**ISYS100 Research Paper – Matthew De Masi 45585342**

**The ethical challenges of shaping a Child’s digital identity**

**Abstract**

Children now grow up under the drastic effects of social media and networking sites. Additionally, parents contribute to those effects by "sharenting". Uncontrolled digital identity created by parents has negative impacts on children by creating a modified and false identity. Accordingly, relevant research articles suggest that this excessive exposure to mistaken identity may result in psychological issues for children that experienced pre-existing accounts created by parents. This assignment presents the potential negative impacts of sharenting and relevant actions by examining scholarly articles. However, as this topic seems to be significant for the future of children, further research on the psychological development of children with pre-existing accounts is recommended.

**Introduction Sharenting**

In the 21st century, people now experience the social media world where individuals broadcast continuously and share their daily life, activities, lifestyles, and "mostly" happy moments. Posting daily, and sometimes even hourly, actions have already become routine among the new generation. Individuals now tend to analyse and justify other people by their social media accounts and sharing habits. Unfortunately, an even more drastic trend, "sharenting" has become popular among some parents. Sharenting refers to the constant posts and daily social media stories shared by parents of their newly born, or little children. Parents are now shaping their children's digital identity long before they have spoken their first word. Subsequently, a child's most embarrassing and intimate moments are shared with the world without consideration. "Sharenting" is examined in terms of scholarly literature and ethical challenges to highlight the critical status and unnecessity of such an action.

The goal of the paper is to analyse the background of "sharenting", and recommend relevant actions to prevent future psychological problems for newly born and little children. Although the world now embraces the social media actions and posts among youngsters and adults, "sharenting" may cause a lot of adverse effects for children in the future.

**The New Social Trend**

Sharenting refers to the rising common practice of excessive content sharing by parents of their newly born, or little children. This situation creates a digital identity that has the potential to commence pre-birth (Choi & Lewallen, 2017). In today's world, parents now start creating the digital identity of their children even during pregnancy. Parents now tend to share the ultrasound pictures of their unborn children, and they have begun creating their children's social and digital identity, yet before they have come to the world (Davidson, 2018). Research findings suggest that social network sites such as Facebook and Instagram have become a platform for "narrative and storytelling the self-presentation" (van Dijck, 2013, p.200). Accordingly, sharenting leads to a digital and social character by parents of their children without their consent and agency.

Social Networking Sites

Social networking sites have become popular since Facebook was founded in 2004, and 2017, more than 2 billion users were reported. The platform allows the act of sharenting provided by the technological advances with the incredibly growing audience (Zephoria Digital Marketing, 2018). On the other hand, Instagram was founded in 2010, and more than 500 million active users were reported in 2016 ("Instagram"). The platform is an "artificial image" social networking site that also contributes to creating a convenient environment for parents to share their children even before they are born (Jackson & Luchner, 2017). However, one may infer that sharing content about children seems to be innocent as a parent try to show their happiness to relatives and their social circles; however, this action of over-sharing has become extremely common among parents. Accordingly, this constant act of sharing unborn or newly born children may affect the future identities of these children.

**Effects of Sharenting**

During the early years of childhood, parent's identity representation of their children has a more considerable impact that other means of media such as media professionals, and the mainstream mass media. Research findings claim that children start developing their uniqueness from a considerably an evolving age, and they build their personality and character by observing the relatives, family, friends or people around them (Davidson, 2018). Accordingly, parents or other guardians have drastic impacts on children's developing self-characteristics and their model of behaviour. However, when the children grow up, the implications of family and guardians decrease as the social circle, and possible effect elements expand for the children. According to Papacharissi (2011), networked connection defines the self-identity, and social network sites is now a way for self-presentation. The act of digital presentation of children by parents even before they are born creates a digital characteristic that may drastically affect the children in future. Accordingly, the self-development of the children is profoundly affected by this digital and artificial identity that serves as a digital footprint for children to follow even before they have come to the world or started walking.

Leaver indicates that the act of sharenting can include no consent from children as they are not aware of what is happening around. Parents define the future-self concept of a child through constant sharing on social networking sites (2017). According to the Leaver and Highfield, four main elements are constituting an online identity; "replicable, persistent, searchable, and scalable" (2018). By distributing these elements to the audiences provided by social media networks such as Instagram and Facebook where the child’s online identity is created. Accordingly, one may claim that constant sharing by parents of their newly born children may result in a drastic impact on the personal and psychological development of children.

Although the daily posts of pictures and moments seem to be temporary as they are published for a certain of time, the ability to record those images through screenshots and by other means create a possibility of reframing or repurposing those images and posts. These sharenting actions by parents of their children on Instagram stories or posts may seem innocent for some; however, with the new updates, Instagram now enables users to repost or highlight their posts and novels published in the past ("Instagram"). Notably, this new function of such platforms may create confusion with the children's psychology (Hodkinson, 2017). The new features that create highlighted attraction to the past posts may also have drastic adverse effects on children in the future because they may repeatedly come up with such posts that create an artificial self-image and digital character.

