

To Post or Not to Post: Psychological and Ethical Concerns

(To Post or Not to Post: Kebimbangan Psikologi dan Etika)

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Abstract: This review digs into the multiple phenomena of sharenting, which is a challenging part of contemporary parenting in the digital era. As parents increasingly share their children's lives online, the discussion centres on the ethical considerations surrounding sharenting, particularly concerning pre-verbal children. The exploration navigates the delicate balance between parents' right to share, potentially paving the way for a stable future income for their children, and children's right to privacy, evoking feelings of deception when their lives are extensively documented without their awareness. The review underscores the importance of ethical decision-making, advocating for a nuanced understanding of sharenting that acknowledges its non-one-size-fits-all nature, instead, it emphasizes the need for careful consideration based on individual circumstances. Ultimately, this review aims to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the ethical implications of sharenting in today's digital era.

Keywords: sharenting, psychological, ethical, micro-microcelebrity

Abstrak: Kajian ini menggali pelbagai fenomena perkongsian, yang merupakan bahagian yang mencabar dalam keibubapaan kontemporari dalam era digital. Memandangkan ibu bapa semakin berkongsi kehidupan anak-anak mereka dalam talian, perbincangan itu tertumpu pada pertimbangan etika sekitar perkongsian, terutamanya berkenaan kanak-kanak pra-verbal. Penerokaan itu menavigasi keseimbangan antara hak ibu bapa untuk berkongsi, yang berpotensi membuka jalan untuk pendapatan masa depan yang stabil untuk anak-anak mereka, dan hak anak-anak untuk privasi, membangkitkan perasaan penipuan apabila kehidupan mereka didokumenkan secara meluas tanpa kesedaran mereka. Semakan itu menekankan kepentingan membuat keputusan yang beretika, menyokong pemahaman bernuansa perkongsian yang mengakui sifatnya yang bukan satu saiz untuk semua, sebaliknya, ia menekankan keperluan untuk pertimbangan yang teliti berdasarkan keadaan individu. Akhirnya, semakan ini bertujuan untuk menyumbang kepada pemahaman yang lebih komprehensif tentang implikasi etika perkongsian dalam era digital hari ini.

Kata kunci: Perkongsian, psikologi, etika, mikro-selebriti

1. Introduction

The Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) is characterized by the integration of artificial intelligence, digitization of information, and the advancement of robots and machinery (Balogun et al., 2023). The revolution has shown an immense number of societal implications on families and society, one of them being parenting. Balogun et al. (2023) have mentioned the most discussions about the influence of the 4IR on society focus on employment and jobs. However, it is not limited to these alone. The 4IR will and is already impacting the way we live. These shifts and changes may affect the functioning of the family and social environment through newfound processes of knowledge, social and daily life adjustments.

Facebook, Instagram, and other social media apps are viewed as preferable platforms for sharing the pleasures and hardships of parenthood (Wen et al., 2022). According to Martin and Feldstern (2020), following the home isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic, many are showing dependency on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram to connect with friends and family. The practice of sharing home content on social media has become a new norm, with many factors contributing to its increase in practice, such as the need for parents to stay connected with extended families and friends

and the morale support from the online community. Social media influencers also played a big influence in the trend of family and parents sharing content on social media. A term was first introduced by Steven Leckart (2012) from the Wall Street Journal in characterising an emerging phenomenon in the practice of parenting called 'sharenting' (as cited in Hamzah & Hussein, 2020). He combined the terms 'oversharing' and 'parenting' to describe the practice of parents oversharing their children as content on social media.

Over the years, extensive numbers of research have discussed the phenomenon of sharenting from multidirectional perspectives, with some research highlighting the benefits while others focusing on the implications. With the vast perspectives being considered, the definition of sharenting has been agreed by a few studies as the practice of parents sharing content about themselves and their children on a virtual platform (Kojok, 2022; Donovan, 2020; Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017). On the other hand, Brosch (2018) defined the term 'sharenting' as public access to digital information shared by parents that invades the child's privacy. Considering the inevitability of sharenting in today's digital era, the previous studies on this phenomenon have stretched into discussing its benefits and ways to minimise the risks (Balaban, 2022; Latipah et al., 2020; Leaver, 2020; Archer, 2019; Brosch, 2018; Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017). The studies related to sharenting also discuss the dangers it brought to society, such as concerns about the possibility of child exploitation, cyber abuse, and identity theft (Bezáková et al., 2021; Minkus et al., 2015; Wachs et al., 2021; Williams-Ceci et al., 2021).

