



Examining the Phenomenon of Sharenting

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Introduction

Sharenting was coined by adding the terms "parenting" and "sharing" to describe parents' tendency to post about their children on social media apps (Sharenting, n.d). Technological advances increased the availability of social media networking apps and made creating profiles easier. As a result, sharenting has become more prevalent among parents. Exploring this phenomenon is really complicated and the most controversial implication is the privacy intrusion children are subjected to. This implication has been thoroughly explored in research, and although it is interesting it is beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, the literature review will analyze the motive of sharenting, and multiple factors that affect it (Holiday et.al., 2020; Briazu et.al., 2021). The notable implications of sharenting include the pressing issue of the privacy paradox, and the distortion of children's digital representations (Fox et.al., 2022; Ouvrein & Verswijvel, 2019). Sharenting is controversial but current research indicates that boundary negotiation between children and parents is necessary to avoid frustrations (Lipu & Siibak, 2019).

Literature Review

Sharenting is done with a multitude of motives, and some researchers argue that sharenting is an act of self-representation (Holiday et.al., 2020). To explore this motive of sharenting, the infamous social theory of Erving Goffman that is based on symbolic interactionism will be examined first. He published "The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life" to discuss the ways people present themselves and engage in impression management. When individuals interact with others, they are in their front region, where they act according to the self they want to present (Goffman, 1971). Individuals can also be in their backstage region where they might prepare to enter the front stage, among other things. Impression management is presenting oneself in an idealized manner that one wishes to be perceived (Goffman, 1971).

Erving Goffman's theory provides the foundation for exploring the motive of self-representation that explains parents' tendency of sharenting. Steven Holiday and co-workers conducted a study called "Sharenting and the Extended Self: Self-representation in Parents: Insta-

gram Presentation of their children." The researchers collected a random sample of 125 Instagram posts and then comparatively analyzed twenty-five of the captions associated with the posts (Holiday et.al., 2020). The posts were collected via the "Explore Posts" section of Instagram and "hashtag sampling" to combat the researcher's biases. After assessing the literal and implied meanings of the images and their captions, the researchers extracted overlapping and recurring themes that were listed according to their prevalence. The researchers concluded that three major categories of sharenting emerged: Polished, Promotional, and Intimate. Firstly, polished posts were aesthetically pleasing, and the content served as a tool to present the ideal self. Even when the child was depicted in these posts, they were not the primary focus and were used as a medium to communicate their parents' perfection. The promotional posts were often aesthetically pleasing; however, they intentionally flaunted the parent's abilities and skills. Even when the promoted skills were not explicitly tied to the parenting role, these pictures included the children. The parents who indulged in this category of sharenting seemed to utilize their kids as marketing tools, which supports the self-representation motive. If sharenting was a promotional tool of the parents' abilities, then their children are viewed as extensions of themselves through which the parents are able to self-represent. The final category of sharenting was a means to authentically portray a precious moment of parenthood and preserve it as a memory through a picture. These posts include the children more often, and the parents are excluded from the content since they are the photographers. Themes of self-representation still occur where the parents attempt to allow the viewer into their imperfect backstage identity in exchange for preserving the intimacy of the moment. The parents are usually showcasing their determination in overcoming parent-related hardships by using their children as means of self-presentation. Therefore, the inclusion of children is not incidental but rather purposeful in that it supports the parents' self-representation when they are presenting their ideal self, promoting their abilities, or documenting authentic parenting moments.