Additionally, social platforms such as Instagram now offers new services that provide artificial and superior filters to the images that are uploaded to the platform ("Instagram"). This new functionality creates a manipulation on social networking sites and may result in a better and synthetic version of an individual in an online platform. According to the Rosenberg and Egbert, the "social networking sites now provide a more positive and selective presentation of daily life that is constantly published in such platforms" (qtd in. Davidson, 2018, p. 5). Subsequently, this function provided by social networking platforms may result in the edited and selected version of children posted by parents. This situation may shift or modify the memories of children by simultaneously influencing their definition of self. Hence, as the parents regularly create a public record of modified childhood memories through Instagram filters, the potential of social media sites can be considered unrestricted and highly long-lasting (Leaver, 2017). However, parents can have drastic negative impacts on children not only in the short term. However, in the long run as these published posts are easily searchable in the internet database, and even these platforms already provide options for reposting and highlighting old published posts (Choi & Levallen, 2014). Also, these repeated online materials can alter childhood memories through social networking sites, and also can unconsciously affect the concept of self-identity.

Through constant sharenting, parents may find relief in belonging and group acceptance by social platforms; however, they merely use their children as an asset for self-parental-representation. Social networking sites, in general, tend to have an option for commenting and likes from followers. Social networking sites create a need for approval among parents, unlike the traditional printed photo albums that are not recorded continuously or presented in a platform (Davidson, 2018). The followers on social networking sites typically consist of close relatives and friends; however, this audience can easily be expanded through the constant usage of hashtags. Social networking sites such as Instagram provides an option to extend the viewers and followers with hashtags (Leaver, 2017). Accordingly, parents can choose a hashtag and create a targeted audience for the posts and stories to be viewed. Therefore, one may infer that "sharenting" action is a collective result of parents that are looking for validation and approval by the digital communities in social networking sites (Leaver, 2017). In this sense, parents can choose a specific hashtag to define the audience and attract followers by creating a presented duo with the child.

A sharenting parent looks for digital approval by followers or other encounters in social media. Davidson argues that parents satisfy the feeling of self-presentation and belonging through social networking practices. Moreover, as the other users of social networking sites like, comment and follow such published posts, the parents feel that they reinforce their identity and self-image. Therefore, the practice of constant sharing by parents of their unborn or newly born children results in a repeated cycle of self and virtual approval. Arguably, these comments on social networking sites may have as well drastic impacts on children's self-development and digital character (Davidson, 2018). After all, this situation and cycle create a stimulating environment for both children and parents. Accordingly, one may highlight the narcissistic needs of parents by publishing excessive contents of their children to satisfy their self-image and the need for approval.

According to Leaver, Instagram verifies celebrity baby accounts, and this means that both the platform and parents may have a negative future impact on child’s personality (2017). However, Instagram terms of use indicate that no children under thirteen years of age are allowed to apply for an Instagram account. However, According to Instagram itself, encourages parents to do sharenting over their unborn or newly born children. The normalisation of sharenting by social media platforms can possess great danger for children in the future.

Additionally, digital character and self-image created by parents through sharenting may result in significant psychological disorders for children in the future. Research findings suggest that constant contradiction with a self-image cause distractions for individuals in terms of situational awareness that is essential to sustain a well-focused and aware routine (Davidson, 2018). For example, if a parent created a moving image of children until five years old on social networking sites and the child would be expected to act accordingly by his/her close relative or future social circles. The child would feel himself in need of complying with such previous artificial images. However, if the child cannot keep up with the false personality and turns to be an introvert individual later on his/her life, the past self-image created by his/her parents may result in extreme contradiction and confusion on child's psychological condition. Through constant questioning or modelling of those artificial posts by parents, a child may come up with a mental mindset or may suffer from anxiety attacks.

The children may experience conflicts and struggle with self-identity during the teenage years, and this process is considered normal. However, children and teenagers now experience a world in which such developments are carried out on social networking sites (Davidson, 2018). According to Hodkinson, teenagers now feel compelled to present their online identities on social networking sites as their friends and social circle (2017). As the social media trend can still be considered new, one cannot observe the consequences of pre-existing social media account for a teenager. Accordingly, Instagram was launched in 2010, and the children who experienced sharenting could be max. Ten years old. For individuals with this age, it is still early to experience the process of inner conflicts during the teenage years.

**Conclusion**

As a result, people now experience the social media world where individuals broadcast continuously and share their daily life, activities, lifestyles, and "mostly" happy moments. Posting daily, and sometimes even hourly, actions have already become routine among the new generation. Individuals now tend to analyse and justify other people by their social media accounts and sharing habits. Parents are now shaping their children's digital identity long before they have spoken their first word. Subsequently, a child's most embarrassing and intimate moments are regularly shared with the world without consideration. "Sharenting" is examined in terms of scholarly literature and ethical challenges to highlight the critical status and unnecessity of such an action. During the early years of childhood, parent's identity representation of their children has a more considerable effect that other means of media such as media professionals, and the mainstream mass media. Research findings claim that children start developing their identity from a considerably young age, and they self-define their characteristics and personality by observing the relatives, family, friends or people around them.

Accordingly, parents or other guardians have drastic impacts on children's developing self-characteristics and their model of behaviour. Although the world now embraces the social media actions and posts among youngsters and adults, "sharenting" may cause many harms for children in the future.

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