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When the Child is Born into the Internet: Sharenting as a Growing Trend among Parents on Facebook

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Abstract

Parents actively share information about their children on Facebook, but little research has explored the extent of this issue. The goal of this paper is to theorize a new type of parents' online activities concerning their children, especially the problem of sharenting, which is increasingly common in contexts where social media such as Facebook play a significant role in relationships and interactions. This paper explores what kind of baby pictures parents share on Facebook and what are the likely causes of doing it. The presented research was conducted with the use of social media ethnography among 168 Polish parents using Facebook. The findings have shown that the phenomenon of sharenting is common practice among parents.

Keywords: *children exposure, digital risks, Facebook, online privacy, social media, sharenting*

Introduction

Today's parents are raising children in a digital-first culture, facing more unique parenting problems than previous generations. But as a new generation of adults joins the ranks of parents, Facebook seems to be a very easy platform to dealing with new or difficult challenges associated with their children – even for parents whose time is a scarce commodity. Therefore, they share the joys and challenges 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 pictures, posts and updates about their lives on social media before they can even walk.

This kind of activity is called *sharenting* and has been defined by Collins Dictionary as “the practice of a parent to regularly use the social media to communicate a lot of detailed information about their child” (*Sharenting*, as cited in: Collins Dictionary). The phenomenon of sharing and disclosure of intimate information about children by their parents through social media is growing rapidly. Therefore, it has become a subject of research by increasing numbers of scholars worldwide.

At the end of 2014, the University of Michigan’s C.S. Mott Children’s Hospital National Poll on Children’s Health conducted research among 569 parents of children aged 0–4 (Davis, 2015). According to the survey, 56% mothers and 34% fathers share information related to parenting in social media. Over 70% parents who use social media know of another parent who has given information that might embarrass a child (56%), offered personal information that could identify a child’s location (51%), or photos of a child perceived as inappropriate (27%).

Another research has been conducted by Hart Research Associates on behalf of Family Online Safety Institute (FOSI) using data from an online nationwide survey of 589 parents of children aged 6 to 17. According to the “Parents, Privacy & Technology Use” report, released in November 2015, among the parents who have a social networking account, nearly 20% share information online about a child, which he/she may find embarrassing in the future. What is more, one out of ten parents was asked by their own child to remove some information about him/her that was posted online by the parent (Family Online Safety Institute, 2015, p. 22).

Undoubtedly, in the era of camera-phones the most common practice on social networking sites is sharing photographs. Every 60 seconds 136,000 photos (zephoria.com) are uploaded on Facebook. Today’s parents willingly share photos of their children. In some research the number of parents who post pictures of their children on Facebook reaches even 98% (Bartholomew et al., 2012). However, mothers are more willing to post photos of their children. Perhaps they prefer sharing photos online because communication via photographs is easier and faster than telling a story (cf.: Jomhari et al., 2009).

Parents post online an enormous number of pictures to chronicle almost every moment of their children’s life – from the birth through the first steps and starting school to teenage years. The research conducted in 2010 by AVG Technologies found that, on average, children acquire a digital identity by the age of six months. But in many cases, these online practices start even before the birth of a child, when expectant mothers share sonogram images of their unborn children (AVG

Technologies, 2010). In that way, Facebook has become a “modern day baby book” (Kumar & Schoenebeck, 2015), where children are becoming micro-celebrities in their communities (Marwick, 2013, p. 10).

There is no doubt that Facebook offers today’s parents a unique opportunity to exchange experiences and happiness about their parenthood or search for help with parenting issues. But the problems arise when they share embarrassing or too personal information about their children and therefore run a risk of breaching children’s privacy.

Another serious issue related to sharenting is a phenomenon called “digital kidnapping”, where strangers steal baby photos and repost them across the Internet as if the child was their own (O’Neill, 2015). As a result, the child is given a new name and a new story to start a completely new online life. But it should be emphasised that kidnapping is a crime independently of where it is committed. Sharenting may also expose children to ridiculing by strangers. An extreme example was the secret Facebook group consisting of mothers who were taking photos of children from other Facebook accounts before re-posting them online and making fun of the children (Parker, 2013). More importantly, the victims were children with disabilities.