Sharenting occurs even though parents might be reluctant to post their children's private information online. Alexa K. Fox and co-workers conducted a study titled "An Exploration of First-time Dad's Sharenting with Social Media Marketers: Implications for Children's Online Privacy." The researchers assessed First-Time Dads' sensitivity to sharing information online and their attitudes towards engaging in sharenting activities with social media marketers (Fox et.al., 2022). FTDs were asked to assess their sensitivity level in sharing their information versus their children's information; then, they were asked to assess their willingness to share their information versus their child's information. The study partly aimed to assess the implications of children's privacy online based on the privacy concerns of their parents. Seventy-five FTDs with children of two years and younger participated in the study, and the researchers relied on semi-structured interviews. The findings showcased that FTDs are sensitive about sharing their child's information online and reported notable unwillingness to share it with social media marketers. However, there was a privacy paradox because sharenting occurred even when the dads were worried about the consequences of this act. The dads participated in sharenting directly or indirectly by posting their child online or by allowing their partner to engage in sharenting activities. One on hand, they showcased more sensitivity towards posting their child's information in comparison to posting their own information online. They also willingly partook in privacy protection behaviours and

did not condone the act of sharenting content that compromised their children's safety or privacy—like nude pictures. However, privacy concerns did not predict sharenting habits: FTDs still participated in sharenting activities for a variety of reasons even when social media marketers were involved.

Research consistently showcases that sharenting was not predicted by the privacy concerns of the parents. Giulia Ranzini and co-workers performed a study titled "Sharenting, Peer Influence, and Privacy Concerns: A Study on the Instagram-Sharing Behaviors of Parents in the United Kingdom." The researchers collected a random sample of 320 parents who are Instagram users with children under the age of Thirteen (Ranzini et.al., 2020). The objective was to determine what factors make sharenting more likely. The authors explored General and Situational privacy concerns, Peer influence, among other factors. It was found that the parents' privacy concerns, whether situational or general, did not affect their tendency to engage in sharenting. Instead, parents who frequently share on Instagram are more likely to engage in sharenting on that platform. The parents' decision to share posts that include their children despite privacy concerns is hypothesized to occur because their children are seen as extensions of themselves. Their sharenting habits strongly correlated to their general Instagram sharing habits on social media platforms. This finding supports the argument that children's content posted by parents is an act of self-presentation since there is no distinction between posting sharenting content versus self-content.

Sharenting has a lot of repercussions, and neither awareness of risks nor previous negative experiences resulted in the exclusion of children in social media posts (Briazu et.al., 2021). Raluca A. Briazu and co-workers assessed mothers' social media use, previous negative experiences with sharenting, and their perceivment of risks versus benefits. Their study was titled "Facebook Sharenting in Mothers of Young Children: The Risks Are Worth It but Only for Some." The researchers studied 190 mothers of young children, most of whom were one year old. The concerns related to sharenting on Facebook included the categories of digital ownership, safeguarding issues, fraud, future risks, concerns about privacy, and diminished risk impact. Most of the categories had corresponding subcategories; for example, safeguarding issues included sexual abuse/child grooming and cyberbullying, while digital ownership included lack of control over media and digital kidnapping. The most mentioned risk at 58.9% belonged to the category of digital ownership, and mothers feared that their children's information might be shared with strangers. The perceived benefits of sharenting did not outweigh the risks unless the content was restricted to pictures shared with a families' intimate circle. The unbalanced risks and benefits associated with sharenting did not translate into stricter privacy settings on Facebook, nor did it discourage the sharenting activities. Moreover, the mothers who had negative experiences because of their sharenting habits did not show any notable difference in their posting frequency or their tendency to share their children's content online. Likewise, 26.3% of mothers in the study who stated that they knew friends or family that experienced negative sharenting related experiences did not showcase a subsequent reduction in sharenting habits or posting frequency. Therefore, perceived risks and indirect or direct exposure to negative sharenting related experiences did not affect the mothers' sharenting habits.

