

(Research Article)

# Sharenting in Digital Age: A Netnographic Investigation

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## Abstract

The social media has dictated and transformed varying aspects of human endeavors in society. Sharenting entails the dissemination or sharing of pictures of children on social media by parents. The study investigates the reason for this trend; and further ascertains the type of pictures of children's parents share on WhatsApp and Facebook. The study adopts netnography as the methodology for exploring the trend of sharenting, and the sample size is 20 parents (both mother and father). This was achieved through snowballing, a non-probability sampling method. Findings from the study may likely reveal that mothers sharent more than fathers. The discoveries may further show that parents share photos of good times more often than other kinds of photos. The study recommends that parents should be privacy-conscious when sharing photos of their children online. Also, social media platforms should formulate a check-list that must be checked by parents before sharenting.

*Keywords:* Facebook, Netnography, Sharenting, Social media, WhatsApp

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## 1. Introduction

Marshall McLuhan is not wrong when he postulates that communication technologies have continued to determine our ways of life. The social media is exerting huge influence in diverse aspects of our endeavor and parenting is among these areas. Parenting in a digital age is somewhat a bittersweet taste. Parents have engaged the use of a plethora of social media platforms forms. Parents share the ups and downs of parenthood and document children's lives publicly with increasing frequency, which has almost become a social norm. Consequently, many children have a plethora of images, posts, and updates about their lives on social media even before they are born [5].

Sharenting is derived from the combination of two words: "Share" and "Parenting." It refers to the sharing of child pictures on social media with or without the child's consent. Collins Dictionary (as cited in [5]) explains sharenting "the practice of a parent to regularly use social media to communicate much detailed information about their child. One earliest form of sharenting is the posting of pictures of sonograms online. Popular American Singer, Beyoncé showed off a sonogram picture of her unborn daughter in the trailer in a documentary "Life is But a Dream" [21]. This is the reason [23] believe that today, a child's digital life may begin prior to their actual birth. The social media

architectures prioritize sharing over withholding information [18], expectant parents are, by default, prompted to share their "baby pictures" with broad and asynchronous audiences. Early this year (2019), a nursing mother by the name Toni Childs shared on Instagram, a nude photo of herself breastfeeding her equally nude daughter. This story went viral, particularly on the popular Linda Ikeji Blog in Nigeria.

Sharenting is pervasive in our digital society [30]. Social media affords parents with many advantages. When parents share on Facebook or blog about their children's lives, they can connect with friends, family, often receiving validating feedback, and in return, feeling supported in their decision to share information about their lives and that of their children. Whether by the award of a "like," a "share," or a gratuitous comment, public sharing of personal information often results in positive stimuli, which, in turn, encourages a parent to continue to put personal information in the public domain. However, most viewers fail even to recognize the child's privacy interest in the information. The phenomenon of sharenting by parents through social media is growing at a high frequency, and a few research studies have been conducted; therefore, it has become imperative to conduct more studies on the subject.

One of the foremost researches on sharenting is by [2], the organization discovered that on average; children acquire digital identities by the age of six months. However, in several cases, these online practices start before the birth of a child, when expectant mothers share sonogram pictures of their unborn children. A study among 2,000 parents from the

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U.K. has shown that on average 200 pictures of a child are shared yearly, and in 2016, parents shared 300 pictures of their children online, with a share of 54% on Facebook [19]. In 2014 the University of Michigan's C.S. Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health researched 569 parents of children aged 0 to 4. The study reveals that 56% of mothers and 34% of fathers share information about parenting in social media, and above 70% of parents who use social media know of another parent who has shared information that might embarrass a child. (56%) offered private information that may identify a child's location (51%), or photos of a child perceived as inappropriate (27%) [8]. Parents, Privacy & Technology Use Report (2015) asserts that among the parents who have a social media account, up to 20% share information online about a child, which the child may find embarrassing in the future.

[22] argues that new media technologies have further intensified the practice of family photography, by easing mothers' tasks of taking, archiving, organizing, and sharing vast numbers of family photos. Rose's opinion corroborates a recent empirical study on parents' Facebook use at the transition to parenthood [3], which reveals that new mothers were more likely than new fathers to upload a photo of their child on Facebook, receive more comments on their child's pictures. The study also reports an increase in parents' use of Facebook after the birth of their child. Facebook has become a contemporary baby book [15], where children are becoming mini-celebrities [17]. [30] contend that parents are the gatekeeper of personal information of their children, and they are responsible for how and what kind of pictures are uploaded to social media. Among parents who use the Internet on average monthly (96% of all parents), 75% share some photos or videos of their children online. One quarter that is, 25% never share photos online [16].

