



Sharenting and Exploitation: A Qualitative Content Analysis of Public Reactions to the Wren Eleanor Situation

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Abstract

This study analyzed responses to the viral sharenting case of Wren Eleanor to understand how people react to sharenting and related ^{allegations} of child exploitation. A sample of 50 comments was created by retrieving the first 25 comments displayed on two TikTok videos. The sample consisted of an equal number of positive reactions (i.e., those supportive of Wren's mother and her sharenting) and negative reactions (i.e., those critical of Wren's mother and her sharenting). The positive responses had five themes: Victim, Opposition, Encouragement, Emotional Attachment and Involvement, and Advice. The negative responses had four themes: Perpetrator, Exploitation, Fear, and Action. This study demonstrated that parasocial relationships and interactions potentially play a key role in how people react to sharenting and allegations of child exploitation.

Keywords: sharenting, children, social media, exploitation, content analysis

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Introduction

The popularity of social media goes hand-in-hand with the popularity of sharenting, the sharing of content relating to parenting and children on social media (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017, p. 110). According to an American survey, 77% of parents have shared content of their children or stepchildren online, whether it be stories, videos, or images (Security.org Team, 2021). Another study from 2016 reported that parents in the United Kingdom posted an average of 1,498 photos of their child(ren) before they turned five years old, a 54% increase from 2015 (Nominet, 2016, para. 1). A conversation surrounding the online content of children has developed alongside the rise of sharenting, with many voicing concerns over ethical issues such as privacy, consent, and exploitation, as well as safety issues such as child predation (Anderer, 2022, paras. 2-24; Walker, 2022, paras. 2-11). While sharenting continues to grip social media and our discourses, a thorough understanding of the phenomenon is necessary to inform future parental practices and policies regarding the content of children online.

A large majority of studies on sharenting have examined the vast content of sharenting posts (Cino, 2021, p. 865). Online representations include photos, videos, written threads, and blog posts that depict pregnancy, children, and parenting experiences (Cino, 2021, p. 865). A subset of this research focuses on how children are portrayed on social media. One study found that the online visibility of marginalized groups, such as females and ethnic groups, has increased; however, representations of these groups upheld traditional stereotypes (Choi & Lewallen, 2018, pp. 156-158). Moreover, sons still tend to be mentioned online more frequently than daughters (Cino, 2021, p. 865).

Another area of interest in the study of sharenting focuses on how parents and children perceive the practice. Research by Moser et al. (2017) examined the perceptions and preferences of parents and children regarding how and what parents share online about their children. Generally, parents and children agree on their perceptions of how often and how much parents share about their children (p. 5223). Moreover, children generally accept content that positively impacts their self-presentation (p. 5224). Similarly, they do not accept content that negatively impacts their self-presentation, including overly revealing information (p. 5224). However, parents and children have differing views about how often parents should ask their children for permission to share content about them (p. 5223).

A limited amount of attention has been paid to sharenting by celebrities and popular influencers. Alongside sponsorships and advertisements, the content posted by these parents tends to include content of everyday life (Cino, 2021, p. 865). This domestic content aims to demonstrate amateurism and authenticity to appeal to their followers (p. 865). The term “calibrated amateurism” was first used by Crystal Abidin (2017) to refer to “over crafting contrived authenticity that portrays the raw aesthetic of an amateur” (p. 1). Abidin (2017) further explains that calibrated amateurism is meant to convince the content creator’s followers that they prioritize being a family above being influencers and achieving monetary gain (p. 12). By doing so, the parents are somewhat protected from accusations of exploiting their children’s digital labor (p. 12). In her content analysis of two-family influencers, Abidin (2017) identifies three ways that parents justify their children’s digital labor (pp. 11-12). First, the parents emphasize that their chil-

dren are willing and enthusiastic participants that are having fun. Second, the parents regularly allow the children to control some of the content to show their lighthearted nature, perhaps by including “bloopers” of the children during filming. Third, the parents demonstrate that the child can choose not to participate in creating content or that the parent revokes child participation as a means of discipline.

The present study is a content analysis of public responses to the highly publicized sharenting case of Wren Eleanor and its ensuing controversy to explore how people react to sharenting and related allegations of child exploitation. Wren Eleanor is a popular three-year-old influencer who has amassed 17 million followers on the TikTok account run by her mother, Jacquelyn (Dickson, 2022, para.1; Organ; 2022, para. 1). Although much of her content appears innocuous at first glance, many followers have begun to express their concerns about Jacquelyn’s actions and those of potential predators (Fox News, 2022, paras. 1-17). For instance, it was brought to the public’s attention that a video of Wren eating a hot dog, which some might view as sexually suggestive, was saved almost 375,000 times, and “Wren Eleanor hotdog” became a frequent and suggested search on TikTok and Google (para. 6). Additionally, many followers noticed sexual comments on Wren’s videos (Organ, 2022, para. 2). Others have also expressed their belief that Jacquelyn is using Wren for money, going as far as alleging exploitation (Organ, 2022, para. 2), the practice of grooming, forcing or coercing someone else to do things for one’s own gain (Preventing Exploitation Toolkit, n.d., para 1). The controversy surrounding Jacquelyn and Wren has invigorated the discussion on the online content of children, even inspiring a movement of parents removing posts of their children and vowing not to post them in the future (Fox News, 2022, paras. 1-2).

