

Navigating Parenthood Online: Understanding the Complex Dynamics of Sharenting Practices

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Abstract: In this paper, we focus on the increasingly central visual aspects of documenting and sharing family life as we examine how parents reflect upon “sharenting”, i.e. sharing representations of family life in social media. The aim of this paper is to contribute with an empirically supported understanding of activities involved in the social practice of sharenting. We ask: “What activities constitute the practice of sharenting and how do parents perceive, experience, and manage sharenting?” and focus on how parents engage in sharenting and how they experience and manage questions and concerns that occur as they share, and do not share, pictures of their children in social media. We draw upon a thematic analysis of twelve semi-structured in-depth interviews with parents of at least one child in the age of 1-10. Based on our data and in relation to previous research we unpack ambiguous and multifaceted reasonings on sharenting as a complex social media practice. Through rich descriptions and empirical detail, we provide knowledge on key activities involved in sharenting, and present findings following three themes: unforeseeable consequences of sharenting, social media dilemmas of sharenting and strategies for managing sharenting. Lastly, we show how these activities represent expressions of agreed upon idioms of the practice of sharenting and discuss the interplay between contemporary social photography, ICT, and family life. Increased access to, and use of ICT such as smartphones with built-in advanced cameras, leads us to believe that the practice of visually representing family life in a contemporary context comes with a new set of challenges for parents. As the social media landscape is constantly evolving, social media practices, such as sharenting, must be continuously studied to ensure the understanding needed to inform future design, policy, and regulation. This paper present illustrative examples of how this community adopt, make, and negotiate use of social media and the possibilities these ICTs afford.

Keywords: Sharenting, Social media use, Social media practices, Idioms of practice, Social media dilemmas

1. Introduction

The connection between photography and family has always been strong (Cino, 2022), with families curating photos and choosing visual representations of their lives to place in physical photo albums. In the earlier days of amateur photography, photos were usually shared within a small social circle, often through home video showings or slideshows (Chalfen, 1987). While people still engage in similar practices of creating narratives through visual content today, the physical photo albums have mostly been replaced by digital albums. Also, due to the digitalization of photography, photos of family life are usually shared with a greater audience than before. Visual aspects of producing, sharing, and interacting around photographs have become a central part of contemporary social media interaction. Over the recent decade, the number of photos shared daily in social media have tripled and today, a hefty 3.8 billion images are shared on Snapchat, 2.1 billion on Facebook, and 1.3 billion on Instagram daily. Approximately 92,5 % of these are estimated to have been taken and shared using smartphones (Broz, 2023). While the fundamental aspects of the practice of social photography, i.e. how people take, organize, and share photographs (Chalfen, 1987) have been of interest for decades, the digital development of sharing visual content of everyday life has raised new questions and concerns for those seeking to understand contemporary social photography. For this paper, we focus on the parental aspects of social photography, a phenomenon which has previously been described as “sharenting”. The term ‘sharenting’, coined using the words ‘share’ and ‘parenting’ (Brosch, 2018), has been defined as the act of “sharing representations of one’s parenting or children online” (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017, p. 110). While previous work on sharenting has begun to establish understanding of motives and concerns, less is known about the multitude and variety of activities involved in this social practice and how parents manage and negotiate challenges. In this paper, we focus on how parents engaging in sharenting experience and manage concerns that occur as they share, and do not share pictures of their children in social media. We ask: “What activities constitute the practice of sharenting and how do parents perceive, experience, and manage sharenting?”. By unpacking parents’ own descriptions of sharenting practices, we describe experienced dos and don’ts of sharenting, unforeseeable consequences of sharenting, dilemmas of sharenting, and strategies for managing sharenting. Finally, we discuss our findings as examples of idioms of this social practice in relation to contemporary social photography.

