

Parental Oversharing: Investigating Sharenting Concerns in the Digital Age

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1. INTRODUCTION

Sharenting refers to the practice of parents sharing information about their children, including photos, videos, and personal details, on social media platforms. The term was first introduced by the Wall Street Journal in 2010. Many parents use social media and frequently share information about their kids without fully comprehending the risks and repercussions associated with this practice. According to a survey study in 2021 involving U.S parents and children, 77% of parents reported sharing stories, images, or videos of their children online, with 2 in 3 thinking their children would not mind their sharenting in the future [1]. At the same time, some parents understand the risks, respect their children's privacy, and share their concerns on different social platforms to raise awareness and learn how to ensure the safety and privacy of their children [2]. All parents make a choice *they* think is *right* for the child.

One of the main reasons for choosing this project is our curiosity to understand *why* some parents *choose* to make their children's lives public and some don't. But from a bigger perspective, this issue aligns with concerns about the ever-growing psychological effects of social media. Some parents exploit their children's rights without knowing the implications [3]. Our project aims to use findings from this investigation to empower parents with knowledge and guidance to make informed decisions about sharing their children's information on social media platforms. With our research project, we aim to answer the following 4 research questions:

*RQ1: What are the **reasons** behind sharing and not sharing?*

*RQ2: What are the **primary concerns** about Sharenting on the Reddit platform?*

*RQ3: How do parents on Reddit perceive the potential **long-term consequences** of their sharenting practices?*

*RQ4: What **strategies** are being employed to deal with sharenting?*

These research questions will help us understand the spectrum of parents' motivations, insights, and behaviors related to sharenting, covering motivations, concerns, perceptions, and strategies related to safe sharenting. By addressing these questions, the research aims to provide valuable insights that can be instrumental in developing guidelines and ethical considerations surrounding sharenting practices.

2. DATA COLLECTION

2.1 Dataset

For our research, we collected sharing-related data from the Reddit platform, a popular discussion platform with textual data. Our initial investigation found a substantial number of discussions focused on sharing practices. Notably, it encompasses broader concepts and discussions on child

privacy concerns or the choice to share their childhood online. The diverse data from the Reddit platform provided us with a solid foundation for our research into the intricate dynamics of sharing practices and the consequent implications of child privacy and development in the digital age.

2.2 Data Acquisition

Our data acquisition process can be divided into 3 phases. Initially, we conducted an extensive search across various subreddits to identify which subreddits have diversified discussions on sharenting. Our investigation identified the following subreddits: ‘*r/parenting*,’ ‘*r/ScienceBasedParenting*,’ ‘*r/childrenoftiktok*,’ ‘*r/BabyBumps*,’ etc.



Figure 1: Data Acquisition

After identifying the relevant subreddits, we employed targeted search tags such as ‘*Social Media*,’ ‘*Social Media Post*,’ ‘*Sharenting*,’ ‘*Sharing on Social Media*,’ etc., to filter discussions specifically related to sharenting. Subsequently, we manually curated a dataset comprising 60 posts, each with their respective top 10 comments, post flairs, upvotes, and timestamp information.

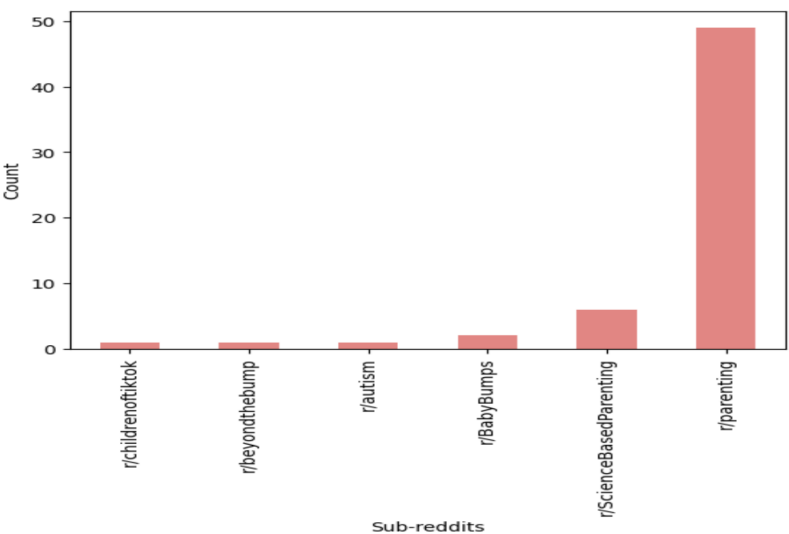


Figure 2: Post Counts across All Subreddits

We visualized our collected data from Reddit in order to understand the sample spread around all the subreddits. The above visualization denotes the number of posts collected across the subreddits, representing most discussion about sharing done on the r/parenting subreddit, followed by r/ScienceBasedParenting. The rest of the subreddits only had a few posts discussing sharenting on social media.