## **2. Objectives of the Study**

The uploading and sharing of children's pictures on social media is evolving as a research domain. Scholars are making frantic efforts to address the phenomenon. The study assesses the adoption of Facebook and WhatsApp by parents in sharing children's pictures. Other objectives of the study are: to explore reasons why parents sharent. Also, it investigates what kinds of pictures are shared, and which parent sharent the most; the father or mother?

## **3. Literature Review: Children Privacy and the Legal/Safety Risk of Sharenting**

The topic of privacy is of considerable interest to a wide variety of disciplines. Nonetheless, the term "privacy" is complicated to describe. As Thomson 1975 as cited in [6] strongly asserts, "the right to privacy is that nobody seems to have any obvious idea what it is". [31] defines privacy as the claim of individuals, groups, or institutions to determine when, how, and to what extent information about the group,

person or institution is communicated to others. In general, privacy is associated with the possibility of using different patterns of verbal and nonverbal mechanisms to make themselves more or less accessible to others [6].

The topic of privacy is much more complicated with regard to children's online privacy. Currently, in most countries [15, 26], no policy or law protects children's right to online privacy, leaving in the parent's hands the decision what kind of information about their children can be shared online. In Poland, According to [6], from a legal standpoint, children under the age of 13 do not have legal capacity, so they cannot make decisions whether and what kind of information about them can be shared online. Besides, they cannot create an account on social media platforms [6]. Besides, different policy documents have emphasized the role of parents and guardians in protecting children's privacy, personal data and online reputation and the need to respect the confidentiality of their correspondence [24].

AS gatekeepers of their children's personal information, parents are obliged to protect their children from online havoc [7]. On the other hand, only parents can decide whether, and how much information about their children would be shared online. Although parents are the first line of defense to protect their children's privacy, in many cases, they are not indeed [10]. Also, when parents share information about their children online, they do it without their children's consent [6]. Besides,

Some parents have found that by just posting a picture of their children could create a privacy risk. [20] writes that one mother, Paris, posted a picture of her daughter on Facebook. She received a like from an anonymous. The stranger had made the toddler picture her display picture and presented Paris' son as her own child. According to [26], another mother, Ashley, experienced a similar form of "digital kidnapping. After posting an image of her two daughters, she found out that it was shared by another Facebook account that seemed to share many teenage girls' pictures. As Ashley studied the link of the shared images of her children, she realized that many of the numerous followers could not only see the picture of her daughters but could also trace the link back to her own Facebook account and track down more information about her daughters, including where they reside. According to [9], parental disclosures on social media have also caused some children to be bullied by children due to embarrassing pictures and stories shared by their parents. Adults also engage in this form of cyberbullying. Some social media posts make jest of pictures shared by other parents [26].

According to [4], a former Google CEO, Eric Schmidt, highlights the prevalence of oversharing both caused by a child's own doing and others' actions. "Schmidt asserts that, as technology evolves will get to a time when many people

would have embarrassing information and pictures from their adolescence on social media platforms. Further, the former Google CEO raised the concern that one day all adults may be entitled to alter their names in order to hide from the embarrassing content shared online during their teenage years [4]. He also opined that Google would soon have massive information about a person that may help users dictate and plan their lives [29].

There are many advantages to sharenting. Sharenting affords children a positive social media presence to help counter some of the negative behaviors they might themselves engage in as teenagers. Besides, by sharing on social media platforms, parents offer their children affirmative networks by inviting caring family members, friends, and well-wishers into their daily lives. However, these advantages must be carefully weighed against the adverse effects of sharing a child's personal information in such a public space. By understanding these complex taxonomy, scholars can better discuss children's rights online.