Unfortunately, sometimes parents do not think about how the information they share might be interpreted by others, especially in the case of sharing embarrassing stories or inappropriate photos and, what is more, they never know where these contents might end up someday. As Richard Follett argues, something posted online now may not be appropriate in the future : “Not only might these images be used to embarrass them in their delicate teenage years, they could also be accessed by potential employers or university admissions departments” (Daily Mail, 8.02.2014).

In Poland, there are currently nearly 12.5 million Facebook users, with the largest age group being 19–25-year-olds (27%), followed by 26–33-year-olds (23%) (Fanpage Trends, 11.2015). Given that over a half of active Facebook users are in prime childbearing years, it is likely that a considerable portion of users are undergoing the transition to parenthood or have already been parents.

Methodology

Data collection was conducted from September to December, 2015 among Polish Facebook users. The main goal of the research was to learn about parents’ habits with regard to their children on Facebook, especially how much and what kind of information about the children they share. Therefore, this study was guided by two main research questions:

1. What types of information concerning children are shared by parents?
2. What are the likely causes of these digital practices?

The research was carried out by using social media ethnography, which is one of the online research methods, such as virtual ethnography (Hine, 2008), netnography (Kozinets, 2010) or digital ethnography (Murthy, 2011), which have evolved from classical ethnography. In general, all these online ethnographic methods focus on “conducting and constructing an ethnography using the virtual, online environment as the site of the research” (Evans, 2010, p. 11). Accordingly, the research field of social media ethnography involves the digital platforms transited by users, as for example Facebook. From this perspective, the concept of virtual communities becomes the central point for social media ethnography through studying users’ strategies of self-presentation and online social identity and therefore creating their own role within a confined community. Thus, this method allows for exploring the various types of users’ online practice and behaviour on social media, which constitute the natural ecosystem for their daily interactions. According to Helen Morton (2001, p. 6), there are two possible ways of conducting research online – involved or distanced. Involved research includes, inter alia, interviewing respondents via chat rooms, e-mails and other synchronous ways of computer-mediated communication. However, this study uses distanced research, which consists in the evaluation of material sources such as texts or images and the observation of social interactions.

As the members of population were difficult to locate, exponential non-discriminative snowball recruiting was used. This non-random method allowed for selecting the final sample including 168 participants. Each of them had at least one child under the age of 8 and had posted some photos of his/her own child on a Facebook profile. In addition to the photo analysis data, for each Facebook account the following data was recorded: the date of creation of a Facebook profile, Facebook privacy settings, the number of friends, the total number of pictures, the number of photos of children, and the content of posts and comments. Analysis of this data allowed for working out whether it was possible to determine children’s identity by using publicly available information.

Research Results

One of the key research objectives was to examine the usage of Facebook among parents, which was measured on two dimensions: how long the participants had had their Facebook account and how many people were listed as “friends” in their Facebook profiles.

The research has shown that the growth of Facebook usage among Polish parents began accelerating in 2010. Most of the surveyed Facebook profiles were created between 2010 and 2012 (73%) and the median year of joining the Facebook community was 2012. It means that the large majority of the parents have been active Facebook users for several years.

In the profiles studied on Facebook, the number of friends ranged from 17 to 1537, with an average of 388.9 friends per account. The majority of the parents (71.4%) had 200 or more friends, with only 2.4% of the respondents having a number of friends in the range of 100 and fewer. It should be emphasized that only 7.7% of the parents changed Facebook privacy settings but mainly to hide their friend lists. Taking into account that parents in general do not use privacy settings to limit their audience, it indicates that they share their photos and comments with a large number of people.

In order to determine the level of sharenting, two main data sets were established. Firstly, the posted photos were analyzed, including the number and type of pictures. Secondly, commentaries about the photos on Facebook profiles were studied. This allowed for determining the amount and kind of available information about the children and finally to identify particular stories that were communicated. Photobased stories were categorized according to the dates they were taken, background of the pictures and also the text description which can be seen in the sequence of stories.

The total number of the posted pictures by the parents is 25,727, including 19,431 (75.5%) photos containing a child between zero and eight years old, for an average of 116 baby photos per account (range from 7 to 936). Every third parent shared fewer than 50 photos of their child, but nearly 40% of the parents posted over 100 photos of their child. What is more, the parents also willingly shared private information about their child. Of these 168 accounts, 90.5% had posted or received a comment mentioning the child's first name, and 83.9% had also revealed the child's date of birth. Many parents (23.2%) made this information available by reporting their child's birthday party in the public photo albums. In addition, 32.7% of them uploaded their baby video and other documents relating to the child, such as a birth certificate, kindergarten diploma or the child's art.