2.2 Variables

To address our research questions, we would use the posts, comments, likes, and date attributes from our collected Reddit dataset for both data visualization and qualitative analysis. As we want to identify the most popular and concerning topics and themes from the data, posts and respective top 10 comments would serve as our primary dataset for our qualitative analysis to answer RQ1, RQ2, RQ3, and RQ4. The "Top" comments on Reddit are upvotes minus downvotes on the comments and ranked accordingly. In addition, the other attributes, "Upvote," "Timestamp," and "Post Flairs," would serve as additional variables to answer RQ2. Along with these variables, we collected the post's URL, which could be used for future purposes.

'Upvote' would serve as a proxy metric to identify prominent opinions and concerns within the Reddit community regarding sharenting practices. We aim to determine the temporal evolution of concerns about sharenting by using the timestamps of posts and post flairs to see how these issues change over time.

3. METHODOLOGY

We collected 60 posts with their respective *top* 10 comments. We performed qualitative analysis on 40 posts and their respective comments by dividing them between the two authors. Each author performed qualitative analysis on 20 posts to eliminate any bias from the manual collection and analysis.

3.1 Qualitative Analysis

We employed a qualitative approach to analyze our data and extracted the themes inductively. Initially, we coded 20 posts independently, totaling 40 posts, each with their respective top 10 comments (Total datapoint 400) for independent coding between ourselves. We separately started with open coding our data to identify the important topics.

We ended up with about 150 codes each from our initial open coding. We then grouped the codes that were relevant to each other, creating broader categories and hierarchies of about 13 each.

After our first iteration of qualitative coding, we discussed our coding process, codes, and ideas/categories extracted from the data. We noticed most of the ideas were similar, although there were differences in the categories generated as the codes were generated from different data sets.

After our discussion, we iteratively compared the codings, adjusted them, and made refinements to agree on the themes extracted from the data. We then divided the themes into addressing our respective four research questions.

Qualitative Analysis

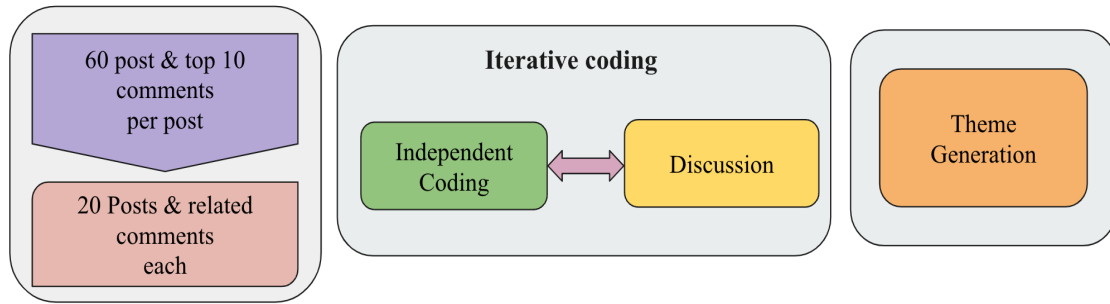


Figure 3: Methodology

4. Data Visualization

i) **Post Flairs:** In addition to our qualitative analysis, we also visualized our data collected from Reddit based on their post flairs in order to understand the topics based on the posts, as shown in Fig 4. We noticed most of the data that were collected denoted general discussion, while from the post-flairs like ‘Toddler 1-3 Years’, ‘Infant 2-12 Months’, ‘Newborn 0-8 Wks’ - denotes parents are concerned about sharenting from an early age of their parenthood and want to know what others think about their concerns. We also noticed some post flairs “Rant/Vent” and “Etiquette,” - where parents vent and seek advice on asking people not to share their children’s photos without their consent.