Previous research has established the characteristics of sharenting and those involved in creating the content, but studies have neglected those consuming the content. The current study is significant because it is the first to examine a large-scale popular culture event, widely called the Wren Eleanor situation, that may have long-term effects on sharenting and social media use. Furthermore, this study deepens our understanding of sharenting by exploring its consumers through their attitudes and behaviours towards the practice.

Method

Sample

The sample consisted of 50 comments (n=50) from two TikTok videos, with 25 comments retrieved from each. One of the videos, titled “FALSE RUMOURS: What You Need To Know,” is a statement by Jacquelyn posted on Wren’s TikTok account (@wren.eleanor) that addresses the public’s concerns about Wren’s safety, particularly regarding child predators. The video was uploaded on August 5, 2022, and it has 1,874 comments. The video can be found with the following link:

https://www.tiktok.com/@wren.eleanor/video/7128469642921807150?is_from_webapp=v1&item_id=7128469642921807150&lang=en

The other video, a TikTok titled “The Wren Eleanor situation got worse,” is partially in response to Jacquelyn’s statement. In the video, the user (@iNabber69) documents some of the public’s concerns and states their personal opinion that Jacquelyn is exploiting Wren by catering to sexual predators. The video was uploaded on August 11, 2022, and it has 1,909 comments. The video can be found with the following link:

https://www.tiktok.com/@inabber69/video/7130679478891629829?is_from_webapp=1&sender_device=pc&web_id=7165902768107030021

Sample Selection

TikTok was chosen as the data source because it is the social media platform where most of Wren’s content is posted, where she has her largest following, and where most of the support or criticism towards Jacquelyn’s sharenting is located. The video posted by Jacquelyn was selected because it is the most direct source, as the individual at the centre of the Wren Eleanor situation created it. Moreover, the reactions captured were highly relevant to the research question because her statement responds to the allegations surrounding her sharenting. However, because most of the comments contained positive reactions (i.e., those supportive of Jacquelyn and her sharenting), a second video, a viral criticism of Jacquelyn’s sharenting, was chosen to help gain a comprehensive understanding of the public’s responses. Due to the nature of the second video, negative reactions (i.e., those critical of Jacquelyn and her sharenting) were prevalent in the comments. The first 25 comments displayed on each video deemed relevant to the research question were selected to construct the sample.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The sample of comments from both videos included reactions to the content of Jacquelyn’s statement or those related to the Wren Eleanor situation more broadly. However, only positive comments were selected from the first video, and only negative comments were selected from the second video to examine both types of reactions equally. The sample also excluded comments that were irrelevant to the research question, were in languages other than English, were replies to other comments, or had a neutral or unclear interpretation.

Units of Analysis

The units of analysis for the study were the words and phrases that potentially suggested themes within the 50 comments responding to Jacquelyn’s video statement and the Wren Eleanor situation.

Settings and Materials

The data collection and the subsequent coding procedure were completed in the principal researcher's residence. A laptop and an internet connection were required to access TikTok and view the videos and the comments. No account or subscription was needed to use TikTok through an internet browser. Moreover, the TikTok videos and their comments could be freely examined because both user profiles are public.

Coding Procedures

The positive and negative comments were coded separately. In both coding processes, the comments were individually examined for meaning units, any words or phrases that potentially suggested themes. Codes were created by giving descriptive labels to the meaning units with similar characteristics. Themes were developed by grouping the similar codes and giving them an overarching label. Throughout this process, the meaning units, codes, and themes were reassessed and revised until data saturation was achieved.

Design

The present study is a content analysis that identified the underlying themes within public responses to the Wren Eleanor situation to understand how people react to sharenting and related allegations of child exploitation.

Results

Positive Reactions

Within the positive comments posted in response to the video "FALSE RUMOURS: What You Need To Know," the results revealed five themes: 1) Victim, 2) Opposition, 3) Encouragement, 4) Emotional Attachment and Involvement, and 5) Advice.

Victim refers to comments that indicated Jacquelyn is innocent or that she is victimized by the opposition. These comments argued that Jacquelyn did not commit any wrongdoings and has suffered because of those critical of her. For example, one commenter laments, "so sorry for what you've had to endure." This theme was the most prevalent, as it was present in 64% of comments.

Opposition refers to comments that provided commentary on the opposition. The posters generally characterized the opposition as malicious or unreasonable. For example, some commenters labeled the opposition "haters," and others considered their actions bullying or spreading conspiracy theories. This theme was present in 60% of the comments.

Encouragement refers to comments that potentially encourage Jacquelyn to continue posting content of Wren. These comments contained compliments, stated their continued support, and attempted to reassure Jacquelyn through sentiments such as “stay strong.” This theme was present in 56% of the comments.