2. Related Work

While sharenting is becoming a greater interest for researchers within a variety of fields, more work systematically identifying and describing the activities that constitute the social practice of sharenting is still needed. Previous work has examined and described sharenting from different angles. Most of the existing work have focused on problematic aspects of sharenting, such as implications for privacy (Fox & Hoy, 2019) and children's rights (Brosch, 2018), possible dangers and risks following sharenting (Ferrara et al., 2023, Gatto et al., 2024). In contrast, other scholars have highlighted more desirable outcomes of sharenting, such as information-archiving (Verswijvel et al., 2019) and the possibility to receive social support as a new parent (Archer & Kao, 2018; Barkhuus et al., 2017; Lazard et al., 2019). Most of the previous work has been focusing on sharenting within a Western context, yet some recent work has begun to examine sharenting practices within additional demographics, such as among Middle Eastern (Esfandiari & Yao, 2023) and Turkish (Aydoğdu et al., 2023) parents. Previous work has shown that sharenting is usually motivated by positive interests (Ferrara et al., 2023) and have proven to bring positive outcomes for parents engaging in sharenting. For instance, Lazard et al. (2019) acknowledge that social media has "provided a space for parents to share experiences and receive support around parenting" (Lazard et al., 2019, p. 1). However, the consequences of sharenting have been shown to be complex and difficult to grasp (Ogbanufe et al., 2023), possibly explaining why parents sometimes put their children at risk even when not intending to (Ferrara et al., 2023). A few papers have begun to unpack emotional tensions that parents describe experiencing as they engage in sharenting, such as juggling own self-presentation with protecting of one's children (Holiday et al., 2022) and negotiating and managing privacy (Walrave, 2023). Steinberg (2017) contributes with a solid problematization of the tension that occur for parents as they cherish both the protecting of their children's rights to privacy while also wanting to practice their own right to free speech. Identifying and mapping examples of similar tensions, Cino (2022) show that parents struggle with digital dilemmas and conceptualize these as "Social Media Dilemmas" (SMDs) and include a few dilemmas that parents associate with governing their families' and children's digital presence (Cino, 2022). Emphasizing this struggle, Cino (2022) writes: "Sharenting is a common habit for parents in the digital age. Despite common discourse describing parents as naïve about it, empirical data supports many of them grapple with digital dilemmas concerning these digital narrations" (Cino, 2022, p. 128).

2.1 The Social Practice of Sharenting

For this paper, we conceptualize sharenting as a social media practice (Jungselius, 2019) when identifying and describing the activities that constitute sharenting. Social media practices refer to the numerous and varied activities that social media users engage in when using social media. These include how people balance, plan and monitor social media interaction before, after and in-between their postings (Jungselius, 2019). In order to be able to engage in social media practices in fulfilling ways, users' need to acquire social media skills (Jungselius, 2019). However, these skills are not static, instead they change as the practices evolve (ibid). Apart from technical skills such as being able to press the right buttons and fill out information for a profile, there are also several social skills that users of social media need to develop to be able to fully engage with social media (ibid). Studying a specific social skill that users of social media develop, knowing how to handle a break-up on Facebook, anthropologist Ilana Gershon introduced the concept of "idioms of practice" (Gershon, 2010). This concept relies on an assumption that communities have shared and often unspoken expectations and refers to "the agreed upon appropriate social uses of technology that people create, learn and negotiate through asking for advice and sharing stories with each other" (ibid, pg. 6) within that community. Also, the idea points to "how people have implicit and explicit intuitions about using different technologies that they have developed with their friends, family members and co-workers" (ibid). Other than learning how to navigate among technical features, there are also a set of social, often implicit, rules that regulate the use of these technologies and which users need to learn to be able to use them in fulfilling ways (Gershon, 2010). As new social media practices emerge, idioms of practice develop through collective discussions, negotiation and social participation among the users who engage in these shared practices (ibid). Extending the existing literature and building upon the theoretical framework conceptualizing social media practices and idioms of practice, we aim to identify and describe idioms of one specific social media practice: sharenting. Taking a qualitative and user-oriented approach, this paper aims to contribute with empirical, detailed knowledge on how parents engage in, and reason on, sharing of pictures of children in social media.

3. Method

In this paper, we ask: “What activities constitute the practice of sharenting and how do parents perceive, experience, and manage sharenting?” and draw upon an interview study where twelve parents were recruited and asked to take part in in-depth, semi-structured interviews on sharenting. The aim was to identify and describe what activities that constitute the social practice of sharenting by contributing with empirically supported and detailed understanding of these activities. Interest in people's own descriptions and a desire for a deeper understanding of people's experiences is often the main motive behind choosing to conduct in-depth interviews (Seidman, 2006). Also, in-depth interviews are often particularly suitable for researchers who want to understand people's underlying motives and strategies in interaction and practice (Dempsey, 2010).

