be “no more freaking out.”

There is always the possibility for at least some resistance to this subjectification. Accordingly, within the discursive field surrounding PSAs, countervailing statements also emerge that question, critique, and even reject the apps as legitimate parenting tools.

Rather than constituting an external counter-discourse, these critical positions remain embedded within the same normative framework that renders PSAs intelligible as tools of responsible parenting. Resistance in this context does not negate parental responsibility as such but reworks its boundaries by exposing internal contradictions within the PSA discourse itself. Therefore, the following section examines how critiques of PSAs articulate tensions around privacy, autonomy, efficiency, and agency without fully escaping the dominant moral imperative of responsible parenthood.

Privacy, autonomy, and the modern subject

One key critique of PSAs arises from contradictions in the very cultural understanding of modern subjectivity. Central to liberal conceptions of the self is the right to choose what personal information is disclosed to others. Thus, concerns over PSAs extend beyond their potential for surveillance capitalism (Keegan & Ng, 2021) and privacy as a consumer right to more general debates about privacy as a human right (Bajpai and Weber 2017), including the privacy of children. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) explicitly acknowledges a child's right to privacy, although its implementation remains challenging (Smith et al., 2000), particularly regarding data privacy (Livingstone, 2018).

In this light, PSAs become entangled in normative disputes over whether children should be granted the same expectations of informational rights as adults. Critics argue that these apps frame privacy and safety as a zero-sum game. One Life360 "parenting expert," for instance, questions whether the contemporary concern for children's privacy has "gone a little too far," asserting instead that it is more important for "children to feel safe within the sphere of nurturing guidance that in-charge parents are meant to provide" (Life 360, 2019). Yet, these tensions can lead to a less stress-free parenting experience as they frequently erupt in family conflicts: "The controversial privacy

problems that are inherent in this sort of app have caused fights between countless parents and kids" (Bonnevie, 2022).

Beyond concerns about privacy, this issue also recurs within the broader framework of children's freedom and independence. Experts, particularly in psychology, have warned that constant surveillance can have adverse effects on a child's personal development, including their self-confidence.[7] At the heart of this concern lies a recurring question: Are children fully recognised as subjects in their own right, and what are the implications of this recognition, or lack thereof, for their freedom (cf. Coady, 2008)? Developmental psychology and related fields have long framed children as incomplete beings, individuals in need of guidance through staged development to achieve full personhood (Mayall, 2005; Rose, 1999). However, a recurring theme in the discourse is that such monitoring often extends beyond childhood. Surveillance does not necessarily end when children become adults; in fact, many parents continue using these apps even as their children attend college (Davis et al., 2024).

Taken together, these debates reveal a fundamental normative tension within the PSA discourse. Children are simultaneously addressed as vulnerable subjects in need of protection and emerging rights-bearing individuals entitled to privacy and autonomy. Rather than resolving this tension, PSAs render it productive by translating it into individualised parental decision-making. Responsibility is thus displaced from collective or institutional arrangements to the moral judgement of parents, who are expected to continuously calibrate the "right" balance between safety and autonomy. In this sense, privacy does not function as a fixed right but as a conditional and revocable attribute, contingent upon parental assessments of risk.

Contradictions of the Efficient Parent

Further critiques centre on the ideals of efficiency and responsibility that PSAs demand of parents. Becoming such a subject is a moving target, requiring "continual modification" (Bröckling, 2016, p. 20), creating an unattainable standard that can result in anxiety or failure. PSAs do not

[7] While numerous argumentative claims have been made, empirical evidence on the impact of PSAs on children's psychological development remains inconclusive (Burnell, Andrade, Kwiatek, & Hoyle, 2023; Davis, Thornburg, Patel, & Pelham, 2024).

eliminate risk—they merely redistribute and reframe it, often offering pseudo-solutions that soothe but also perpetuate parental fears (Hasinoff, 2017). Although the apps automate various monitoring functions, they still place the burden of interpretation and responsible decision-making on parents.

For example, FamiSafe can automatically take screenshots of a child's device and perform image analysis, but parents must decide the frequency (e.g., every 2, 5, 10, or 30 minutes) and are ultimately responsible for reviewing the content themselves. In the event of harm, such decisions may be retrospectively judged as failures in responsible parenting. One tragic case illustrates this danger: a mother repeatedly warned her teenage son via text after her Life360 app showed him speeding, including a message stating, "I have screenshots of you ... doing 123 mph ... It scares me to my bone." Despite this, she did not intervene, and her son later caused a fatal accident. She now faces legal repercussions (Baldas, 2024). The app did not cause the incident, but it made visible a risk and, with that, an expectation to act.