Emotional Attachment and Involvement refers to comments that illustrate the commenter’s emotional connection to Jacquelyn or Wren. These comments tended to mention the “love” or closeness felt by the commenter towards Jacquelyn and Wren. For example, one individual declared, “Love you both,” while another stated, “I was always on your side.” This theme was present in 40% of the comments.

Advice refers to comments that contained recommendations given by commenters regarding how to respond to the opposition and the general “Wren Eleanor situation.” These recommendations included taking a break from social media, ignoring the opposition, and even taking legal action by suing for defamation. This theme was present in 20% of the comments.

Negative Reactions

Within the negative comments posted in response to the video “The Wren Eleanor situation got worse,” the results revealed four themes: 1) Perpetrator, 2) Exploitative, 3) Fear, and 4) Action.

Perpetrator refers to comments that indicated Jacquelyn is a responsible party in the Wren Eleanor situation and that she is willingly harming her child. These comments emphasized that Jacquelyn is conscious and accepting of the threat to Wren. This theme was the most prevalent, as it was present in 84% of the comments.

Exploitation refers to comments that suggested Jacquelyn is exploiting Wren by deliberately catering to sexual predators for financial motivations. These comments echoed the belief that “it’s all about money” and claimed that profit is the reason Jacquelyn will continue posting content of Wren. This theme was present in 52% of the comments.

Fear refers to the comments that expressed worry for Wren or the commenter’s own child(ren). For example, one individual responds, “...there are sick people out there and I hope they never find her,” and another admits, “this whole situation scared me enough to delete any videos that had my son.” This theme was present in 20% of the comments.

Action refers to comments that mentioned potential interventions or solutions for Wren’s protection. Some commenters suggested getting authorities or other close individuals involved, whereas others pled for Jacquelyn to cease posting content of Wren. This theme was present in 20% of the comments.

Table 1: Examples of Comments by Theme

Positive Themes	Comment Examples
Victim	“...so sorry for what you’ve had to endure” “You are a wonderful momma and doing the right thing.”
Opposition	“Ignore the haters” “It wasn’t about being “worried” about your daughter. It was bullying.”
Encouragement	“...stay strong.” “You are an amazing mom.”
Emotional Attachment and Involvement	“Love you both” “I was always on your side”
Advice	“I honestly just think you should get off social media and take a break. For you and for her.” “sue for defamation”
Negative Themes	Comment Examples
Perpetrator	“...many people have been warning her for months but she ignored them...” “The mother knows exactly that she is doing.”
Exploitation	“she knows what’s happening but she’s profiting from it so she isn’t gonna stop” “It’s all about money”
Fear	“...there are sick people out there and I hope they never find her” “this whole situation scared me enough to delete any videos that had my son...”
Action	“someone call cps” “... she needs to acknowledge what is happening NOW and act. Make the hard choice and shut it down.”

Discussion

The present study examined the public’s responses to the Wren Eleanor situation to understand how people react to sharenting and related allegations of child exploitation. The portrayal of Jacquelyn as a victim was the most prevalent theme in the positive reactions, whereas Jacquelyn as a perpetrator was the overwhelming theme in the negative reactions. Therefore, most

responses approached the situation by initially assigning Jacquelyn a role within the Wren Eleanor situation: a victim or a perpetrator. Positive reactions appeared to be generally motivated by the commenters' parasocial relationships and interactions with Jacquelyn and Wren. Parasocial relationships and interactions refer to the one-sided relationships "experienced by members of an audience in their mediated encounters with certain performers in the mass media" (Horton & Wohl, 1956, as cited in Oxford Reference, n.d.), based on the illusions of intimacy fostered by the performers. This relationship is apparent in most comments, but especially those that revered Jacquelyn and Wren while vilifying the opposition.

According to Horton and Wohl (1956), non-regular viewers of a performer are more likely to be detached, analytical, and cynical of the performer (as cited in Oxford Reference, n.d.), which characterizes the negative reactions towards Jacquelyn. The negative comments created an entirely different depiction of Jacquelyn and heavily focused on her actions and motivation for posting content of Wren. To many of these individuals, Jacquelyn is purposefully exploiting Wren to make money, a stark contrast to the view of her supporters that she is an idyllic mother. Interestingly, the negative comments did not discuss her supporters, whereas most of her supporters attempted to invalidate the opposition.

There are multiple limitations to the present study that must be considered. The credibility of the results may have been negatively impacted because of the small sample size ($n=50$), which was taken from a single data source, and only coded by the principal researcher. Furthermore, because the users who posted the videos can remove comments, particular reactions may be missing from the analysis. Another limitation is the inability to generalize the findings, as the reactions examined were in response to a single, unique case of sharenting and alleged exploitation.

Because of the limited scope of this study, there are many directions for future research. Considering the ratio of positive and negative reactions within the sample was artificial, the true proportion of negative and positive reactions should be examined. Additionally, data triangulation using responses across various platforms would help to achieve a greater level of rigor. Lastly, it would be beneficial to study individuals who participate in sharenting but represent different demographics to find potential differences.

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