This review will discuss the ethical issues of sharenting, specifically including young children. Brosch (2018) mentioned that children under the age of three are frequently the potential subject to sharenting. Furthermore, Mc Daniel has found that parents are more prone to share their babies' photos until they turn two years old (as cited in Wen et al., 2022). The young children refer to the pre-verbal population where they are not yet equipped with the skills to verbalize their needs. As mentioned by Coplan (1995), children are fully intelligible by the age of four. Intelligible refers to how much of the child's speech can be understood by a stranger. Even though children of the pre-verbal population have basic verbal competency, they can understand when their photos are being taken or if they are being filmed. Children around the age of two can already express their wants and objections with simple phrases such as "No" or "Stop" and gestures that give behavioural signs of protest. In an online post on *Her View from Home*, an author named Jen Savage reflected on her sharenting practices upon her three-year-old daughter's request to stop posting pictures on Facebook after Jen showed other children's photos of playing with snow (Savage, 2018). When seeing other children's photos, Jen's daughter inquired if her photos were also on Facebook, and then indicated she dislikes having her photos posted after Jen responded "Yes". Jen and her daughter's situation explain that pre-verbal children, especially in recent days, are aware of their self-representation on social media, and with that, they should be given autonomy to have a say on their social media presence. Based on Erikson's Psychosocial Theory, having a sense of autonomy represents a positive outlook on a child's development especially for children aged two to three (Graves & Larkin, 2006). As such, this review will discuss the psychological and ethical concerns arising from the practice of sharenting including pre-verbal children.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Parents' Need to Share

Parents are responsible for the well-being of their children, which includes fulfilling their basic needs and providing a sustainable living such as by providing education and financial planning. In the digital era, as the community is now inseparable from the devices, it is explicable that earning income through social media has become a new norm. Previously, using social media platforms to generate income was a worldwide trend involving mainly celebrities (Archer, 2019; Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017). Today, this scenario has shifted to the ordinary people, with a status called 'micro-celebrity' (Kojok, 2022). Khamis et al. (2017), stated that self-branding and marketing are tied together. Archer (2019) mentioned that it has become a norm for influencers to use their children as 'brand extensions' to attract views and sponsorship, which includes creating a specific social media account for their children. If parents effectively promote themselves and their children, they may open a whole new world of financial prospects under the concept of 'micro-microcelebrity', which can be defined as the offspring of influencers who get a certain level of renown from their influencer parents (Kojok, 2022; Abidin, 2015). Aligning with parent's responsibility to ensure a comfortable life for their children, parents have the right to choose their source of income based on personal circumstances. Additionally, having a personalized account at an early age would allow the platform to gain popularity as years go and this would provide a stable income for the children in the future.

2.2 Children's Right to Privacy

Pre-verbal children are too young and unable to provide consent to the sharing of their own digitalized information. Brosch (2018) mentioned that from the Polish legal standpoint, children of the age of thirteen have a legal right to decide what kind of personal information can be shared online by parents. The sharenting during the pre-verbal phase had long-term implications on children's psychological well-being. Alfasi (2019) and Steinberg (2021) have found long-term implications faced by adolescents resulting from their parents' sharenting such as feelings of embarrassment and online bullying which have led to low self-esteem (as cited in Wen et al., 2022).

Erikson (1950) described adolescence as the phase when an individual must develop an understanding of their identity and avoid identity confusion. Failure to form one's identity could lead to the possibility of developing a sense of isolation and confusion. Erikson (1959) mentioned that developing identity involves a unified establishment of self-concept from the past, present and future. Adolescents' identity formation might be conflicting with the digitalized information portrayed on social media from when they were a baby or toddlers. As the information portrayed is permanent and openly accessible to the public, this could have a detrimental impact on the adolescent's autonomy in their self-identity. As per Erikson's theory of psychosocial development, these individuals might face identity confusion possibly leading to further psychosocial issues in the future.

A 13-year-old girl, Sonia Bokhari expressed the devastation of seeing her digital footprints made by her mother and sister on Facebook (Bokhari, 2019). She felt betrayed by the amount and type of media being uploaded ever since she was a baby, only for her to know when she got into Facebook at the age of thirteen. The content uploaded included a few embarrassing photos of her childhood such as a letter to the tooth fairy when she was five and vacation photos. Bokhari's mother and sister were not expecting her disagreement as their motives were not to embarrass her, instead, they only intended to document her childhood. Unfortunately, realizing her whole life was being documented and talked about without her knowing elicits the feeling of treachery.