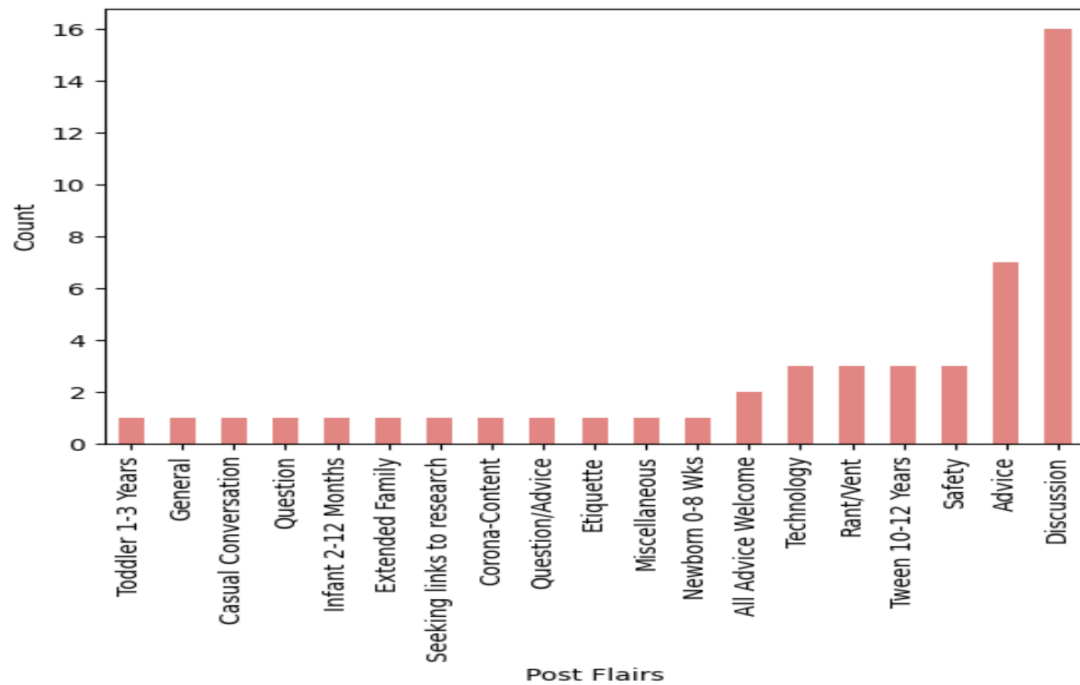


Figure 4: The different post flairs used the posts collected. The highest count was ‘discussion,’ followed by ‘Advice.’.

The comparison of the two-word clouds denotes that the post heading and post description represent each other, aligning with our themes.

5. FINDINGS

The findings are organized according to the research question that it answers.

5.1 RQ1 Why do Parents Share?

To address our first research question of the reasons for parents sharing about their children on social media or the reason for not sharing, we found that most discussions and comments that were against sharenting were because of privacy issues, but 3 kinds of themes influenced parents who share pictures of their children:

i) Sharing with family: Our qualitative analysis found that most parents who share data about their children on social media platforms were mostly motivated to share special moments of their children's lives with their families, especially when they live in a different timezone. A quote representing the idea:

"I post my kids on social media. I have International Family and friends in other states. They see our life, comment, and do so on their own time zone..."

ii) Maintain social image: Some parents perceive social media as a platform to showcase a curated version of their lives. The pressure to present an idealized image, often influenced by societal expectations and norms, may contribute to the phenomenon of and sharing content related to their children. Some feel pressure to maintain their social image and follow the norms:

"I thought my wife understood until last night, when she said she wanted to post pictures on Facebook because it's what normal people do"

iii) Outweighs benefits: Our analysis shows that most parents are somewhat aware of the risks associated with sharenting. But those who share feel the risks involving sharenting outweigh the benefits of sharing their child's special moments:

"I am aware there are risks, but I value the connection it makes and am willing to take some risks to maintain the connections we have."

5.2 RQ2 Primary Concerns

To delve into why parents are not comfortable with sharing, we identified the themes of their primary concerns discussed in Reddit.

i) Unauthorized Sharing: One of the main concerns was the sharing of children's photos by others without their parents' permission. This included extensive discussions on how the parents should draw boundaries even if the other person is a close family, like the children's grandparents.

"My mom did some harebrained things with announcements and photos a few times for major moments in my life."

ii) Security: Numerous parents express substantial security concerns when it comes to sharenting,

demonstrating profound apprehensions about potential threats such as identity theft for their children, risks associated with human trafficking, kidnapping, bullying, and the peril of attracting the attention of pedophiles. The gravity of these concerns is often magnified by real-life experiences shared by some parents, recounting instances of inappropriate comments by individuals with malicious intent on their children's photos.

“The chances are small, but I just don’t want my child’s identity/likeness used for abuse or something perverted.”

iii) Digital footprint without a child's consent: Parents show concern about how sharenting creates a digital footprint of their children without their children's consent, which they should refrain from.

“I want my child to have full autonomy over their identity and presence, and only when they are mature enough to handle it.”

iii) Insecurity about parenting: Sharenting practice from other parents results in depression among some people, creating a false image of parenting and happiness.