For this study, the participants were recruited through Facebook and Instagram through identical posts posted on three different occasions in March 2023, where parents’ meeting the criteria’s of having at least one child in the age of 0-10 years old and being a regular user of social media were asked to participate in the study. Prior to the interviews, an interview guide was constructed including questions allowing both general as well as more specific reasonings on sharenting. Beginning the interviews, all informants were given the same, brief, information about the study and informed consent forms was signed. The interviews were audio-recorded and conducted during March-April 2023. Each interview lasted approximately 45-60 minutes. Participants’ ages ranged from 26 to 46 years (average age was 36, median age 36,5), nine of them were women and three of them were men.

Informant	Gender	Age	Number of children	Age of children
Informant 1	M	44	1	9
Informant 2	F	37	3	1, 7 and 9
Informant 3	M	26	1	3
Informant 4	F	26	1	3
Informant 5	F	37	2	9 and 11
Informant 6	F	36	2	3 and 5
Informant 7	F	32	2	2 and 4
Informant 8	F	44	2	9 and 12
Informant 9	F	33	2	2 and 4
Informant 10	F	37	2	1,5 and 10
Informant 11	M	34	1	2
Informant 12	F	46	3	7, 12 and 15

Figure 1: The informants

Following the interviews, the audio files were anonymized and transcribed using the built-in voice-to-text feature in Microsoft Office Word to facilitate further analysis. The second and third author completed an iterative thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), consulting the first author throughout the process and allowing feedback. It should be mentioned that the data for this paper was initially collected for a bachelor’s thesis written by Author 2 and 3 and supervised by Author 1 why parts of the data reported on in this paper have therefore been reported on within that thesis. For this paper however, the data have been analyzed in further detail using the computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) NVivo by Author 1 trough a different theoretical lens exploring sharenting as a social practice, which has not been reported on before.

4. Findings: The Dos and Don’ts of Sharenting

From our data, it is clear that the evolvment of digital social photography and increased sharing of representations of family life beyond the immediate family has raised new questions and concerns for parents. We have found numerous examples of ambiguous reasonings as our informants reported both wanting to share photos of their children with their followers on social media, yet also wanting to protect their children’s privacy and integrity. When analyzing our data, we noticed that it seemed easier for the informants to describe what they would *not* do, rather than what they actually *do* when they share pictures of their children in social media. Their reasonings on what not to post were explicit, while their reasonings regarding preferred content and ways of sharing photos of children were vaguer. When asked what kind of photos they would never share of their children, we received several rather specific answers. Even when asked the reversed question, i.e. “What kind of pictures would you post of your children?” they referred to what they wouldn’t post. We found numerous examples of statements where the informants verbalized their opinions on content that they would never post themselves. These most clearly involved nudity, posting angry or upset children and using one’s children for bragging and showing off.

Within the following sections, we will present examples of parents' reasonings on the dos and don'ts of the social practice of sharenting following three themes. Within the first theme, we present findings concerning unforeseeable consequences of sharenting. Secondly, we show examples of social media dilemmas (SMDs) of sharenting found within our data and lastly, we describe strategies used for managing these.

4.1 Unforeseeable Consequences of Sharenting

A central concern raised by multiple informants was the struggle of trying to foresee and manage possible consequences of sharing pictures of their children in social media, even when these are difficult or even impossible to foresee. As shown in previous work, the consequences of sharenting have been difficult to grasp due to its complexity, leading sharenting parents to putting their children at risk, even unintentionally (Ferrara et al., 2023). Although no questions addressing this topic were directly asked during the interviews, each informant mentioned and referred to potential consequences of sharenting. Several mentioned the difficulties of understanding and foreseeing consequences. For example, they said:

"I think there will be consequences, but that it is too early to know what these consequences will be."

(Informant 3)

"My personal opinion on putting out pictures on children under 18 is like, there can be consequences or whatever later on when the child is over 18 and then they might be like: 'why did she put this out, I didn't approve of that.'"

(Informant 11)

"And like that picture that you yourself find cute [...] especially nude pictures I think you need to be careful with, because you don't know where these might end up later."

(Informant 12)

Not being able to foresee the consequences, especially for the child, seem to have an inhibitory impact on their sharenting practices where the informants report on being precautious and safe rather than sorry. All informants acknowledged potential consequences following upon their sharing of photos in social media, and even if they were not certain of what these could turn out to be, they expressed that they need to be guarded against.

4.2 Social Media Dilemmas of Sharenting

While the informants were explicit regarding some content that they would never post themselves, during other reasonings it became clear that the distinction between what was believed to be okay to share and what was not, was not always as clear. As within the work of Cino (2022), our informants described struggling with striving towards conflicting aims. For instance, one informant described a two-folded motive for sharenting:

"You want recognition from others and like, not just the approval in terms of 'look at these cute children' but also approval in terms of being a parent, to share things you want to discuss [...] getting support and cheers and understanding from other parents so that's an additional reason for posting about your children and family life."