#### **4. Theoretical Framework**

[28] asserts that domestication clarifies a methodology of how technology affects society, especially at the household level and how society affects technology. [25] domestication demonstrates how innovators design technologies to be user-friendly and how users communicate their demands to innovators. This theory explains the process of understanding the sophistication of how ICTs are experienced in everyday life [1]. Deirdre as cited in [28] elaborates on the four phases of domestication. First is appropriation- the ownership or possession of a technology by a person. Objectification explains how values, tastes, or styles are communicated through the display of the new technology. The incorporation phase describes how technology is used, and the physical feature is more central in this stage. Conversion is the final phase of domestication. This phase is concerned with how users speak and articulate their relationship with technology. This involves the bigger audience, discussion about the technology, and how the users use the technology in a way that may not be visualized by the manufacturer of the technology.

Domestication theory is essential to the study because it establishes a relationship between the social media- Facebook and WhatsApp and how these parents appropriate, objectify, incorporate and even convert the technologies into their lives, and eventually the lives of their children.

#### **5. Methodology**

This study adopts a quantitative and qualitative research methodology known as netnography. Some scholars [27] describe it as virtual ethnography. This methodology is a variant of ethnography. Ethnography investigates culture in its natural (face-to-face) habitat, but due to the emergence of

online communities or "netizens" it has become imperative to devise a method that suits it. [11-15] proposed netnography as a research methodology for studying cyber communities. One of the merits of the methodology is that a large set of data is automatically archived online for the researcher. It incorporates multimedia data of every kind, including images, video, and audio. The method allows for exploring the various kinds of users' online practices and behaviors on social media, which constitute the natural ecosystem for their daily interactions [5]. Kozinets as cited in [27] enumerates guidelines for carrying out a netnographic research. These guidelines underpin this study.

#### **6. Population of the Study**

The population for the study is young married couples between the ages of 20 – 40. Due to the difficulty in locating the population, the researcher employed snowballing sampling, a non-random sampling technique. This helped the researcher in arriving at a total of 10 families. Each of the families has a child below the age 5, and the parents had either posted photos of their child on Facebook or WhatsApp. In addition to the picture analysis, data for each Facebook and WhatsApp account, the research participants were interviewed, particularly about the posting of their children's pictures on WhatsApp. Besides, the following were investigated: the number of friends, the number of photos of children posted by fathers and mothers accounts respectively, and what kinds of kids' photo posted.

#### **7. Analysis and Findings**

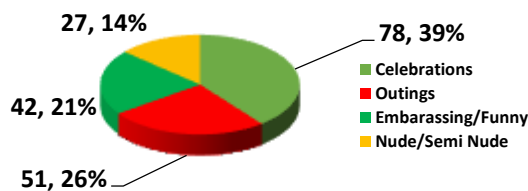
After quantifying the qualitative study's narrative materials, the results show that most parents use Facebook for sharenting (82%), and 18% use WhatsApp. This particular finding corroborates [6] who carried out a similar study in Poland. In her study, the scholar found that all of the participants regularly post digital content on Facebook. Similarly, in the United Kingdom a study by [19] found that parents shared 300 pictures of their children online, with a share of 54% on Facebook. This may be because Facebook has a broader spread, and contents uploaded to the platform reach more audiences. On the other hand, WhatsApp contents are restricted to persons on the owners' contacts. In the profiles studied on Facebook, the number of friends ranged from 198 to 1223, with an average of 375.9 friends per account. The majority of the parents (82.4%) had 200 friends and above, with only 17.6% of the respondents having a number of friends in the range of 100 and below. The total number of children pictures uploaded on Facebook by the parents is 198. Mothers posted more pictures (157 pictures) that is, 79.2%, and fathers uploaded 41 pictures- (20.7%). The preceding report is in tandem with the University of Michigan's C.S. Mott Children's Hospital National Poll in the United States. According to the poll, 56% mothers and 34% fathers share information related to parenting in social media platform. This has equally shown that despite the

geographical spread of both studies, it is affirm that mothers unlike fathers often share children picture and related information on social media platform. For WhatsApp, it was observed that for the period of the study, 7 out of the 10 mothers had their babies on their WhatsApp displayed picture (D.P.), and only 2 fathers had their kids photos displayed on their WhatsApp DP during this period. Through WhatsApp interview, the table below elaborates reasons parents share pictures of their children on both Facebook and WhatsApp.