2.3 The Psychological Impacts of Sharenting On Pre-Verbal Children

For pre-verbal children who grow up and become adolescents and adults, there will be a psychological effect from having their childhood photographed and uploaded online without their consent. These early years are a particularly formative part of a child's autonomy, self-identity, and self-esteem and sharenting can greatly influence these areas of a child's development. The undertaking of making one's own choices and decision is a fundamental element of our mental development and autonomy in this field. Children are in the "Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt" stage of Erik Erikson's stages of psychosocial development, which centers on the issue of trust rather than mistrust (Cherry, 2021), starting from birth to age one, and children are in the stage of "Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt," where they begin to assert their independence not unlike the Terrible Twos and develop a sense of self-control (Cherry, 2021). But even though it is not possible for a child to actually make that choice themselves until they are technically too young to use those services (such as BattleKid as a 5-week old), over-exposure through sharenting throughout their entire childhood means that the choice is being made for them. This lack of control over their digital image may convince some minors that they are actually powerless in regard to their territory and thereby disempower them by the time they reach adolescence, and follow that feeling of disadvantage into adulthood.

An example of such an article is from 2019 from Fast Company, where 14-year-old Sonia Bokhari described the depths of her mother's sharenting. I felt like my privacy had been invaded...Sonia, who said she felt "betrayed" and "embarrassed" by the details and photos her mother had put online throughout her childhood (Bokhari, 2019). It serves as an example of how sharenting can eliminate a child's control over the acts of their life and the story of it. Sharenting has also a major impact on self-identity and self-esteem development of a child. While children are in school and developing their individual identities, they may find that the story of their life that has been broadcast online does not match their own self-concept. Which results in confusion, self-doubt and a fragmented sense of self.

In addition to this, adolescents may experience teasing, bullying or unsullied reputational harm as a result of sensitive information shared online about them back when it had happened to them ages ago. Research in 2017 conducted by the University of Michigan, found that by the time they turn 13, children have had 1,300 photos and videos of them posted to their parents' social media (Children's Commissioner, 2018). This means having a huge digital footprint leads to a high potential for harm. A case in point is the tale of 18-year-old Gwyneth, who was mercilessly bullied at high school after a video of her as a very small child, pretending to be a dragon, started doing the rounds on the internet. Gwyneth admitted: 'I was so mortified that I was literally crying and mortified. It felt like everyone was watching me and making fun of me,' (Siegel, 2021). Gwyneth described how this left scars on her self-esteem and how she interacted with other kids socially. In addition to questioning the value of sharenting, and whether children have a right to privacy, it would be pertinent to consider the impact on older, post-verbal or pre-verbal and pre-social children whose parents have used their personal lives and images for financial gain. They feel betrayed, exploited and end up with a damaged relationship with their own child.

To sum up, sharenting has a profound and long-term influence on the psyche of pre-verbal children, and can potentially define their sense of autonomy, self, and self-esteem long in their adolescence and adult life too. As parents try to navigate the world of social media sharing, let us keep in mind the possible psychological implications for your children and place their consent and privacy on the table. Parents can ensure the digital age does not add stress to their child-related disagreements by recognizing these issues and then setting the proper boundaries.

2.4 The Role and Responsibilities of Social Media Platforms in Sharenting

The rise of sharenting is due in large part to social media platforms that act as the vehicle for it, and therefore have a part to play in managing some of the risks it may pose to child privacy. These enterprises also instrumental in forming user habits through their design decisions, algorithms and policies, and are well positioned to push responsible sharenting practices. One of the key measures that social media sites can adopt is to make definitive ladders of evidence available

to sharents explaining the risks and potential long-term side effects of sharenting. Educational resources like tutorials or guidelines can be developed to educate parents on why privacy is important and provide examples of how to safely share. More expressly, incorporate these assets into the administrative flow or with the user onboarding steps or include them in areas of content around parenting.

Social media companies can also create tools and features that help parents better regulate who can see and engage with the content they share about their children. For example, they could provide in-depth privacy settings that give parents the opportunity to restrict access on the basis of individual posts or albums, not just their entire profile as an entirety. They can even set up a default that protects the privacy settings for posts about kids... limiting visibility to only close family and friends or turning off location data automatically. It's also important for the company to allow parents to have more control over the data that's collected and shared about their children on the platform. Social media companies may also enable transparency regarding the categories of data they collect, the purposes of data processing and with whom data is shared, and simple ways for parents to control data. The companies also should provide standards for use of children's data for advertising or other commercial purposes, and make sure parents can refuse to allow such uses.