(Informant 9)

Another informant elaborated in a similar way when initially describing being very critical towards sharing pictures of children in social media in general, and therefore never doing that herself. However, as she continued talking about sharenting she elaborated in a different direction:

"But in a way you do feel that like, it's a two folded feeling. Because at the same time, I think it's fun to see my friends' children and it's not that I get provoked when I see them or that I am strongly against what they do, it's more like [...] I don't think that it is right to post pictures of one's children but at the same time, I think it is fun to see the children."

(Informant 5)

These informants are acknowledging wanting and getting approval and social support from peers and followers but is also expressing skepticism towards using children to accomplish that. Another interesting example of how a similar kind of SMD was described as one mother talked about her motives for following a certain kind of parent, 'the Pinterest mom'. She described following other mothers on social media and

appreciating their postings containing ideas for sleeping routines, meals and recipes, DIY crafts, hobbies and the similar. Later during the interview however, she referred to these mothers again and continued her reasonings, painting a more ambiguous picture. She said:

"I kinda think that you, because you know, you do want to be one of them. You want to do things with your child. Or like, you do want to be one of those Pinterest moms. But then when you get out of this Instagram bubble and like meet reality and it's like [...] how do people have time?"

(Informant 4)

4.3 Managing Sharenting

As with other social media practices, sharenting involves managing social media, before, during, after and in-between postings (Jungselius, 2019). In the previous section, we showed examples of parents experiencing SMDs (Cino, 2022). For this section, we will show how our informants describe meeting, negotiating, and managing these SMDs. From our data, it is suggested that a central part of the sharenting practice takes place before content is shared in social media. We found examples of how parents described having a set of normative 'rules' they follow that they rely upon navigate through their sharenting. Apart from engaging in guiding inner dialogues, other informants described consulting the other parent or other family members guidance:

"...maybe have a dialogue with the family [...] what you think and maybe you discuss some pros and cons, what's best. Or less good so to speak."

(Informant 11)

Another strategy described for managing a will to share pictures of their children with also wanting to protect them was mentioned by multiple informants and included adjusting privacy settings:

"You never know who will watch the pictures, so on Instagram for instance, you can shut it down a bit to be sort of private [...] so that like if you are not friends then they can't see it either."

(Informant 4)

In addition to these examples representing the most commonly described managing activities, we also found examples where the informants described creating additional (private) accounts specifically for sharing pictures of their children, asking others to remove pictures of their own children, reporting other people's postings of sensitive content, anonymizing and hiding or removing identity revealing content (such as hiding faces by adding emojis, blurring faces, only posting pictures of children's hands or backs). These actions all include rather active measures, yet the data also included examples of a slightly different nature. One specifically interesting strategy described was to not press 'Like' on a picture of her children as a way to avoid revealing the identity of her children. She said:

"If I see one on for instance on Instagram or anywhere, then I don't 'Like' it because [...] then I tie them more obviously to me."

(Informant 5)

The informants also referred to involving the children themselves for guidance. However, although they might ask their children, the children do not always have the final say on what will actually be shared:

"If it's a picture of them I would want to talk to them before [...] of course if they say that you should remove that picture, you listen, usually, if it's not a very good picture."

(Informant 1)

This informant explains that if he would consider sharing a picture of his child on social media, he would consult the child first. However, what is interesting within this last example is the ambiguous reasoning here and how the parental ascendancy is highlighted. Even if the child would oppose, there might still be a desire to share the picture.

5. Discussion

For this paper, we conceptualize sharenting as an example of a social media practice that include activities taking place before, after and in-between posting. Following the agreed upon use of idioms of this specific practice, these activities rely on a set of norms which those who engage in the practice have developed

through participation, discussion, and negotiation. Increased sharing of family life with a greater audience outside of one's closest family has led to a development of a new set of social media skills for parents. As suggested by Gershon, when people engage in a social digital practice, shared and often unspoken expectations develop (Gershon, 2010). For the practice of sharenting, users have developed expectations of how to act, interact and manage their sharing of photos of their children in social media.