**Table 1**

Reasons	Description	Statements
Social Approval	To be accepted, appreciated or liked by their peers	16
Family Ego	To display their kid as prized or proud objects	10
Social Networking	Inform, educate, and entertain others: keep up-to-date and socialize.	19
No Reasons	Considers no reasons	14

First, social approval leads parents to disclose photos of their children on Facebook and WhatsApp. Thereby, they are able to feel among their social circles, and probably liked their peers. This statement is in consonance with the sixteen statements revealed in the analysis: *"...of course it makes me feel that my child is liked and appreciated."* Another says, *"I have kids why shouldn't I flaunt them on WhatsApp."* The preceding statement is connected to "Family Ego"; the feeling of accomplishment. Some parents described social media as a platform that is primarily adopted for social networking; to inform, educate, and entertain. Responses like *"Facebook is vast, and I have friends there. So I have the opportunity to let my friends know what's up with the kids"*



**Figure 1.** Types of Pictures Posted on Facebook by Parents

One of the study objectives is to ascertain types of pictures posted on Facebook and WhatsApp. The pie chart above illustrates the types of photos that are uploaded by parents on Facebook. Unlike Bosch's 2016 study in Poland which has outing and special events as the most posted pictures (95.6%), the chart reveals that "celebrations" have the highest percentage (78, 39%). The pictures analyzed showed that parents posted more of birthdays, graduations, and naming ceremonies pictures. That is why the researcher tagged them "celebrations". This discovery may be because in this part of

the world we like celebrations whereas in the West they prefer simple outing. Just like the study conducted in the United States by the University of Michigan Children's Hospital where 27% of the study respondents shared photos of children that are perceived as inappropriate or embarrassing, the current found that parents also posted nude and semi-nude (27, 14%), and embarrassing/funny (42, 21%) photos that may be embarrassing to the kids in the future. Similar research by Hart Research Associates in the United States entitled "Parents, Privacy and Technology Use" report, released in November 2015 found that among the parents who have a social media account, nearly 20% share information online about a child, which he/she may find embarrassing in the future. Photos tagged "outing" has the second-highest scores (51, 26%).

## 8. Discussion

This study has revealed that social media, mainly Facebook and WhatsApp provide another form of social behavior, closely linked to voyeurism, and it occurs due to the social control and the need for monitoring other users. It calls for a new type of reflexivity about the creation of cyber identities, resulting in increased transparency. Therefore, today's parenting is facing becoming a digital trend. Undoubtedly, sharing kids' photos online may assuage parents' ego and social approval. However, the early phase of parenting might cause social solitude, and the present digital era may engender the possibility of making this time heart-warming for parents. Therefore, they are depositing virtual memories online, which tell stories of their children's growth. In some cases, parents share boundless information about their kids online, like the uploading of nude, funny, or embarrassing photos.

In this research, it was discovered that parents share happy moments of their parenthood with their friends. A possible reason for these findings is that social media provide parents the platform to possibly compare themselves with others on the bases of social status, life experiences, and pride. However, it is a challenge when parents over share pictures of their children.

This research has also shown that parents may endanger children's private life and expose them to public viewing without their consent. Thus, children have cyber images already formed by their parents before they are ready to surf social media. This might be a severe challenge in the future, bearing in mind that these actions may pose problems to these kids tomorrow. In some countries in Europe, specifically German, parents obtain the consent of their kids before sharing their photos online. Sharenting might make children

grow up with an utterly different meaning of privacy. Thus, it might seem to be normal to them that details about them are in cyberspace; hence, the notion of privacy is eroding at high speed.

From the current study, several findings from other studies have shown that Facebook has become a contemporary baby book [15], where parents routinely post their children's pictures and related information. Hence, the current study has shown that compared to WhatsApp, Facebook is most used for sharing children's pictures online.

## 9. Conclusion

Social media has had a significant influence on different aspects of our daily endeavors, and as this study has revealed parenting is not an exemption. This study uncovered how parents share photos of their kids on social media- sharenting. Scholars are still arguing the morality of this phenomenon. By exposing children photos on social media, parents are grooming a generation of children whose identities are in the public domain even before they could discern between a private and public life. Parents risk the lives of their children when they upload private information about their kids online. Also, this information may be embarrassing to the kids in the future. This is why some societies have made laws that prevent parents from sharing photos of their kids on the Internet indiscriminately. As much as the Internet makes parenting interesting, parents should exercise caution when posting photos of their kids online. More so, the social media platforms should provide some form of times and conditions that parents must agree to before they share photos of their children on the Internet.

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