This constant threat of not living up to expectations reveals that the efficient and responsible parent is an inherently contradictory figure. Rather than acting calculated and measured, this ideal also harbours the potential for excessive and irrational action (Stäheli, 2010). In the discourse, this manifests in the trope of the "helicopter parent"[8], a figure criticised for becoming overbearing through hyper-surveillance. One former Life360 user described becoming "addicted to watching the tiny blue dot that represented my child move across the map" within just days of using the app (Glassman, 2021).[9]

Here, resistance does not take the form of outright rejection but emerges through the problematization of excess. Critiques of the "helicopter parent" expose the limits of efficiency as a moral ideal, suggesting that the very tools designed to produce calm, rational parenting may instead amplify anxiety and loss of control. Thus, the efficient parent appears as a deeply unstable subject position, caught between demands for constant vigilance and expectations of emotional restraint.

[8]This term was coined in a well-known parenting book (Cline & Fay, 1990) and became part of American popular knowledge.

[9]Life360 explicitly addresses criticisms that it fosters helicopter parenting by appealing to key tenets of contemporary parental subjectivity, namely, responsibility and freedom. It argues that such behaviour arises not from the technology itself or the fears it amplifies but from parents' misuse of the app. The company even reduces the issue to a matter of how parental behaviour is framed, suggesting that avoiding the helicopter parent label is simply a question of misguided perception (Life360, 2024a, n.d.).

Children as Active Agents of Resistance

While childhood may be "the most intensively governed sector of personal existence" (Rose, 1999, p. 123), this does not negate children's agency. As Corsaro (2015, p. 4) emphasises, children actively contribute to their own social worlds. In the PSA discourse, glimpses of this agency appear in stories of children resisting or subverting surveillance. Online guides offer technical advice on how to spoof GPS signals or fake locations (e.g., iMyFone, 2020). Some children have even used the apps' mutual monitoring features to their own advantage, for instance, by timing their outings to ensure they return home before a parent (Matsakis, 2019).

These practices illustrate how surveillance technologies can be "decoupled" (Meyer & Jepperson, 2000, p. 112) from their intended use. While PSAs aim to reinforce parental control and responsibility, the subject positions they construct for children are not always passively accepted. Resistance is not only possible but also, at times, strategic and creative.

Taken together, these instances of resistance do not dismantle the PSA discourse but reveal its fragility. While PSAs seek to stabilise parental authority through technological mediation, children's practices of evasion, subversion, and strategic compliance expose the limits of surveillance as a governing tool. Rather than allowing these technologies to fully govern them, children emerge as subjects who actively negotiate, reinterpret, and occasionally undermine the expectations inscribed in them. PSAs thus function less as totalising instruments of control than as sites of ongoing contestation, in which norms of safety, autonomy, and responsibility remain unstable.

Conclusion

When we think of surveillance capitalism, we often focus on the technological infrastructure that enables it, while overlooking the more mundane elements that make it culturally viable. The perceived value of surveillance capitalism's products—such as parental surveillance apps (PSAs)—relies not only on their technical functionality but also on their deep cultural embeddedness. Surveillance capitalism does not operate solely through repressive power imposed on pre-existing subjects. Rather, as exemplified by PSAs, it takes up and reinforces existing cultural ideals, most notably the neoliberal construction of the responsible parent, defined by their capacity for vigilance

and control. At the same time, this process is neither seamless nor fully stabilising: the very ideals that render PSAs meaningful also generate tensions that complicate and, at times, undermine their governance effects.

The discourse surrounding PSAs positions them as tools that allow parents to “rest easy,” but this reassurance is deeply contingent on cultural models of responsibility, fear, and care. In this way, PSAs function similarly to a protection racket: they amplify the perception of risk and then offer themselves as the only viable means of protection. Like racketeers, they do not create the threat outright. Instead, they contribute to a climate of anxiety that makes their use seem rational and necessary. They promise relief from a parental sense of failure, which, in part, they help produce. In doing so, PSAs furnish the cultural ideal of the responsible parent with “the means of making itself true” (Bourdieu, 1998). Yet this promise remains inherently fragile, as failure, misjudgment, or excess continuously threatens the responsibility it installs.