Table 1. Information concerning children posted on Facebook profiles by parents

	Name	Age	Date of birth	Films	Other documents
N	152	141	52	55	12
%	90.5	83.9	30.9	32.7	7.1

The research has shown that all of the participants regularly post digital content on Facebook. Posts containing the child's name and date of birth are most common among the parents in the first month after the child's birth by recording almost every moment of her/his life (48.2%), sharing photos taken in the hospital (4.8%) or simply posting this information on the parent's profile or timeline. In some cases, the parents created a digital footprint for their unborn child by posting a sonogram image (10.7%) or sharing photos of the expectant mother (8.3%).

Types of baby photos shared on Facebook

Similarly to other studies on photo sharing practices, the participants surveyed in this study basically tend to post happy moments of their life. Analysis of the posted photos of children allowed for defining five photo categories as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Types of baby photos

	Daily life	Outings	Special events	Embarrassing	Professional	Total
N	8736	5629	4209	710	147	19431
%	45.0	29.0	21.7	3.7	0.8	100

The participants shared a variety of stories by posting photos of their children. The three top categories are Daily life, Outings and Special events (95.6%). Daily life pictures relate to spontaneous moments of a child's life, e.g. playing with toys, sleeping or meal-time often with other family members. Many pictures in this category also focus on the baby's face and body movements. Outings include photos which were taken outside or during holiday. Examples of Special events include baptism, Christmas Day, the first day at kindergarten, birthday party and other celebrations. A relatively small group comprises pictures taken by professional photographers – only 0.8%. However, embarrassing photos should be paid more attention to. This is all the more significant because 113 (67.3%) parents shared at least one photo of their child that may be considered as inappropriate. Therefore, among the embarrassing photos four subcategories have been identified. The overall results are presented in Figure 1.

The most popular type of embarrassing pictures of children shows them nude or semi-nude. However, of these 113 accounts, 77.9% of the parents posted, in

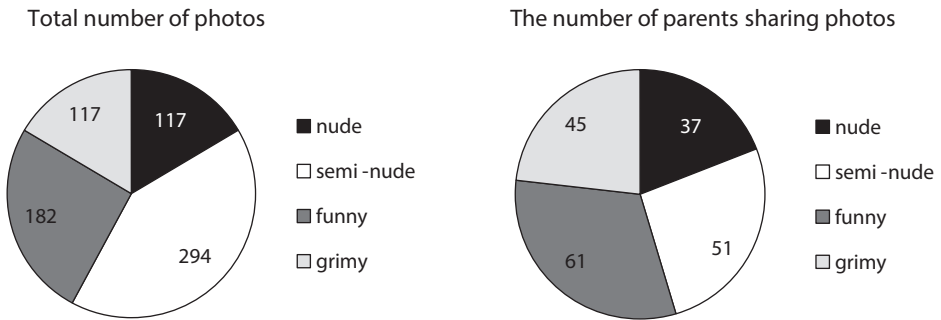


Figure 1. Types of embarrassing photos of children

fact, 411 photos of this kind. Admittedly, they were usually taken during bath or on the beach and basically concern children under 3 years of age, but even then they should not be exposed to public viewing. Consequently, the child might be at great risk if these photos fall into the wrong hands, such as those of child pornographers. Other photos of children that the parents willingly shared can be described as funny photos. Every second parent shared photos of their child that seemed to be amusing. But in most cases, these pictures showed children in disturbing situations, e.g. sitting on a potty, crying, sleeping in a strange position or pulling faces. The last type are photos of grimy children, which were taken usually after meals. Thus, the participants posted pictures of their children with porridge, chocolate, and other food on their faces. These photos were often widely commented on, but always in an inappropriate manner.

In view of the above, sharenting remains a worrying problem. Firstly, parents tend to spread on Facebook the information about their children that might include things like the date of birth, the child’s full name, or post photographs and contents which might embarrass the children in the future. Secondly, parents never know who might use this information for purposes other than intended. Thereby, they make their own children a potential target of child predators.