The informants mentioned several ways of managing sharenting, such as consulting others before posting, adjusting the privacy of their profiles or create additional accounts specifically for sharing pictures of their children, asking others to remove pictures of their own children, reporting other people's postings of sensitive content, anonymizing, hiding or removing identity revealing content (such as hiding faces by adding emojis, blurring faces, only posting pictures of children's hands or backs). While these actions all include active measures, we have also presented examples of more 'silent' actions. For instance, one informant described not 'Liking' photos of her children on social media as a way to avoid revealing of the identity of her children. This silent action of acknowledging, yet consciously not 'Liking' a photo due to foreseeing the consequences of doing so (i.e., possibly providing a digital trace that could reveal the identity of the children visible in the pictures) require an understanding of the intertwined and complex relationship between privacy and technology discussed by Ogbanufe et al. (2023) and represents an example of a social media skill (Jungselius, 2019) that develops through engaging in sharenting. Engagement in social media practices have been shown to go beyond the most immediate actions such as pressing the right buttons and include activities that social media users engage in as they balance, plan, and monitor their social media interaction before, after and in-between their postings (ibid). Within our data, we found several examples of how parents engage in sharenting activities before, during and after their most immediate engagement with the social media application used for posting content of their children, leading us to conclude that sharenting is a social media practice that, similar to other social media practices, expands beyond simply taking and sharing pictures and rather involves extensive thought, ambiguous concerns, struggles and negotiating of the practice while creating digital, visual narratives.

Previous work has established that parents engaging in sharenting often struggle with wanting to practice their own right to express themselves while simultaneously aiming to protect their children (Cino, 2022; Steinberg, 2017). Other scholars have shown that sharenting offer comfort and support to parents, providing a sense of belonging to a community, and give children a sense of pride when receiving 'Likes' from family and friends, while also raising concerns in terms of management of privacy risks and consequences difficult to foresee (Ogbanufe et al., 2023). Our data support previous work showing that parents struggle when wanting to express themselves through sharing their everyday life, but also wanting to protect their children's integrity. Ambiguity is central for parents participating in sharenting, and we have found numerous examples of how parents engaging in sharenting negotiate this practice. They admit to appreciating the social support they gain yet also want to protect their children from being overly exposed, especially since the consequences of exposing them are difficult to understand and foresee. They want to show pictures of their children to everyone because they love them and are proud of them, yet they also want to protect them from being subject to dubious purposes. From our data, it is clear that the informants consider it obvious that parents have good intentions, want to protect their children, and respect their own desires and opinions. However, there are also examples of when their children's desires conflict with their own motives and willingness to share pictures of them. As one informant said: *"Of course, if they say that you should remove that picture, you listen...usually, if it's not a very good picture"*, highlighting this very dilemma.

6. Conclusion

As people engage in social practices using Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), they develop an agreed upon appropriate use of them, i.e., idioms of practice (Gershon, 2010). For this paper, we have presented examples of idioms of the practice of sharenting. Some of these expectations of how to behave are explicit (such as not posting pictures involving nudity or the child expressing strong emotions), while others are more implicit (such as not showing off, being cautious, and protecting your children's right to privacy). These activities should be understood as idioms of a practice for a community of users engaging in contemporary social photography. As noted by previous scholars, the link between family and photography has always been strong (Cino, 2022). However, the increased access to and use of ICT such as smartphones with built-in advanced cameras, leads us to believe that the practice of visually representing family life in a contemporary context comes with a new set of challenges and concerns for parents. The findings from this paper suggests that the idioms of the social media practice of sharenting are not static and involve negotiating of current agreed upon ways to use social media, why it is important to continue to follow the evolvement of these

practices and study the impacts of living with ICTs have on family-life and parenthood to continue inform future design, policy, and regulation.

7. Limitations and Future Work

While the notion of limitations in terms of validity, generalizability and transferability is a known concern when conducting qualitative research, the work behind this paper has been conducted with an aim of ensuring quality by emphasizing transparency, engaging in personal and epistemological reflexivity, iterating between empirical detail and “the bigger picture” (Blandford et al., 2016). While some challenges are manageable, others are more difficult to meet. For instance, we cannot ensure that the informants’ descriptions capture their actual use, experiences, and opinions. Also, parenthood is sensitive to many and often characterized by strong beliefs and expectations of how to be a ‘good’ parent, why there is a risk that the informants adjust their answers accordingly, even if not intending to. Despite limitations, what our findings suggest are valuable in the light of aiming to continue to create in-depth understanding of user needs, practices, perceptions, and experiences to inform design of future ICTs.

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