While this text has primarily focused on parental subjectivity, the PSA discourse also constructs a particular image of children. Children are portrayed as precious yet vulnerable, necessitating constant monitoring to preserve their value. This framing casts their safety in tension with their autonomy and privacy. Importantly, surveillance is often presented not only as a parental imperative but also as something that children themselves desire. For example, Life360 reports that up to 86% of teenagers express comfort with location-sharing apps (Life360, 2019). Generation Z has become “accustomed to the benefits” of such technologies, remaining the most likely cohort to share their location with a parent (Life360, 2024c; see also the studies reported in Davis et al., 2024). This willingness may align with Foucault’s argument that power is most effective when it is least visible (Pickett, 1996). The indirect nature of PSA surveillance, where parents interact primarily with the app instead of the child, may thus foster its acceptance. Beyond active consent, children may also accept the use of such apps due to resignation or forced compliance (Barassi, 2019). However, this acceptance does not preclude moments of negotiation, reinterpretation, or resistance, which point to the limits of surveillance as a mode of governing childhood.

As the discourse analysis showed, resistance exists, both from parents and from children. Objections centre on children's rights to privacy, developmental concerns, potentially irrational demands

placed on parents, and the technical subversion of PSAs by the very children they are meant to monitor. These counter-statements are fragmented and lack a unified ideological framework, which Zuboff (2019, p. 344) calls a "synthetic declaration," but may nevertheless constitute meaningful "microresistances" (Sadowski, 2019, p. 168). Such resistance does not require collective mobilisation to be effective. As Pickett (1996) notes, local acts of dissent can acquire broader cultural significance even without cohesive ideological underpinnings. Rather than standing outside the PSA discourse, these forms of resistance emerge from within it, revealing governance through PSAs as inherently incomplete and contested.

Despite these forms of resistance, the cultural model of the responsible parent resonates. Davis et al. (2024) estimate that between 33% and 69% of U.S. parents use some form of digital location tracking. Life360, for example, reports around 40 million active users in the United States and another 30 million globally (Life360, 2024b).[10] The relatively lower number of international users suggests that this model of parenting may resonate particularly strongly in the American context, perhaps due to the longstanding cultural compatibility between American individualism and neoliberalism (Hochschild, 1996). Alternatively, a stronger presence of counter-narratives in other national contexts may render such apps less attractive where different cultural logics prevail. As with neoliberalism more broadly, the appeal of PSAs is shaped by local discursive fields and the cultural repertoires available to actors in specific contexts (Hall & Lamont, 2013; Hall & Thelen, 2009).

Studying this contextual variation is a task for future research. In high-usage contexts, it would be valuable to differentiate between user types—such as casual, high-frequency, or non-users—and to explore the market segmentation strategies of PSA providers. Interestingly, no single PSA has yet achieved the quasi-monopolistic dominance seen in other sectors of the digital economy.

Another important avenue of inquiry concerns the differentiated capacity to resist PSA-related cultural pressures. In other domains, such as careers and non-parental digital surveillance, gendered patterns of responsibility and impact have been observed (Bröckling, 2005; Walkerdine, 2003; Dubrofsky & Magnet, 2015), suggesting similar dynamics operate within the PSA context. The fact that "womanhood has been equated with motherhood in a mixing of identities that simply does not

[10] GeoZilla claims to have over 10 million users worldwide. FamiSafe, developed by Wondershare as part of a broader suite of apps, does not have publicly available user data specific to the app.

occur for men and fatherhood" (Thorne, 1987, p. 96) suggests that women, particularly mothers, may experience greater pressure to conform to the ideal of the responsible parent. This is reinforced by evidence that typically mothers typically negotiate the boundaries of children's autonomy (Mayall, 2005, p. 153). While the PSA discourse tends to address "parents" generically, it may nonetheless rely on deeply ingrained gender norms. Differential receptiveness may therefore stem from structural inequalities embedded in caregiving roles. Surveillance itself also appears to be gendered in its targets: research shows that girls are monitored more intensively than boys (Burnell et al., 2023; Davis et al., 2024). In addition, the cross-national variability in PSA uptake underscores the contested nature of their discursive field, and the transferability of findings from the U.S. context must therefore be approached cautiously (Recuber, 2017).

By emphasising the cultural and moral conditions that shape how these technologies are embraced in everyday life, this analysis complements political-economic and postcolonial critiques of surveillance and informational capitalism. This article demonstrates that the success of surveillance capitalist markets depends not only on data extraction or technological innovation but also on their cultural embeddedness—that is, their ability to align with and exploit culturally specific moral economies of care, responsibility, and risk. While other products may be embedded in different cultural narratives, the case of PSAs illustrates the need to explore how surveillance capitalism intersects with the cultural foundations of market capitalism in the digital age. In the end, surveillance capitalism may be powered by data, but it is sustained by culture.

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Author Details Christopher Dorn
[1] Bielefeld University, Department of Sociology, Bielefeld-Germany,
0000-0002-5288-3592 christopher.dorn@uni-bielefeld.de

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