Sharenting can have negative consequences because it contributes to the children's digital identity (Ouvrein & Verswijvel, 2019). Gaëlle Ouvrein and Karen Verswijvel explored the implications that sharenting has on children by identifying their varying feelings on the subject and its consequences on their online representation. Their study was titled "Sharenting: Parental Adoration or Public Humiliation? A Focus Group Study on Adolescents' Experiences with Sharenting Against the Background of their Own Impression Management." Unlike most of the research conducted on children, this study sought to work with children. This positions the structure of the study away from the traditional methods of performing research on children. The "new" sociology of childhood gives children representation as social actors and provides them with more agency (Swauger et.al., 2017). This study included forty-six participants aged between twelve and fourteen years old from two different secondary school classes (Ouvrein & Verswijvel, 2019). The methodology relied on focus groups that encouraged discussions among children that were roughly the same age and had known each other prior to the study. The discussions were recorded, and the transcriptions were analyzed independently by two researchers. The findings suggested that children invest a lot of effort and time into constructing intentional online images and identities. This is done through the use of filters, the monitoring of their posts to ensure they are perfect while also retaining an effortless look. The images posted by children are not the sole factor in constructing their intentional digital identities; indeed, sharenting is another notable factor. Thus, sharenting distorts the children's digital image, interferes with their digital self-representations, and disrupts their impression management efforts.

Researchers found contradicting information on the feelings of children towards their parents' sharenting activities; however, current literature encourages boundary negotiations to avoid frustration among children. The aforementioned study showcased that the reactions to sharenting activities are not uniform (Ouvrein & Verswijvel, 2019). Sometimes children are appreciative of their parents' posts because they are celebratory, showcase pride, and are constructed in a positive light. However, that is not always the case because parents share images that children view as embarrassing or imperfect. This ultimately evokes frustration because the parents' sharenting activities distort the children's carefully constructed digital identity.

Another notable study is titled "Take it Down!: Estonian Parents' and Pre-teens' Opinions and Experiences with Sharenting." Merike Lipu and Andra Siibak relied on interviews with Fourteen Mother-Child pairs where the children were between the ages of Nine to Thirteen years old. The researchers aimed to outline the opinions of the children versus their mothers on sharenting activities. The interviews were flexible in terms of open-ended questions, and the transcriptions were cross-analyzed thoroughly (Lipu & Siibak, 2019). The children highlighted that embarrassing content as well as endearments on public posts were heavily disliked. Oftentimes the privacy boundaries of children and their parents are not identical, which causes frustration and tensions in the family. These findings illustrate the importance of negotiating boundaries related to sharenting to avoid frustration.

Conclusion

The motives for engaging in sharenting activities are numerous; most notable is the self-representation that parents seek when they share their children's content online (Holiday et.al., 2020). A lot of factors do not cause the decrease in sharenting activities. For example, awareness of risks associated with this activity and exposure to negative experiences because of it does not reduce the occurrences of sharenting (Briazu et.al., 2021). Moreover, the researchers showcased the presence of a privacy paradox (Fox et.al., 2022). Even when parents showcased sensitivity in sharing their own and their children's information online, sharenting still occurred (Fox et.al., 2022). Moreover, parents' reluctance to engage in sharenting activities with social media marketers did not reduce the indirect or direct acts of sharing child-related content online (Fox et.al., 2022). Heightened privacy concerns overall did not predict instances of sharenting on social media apps (Ranzini et.al., 2020). Instead, other factors like general sharing habits on social media apps provided a stronger positive correlation to sharenting tendencies in parents (Ranzini et.al., 2020). The negative consequences of sharenting are various, including a potential loss of digital ownership over content once it is posted online (Briazu et.al., 2021). Most notable is the intrusion into the digital identity of children that occurs because of the content posted by their parents (Ouvrein & Verswijvel, 2019). Overall, the process of sharenting is complicated and has a lot of negative repercussions on the lives of children (Ouvrein & Verswijvel, 2019). Children often have mixed feelings when their parents post content that contains them online (Ouvrein & Verswijvel, 2019; Lipu & Siibak, 2019). Current literature highlights the need for boundary negotiations among children and their parents to avoid feelings of frustration (Lipu & Siibak, 2019).

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