“It completely messed with my perception of so many things - what I should like, what my marriage should be like, how I should parent, what my house should look like. I can admit that social media (specifically Facebook and Instagram) fucked me up.”

5.3 RQ3 Long-term Consequences

Our findings suggested many long-term consequences of sharing in children's lives.

i) Impact on personality shaping: There is a notable impact of sharenting on personality shaping, where exposure to curated aspects of their lives online may influence how children perceive and construct their identities, creating self-esteem issues, anxiety, depression, or self-consciousness.

“Once something is on the internet, it’s there forever. Or somewhere. You lose full control. I want my child to have full autonomy over their identity and presence, and only when they are mature enough to handle it.”

ii) Over-reliance on social media: Sharenting contributes to an overreliance on social media to maintain an image from an early age, potentially shaping how children form relationships and seek validation.

iii) Harassment: Unwanted attention from sharenting and embarrassing photos shared through social media may also result in online harassment or inappropriate comments.

“I saw what online bullying was the firsthand as a teenager. I know my son will be OK because he has grown up in an open environment where he won't be judged, but he is hurt, deeply hurt...”

iv) Frustration about having no control: The frustration stemming from a lack of control in sharenting manifests as a sense of diminished privacy and autonomy.

"My oldest kid is 10 and is not always comfortable with his body. I took some pictures at the beach this past summer and asked him if he was ok with me posting them on my photo stream because he was shirtless."

5.4 RQ4 Suggested Solutions

On Reddit, numerous parents emphasized the significance of safe sharenting practices, sharing diverse strategies to safeguard their family's privacy. Recommendations included leveraging direct messages on platforms like Instagram and Facebook, establishing secure WhatsApp groups for exclusive family updates, and utilizing dedicated family album apps like TinyBeans. They also suggested creating restricted-access Google Photos albums and using digital frames for secure sharing within trusted circles. They also suggest some baselines on what to share and what is an absolute no:

"If it's not something I'd be willing to frame and hang in my house, it's not going on social media."

6. SOCIAL COMPUTING CONCEPT OF SELF PRESENTATION

In Week 5, we delved into the concepts of self-presentation and interpersonal relationships in social media, which are evidently intertwined with the inclination to share children's lives online.

Especially from our **RQ1** - sharenting to "Maintain social image" denotes how people undermine the risks associated with sharenting and value more on maintaining social image. The phenomenon of sharenting, predominantly occurring on Social Network Sites, aligns with the pursuit of social capital, where users seek benefits from their engagement in social media. However, in the realm of sharenting, a conspicuous pattern emerges - parents tend to highlight only positive family aspects. This selective showcasing, driven by the pressure to impress, inadvertently leads to the omission of challenges, contributing to an unrealistic portrayal of family life.

Our **RQ3** also shows how a digital footprint from an early image can make children conscious of their self-representation, creating issues like anxiety, depression, or self-consciousness. It is also noteworthy that, in our digital interactions, we tend to surrender our data, often without contemplating the worst-case scenarios associated with such disclosures.

7. LIMITATIONS

Our study acknowledges certain limitations that may impact the generalization of our findings. First of all, the choice of subreddits or posts within subreddits or selecting only top comments might introduce some selection bias.

In addition, Reddit users may not represent the broader parent population, and the platform's demographics could influence the nature of discussions, potentially introducing bias in expressed opinions. The discussions within our study may be shaped by cultural norms, introducing an additional layer of context that could impact the interpretation of findings.

Determining the parental status of profiles in the discussion (both posting and commenting) remains uncertain, posing a challenge in accurately categorizing whether perspectives are really

from the parents or not. There is also a concern about the validity of experiences shared within the discussion. We simply cannot determine whether those are real events or just some exaggeration to make a point.

Finally, we analyzed about 400 data points (posts and comments), which are limited in amount and may influence or constrain the findings.

8. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK

Our investigation of sharenting shed light on the complex dynamics of digital self-presentation and interpersonal relationships that influence the practice. The widespread practice of sharing children's lives online, particularly on Social Networking Sites, demonstrates a quest for social capital in which positive family features take primacy. On the other hand, the urge to impress leads to a selective portrayal, ignoring problems and developing an idealized view of family life.

Moving forward, there is a need for more in-depth investigations into sharenting practices. Our future work includes more data collection from various subreddits, ensuring a more comprehensive analysis. Instead of solely identifying concerns, we will explore practical solutions to address the challenges of sharenting. We also want to focus more on the suggested solutions and strategies for sharenting to contribute positively to mindful and safe sharing practices in digital spaces.

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