The likely causes of sharenting

Virtual communities, such as Facebook, are usually strongly influenced by the number of users they have and can provide sociability, information, a sense of belonging, social identity and support of non-hierarchical communication (Well-

man et al., 2002). Furthermore, it allows individuals to express their identities and to create and maintain social relations online. Therefore, parents may feel validated by the numerous likes and comments they receive on their baby photos, even if they come from users they have weak ties with. What is more, the popularity of Facebook has grown steadily in Poland since 2010 and hence it has the relatively long history of using. Controlling the length of Facebook usage is also important, because many-year users might be more likely to succumb to the norms established among Facebook users. Statistical analyses are therefore presented only for two hypotheses:

- H1. The number of Facebook Friends is positively correlated with the number of photos of children shared by parents on Facebook.
- H2. The length of Facebook usage is positively correlated with the number of photos of children shared by parents on Facebook.

Hierarchical regression analyses were conducted to test the hypotheses and investigate the impact of the number of Facebook friends and the length of Facebook usage on the number of photos of children shared by parents (Table 3).

Table 3. Results of hierarchical regression analyses

	b	t	p	β
The number of Facebook friends	0.12	2.68	0.008	0.21
The length of Facebook usage	-0.44	-0.06	0.95	-0.004

The analysis shows that the number of Facebook friends significantly affects sharing information about children on Facebook, as expected ($b = 0.12$, $t = 2.68$, $p < 0.01$). Thus, hypothesis H₁ is confirmed. In other words, the number of online friends moderated parents' online activity and therefore was a significant predictor of sharenting. However, the interaction between the length of Facebook usage and the number of photos of children shared by parents on Facebook was not significant ($b = -0.44$, $t = -0.06$, $p = 0.95$).

Discussion

The research has shown that Facebook provides another form of social behavior, closely related to voyeurism, and occurs due to the social control and the need for monitoring other users. It demands a new type of reflexivity about the creation

of virtual identities and the management of personal information, resulting in increased transparency. Therefore, today's parenting is becoming a digitally shared experience.

Undoubtedly, sharenting can satisfy parents' need for self-realization and social approval. Moreover, the early period of parenthood might cause social isolation and the digital era gives a possibility to make this time more comfortable. Therefore, they are leaving scores of digital footprints online, which tell stories of their children's private lives. In many cases parents excessively share intimate details of their children and then this practice reaches a stage where sharenting is associated with oversharenting, e.g. by posting 100 of baby pictures or even more.

On the other hand, sharenting might be a form of social comparison. It was indicated by the positive correlation between the number of Facebook Friends and the number of photos of children shared by parents on Facebook. Generally speaking, the number of friends determines the number of shared photos. Moreover, by sharenting parents declare that they are able to fulfil the parental tasks and Facebook seems to be the modern equivalent of sending a letter with a snapshot enclosed. In this way, parents share their happiness about their parenthood with their friends. Another possible reason for these findings is that Facebook provides parents with a possibility to compare themselves with others on a broad range of dimensions, such as social status and life experiences.

However, problems arise when parents share pictures of moments that might embarrass their child now and in the future. According to these findings, it is rather common practice among Polish parents, who post inappropriate photos of their children, especially naked and semi-naked or showing them in an unfavorable situation.

On the subject of sharing photos of children, the research has also shown that many of them compromise children's privacy and expose them to public viewing without their consent. Thus, children have digital images already created by their parents before they themselves are ready to use Facebook. It is a serious problem, bearing in mind that actions today shape children's online experience tomorrow. Apart from present security risks and permanence of online content, it may cause other consequences in the future. Due to sharenting, children grow up with an entirely different concept of privacy. Thus, it might seem to be normal to them that everything is in the public domain. In this way, the idea of privacy is quickly disappearing.

Conclusion

The age of social media has given rise to a new hobby among Polish parents – sharenting. The debate on its morality has been raging since the term was coined and is still open. Although it can be argued that parents have the right to do so, the privacy of the children involved should be taken into account. By exposing children on Facebook or in other social media, parents are creating a generation of kids born under media glare and public attention. Therefore, children grow up with a sense that a world where what is private is public and sharing personal details is common practice is normal. When they become parents, the young generation might be even more open.

Otherwise, parents tend to share content about children which may put them at risk, including things like the date of birth, the child's full name, or posting any photographs that may be embarrassing for children. It should be emphasised that by posting content about children, parents create their digital footprint, which could have unforeseen consequences now and in years to come. All the more, because nobody knows how this information will be used to shape children's online experience, like social development and school or job prospects. Eric Schmidt predicts that every young person one day will be allowed to change their name in order to disown embarrassing digital past (Holman & Jenkins, 2010).

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