In addition, via their algorithms and content moderation systems, social media platforms can prevent privacy and well-being harm to children. For example, they can create an algorithm that identifies posts involving children — “Kids” — and asks the parents to review these posts about their children or any posts containing identifying information like first and last names, addresses or school and correct them before they are shared. Invest in content moderation by humans, for example the team that receives reports on children's photos broadcast without authorization, or hat with inappropriate content. Social media companies should consider partnering with child safety organizations, privacy advocates and parenting experts to help keep them apprised of new risks and best practices involving sharenting. Together, they could work on research, policy proposals and public service campaigns about how to use social media responsibly and help parents make informed decisions about their children's online use.

These measures would ensure social media platforms play their part in offering a safe and supportive space for families to handle the tough world of parenting online. Ultimately, it is the responsibility of parents to decide what and how much they want to sharent (and how to strike a balance between that and protecting their children), but you can bet social media firms have a role to play: in terms of the tools, the resources and the guidance that are needed to ensure childrens' privacy and well-being are at least considered by people who maybe absent-minded at the best of times; if not actively trashing both children and their data by carelessly over-sharing. Working together, parents and the platforms can function to establish a responsible sharing culture that keeps families connecting and sharing, but still respects children's autonomy and privacy.

2.5 Micro-Microcelebrity

In the year 2007, two toddlers named Charlie and Harry Davies-Carr surged the internet with a video of them titled “Charlie Bit My Finger”. The video showed an adorable interaction between these two siblings, where the then three-year-old toddler, Harry let his younger brother Charlie bite his finger. According to the *Wall Street Journal* report, the 55-second video has helped the Davies-Carr family gain hundreds of thousands of dollars and move to a new house (Mack, 2021). The popularity of the video has brought to the family various marketing and business deals over the years. The Davies-Carr family’s YouTube account, namely HDCYT is still available with over three hundred eighty-three thousand subscribers. Over the years, the family has been sharing home videos on their YouTube account, with the recent video made in 2021. As long as the videos are seen on YouTube, the family may continue to make money through content monetization, such as YouTube advertisements. On May 23, 2021, the video was put on an auction and was sold as a non-fungible token (NFT) to a buyer for \$760,999 where the funds were mentioned to be used for Harry’s education (Lewis, 2021; Mack, 2021). The father of the two boys, Howard Davies-Carr mentioned to CBS News’ Ian Lee that he would want Harry to enrol into the university without having to work part-time in a bar (as cited in Lewis, 2021). According to Mack (2021), the younger brother, Charlie has started his gaming account on Twitch which has gathered around two thousand followers.

The Davies-Carr family is a representation of how social media can be a source of income for a family. In an interview on CNBC, seventeen-year-old Harry mentioned that their fame did not have much influence on his friends' perception of him at school (Mack, 2021). Fortunately, the siblings were able to attend school as usual without being treated as celebrities. Based on the videos posted on the HDCYT YouTube account, the fifty-seven videos posted documenting Charlie, Harry and their two brothers’ moments growing up, such as videos of the siblings playing, running in the field, and going on vacation. The contents displayed positive parenting and healthy relationships between siblings that seemed carefully selected. Careful considerations of content shared can mitigate the negative risks of sharenting with the children, such as feelings of embarrassment.

Lara Alana Ahmad is one of the infamous child celebrities in Malaysia, with four million followers on her Instagram. Her parents, Awal Ashaari and Scha Alyahya, well-known celebrities in the broadcasting and acting industry created a separate account for Lara as a digitalized journal of her life. The parents’ life has already been followed closely by their fans ever since they got married, which brought Lara under the spotlight after her mother’s pregnancy announcement. Unfortunately, at three years old, Lara’s parents had participated in the End-Cyber-Bullying and False Information campaign following up on their experience dealing with cyberbullies on their daughter’s social media (Alhamzah, 2018).

The criticism made on Lara was based on Lara's physical appearance, which is baseless, and could potentially cause psychological harm to her in the future.

3. Ethical Concerns

The research on sharenting has created progressive views on the phenomenon with some viewing sharenting as beneficial while some see it as harmful. It is also important to look at this phenomenon from an ethical perspective. Ethical decision-making would help the communities view sharenting not as a one-size-fits-all situation, instead as a careful consideration that might differ for everyone based on each person's circumstances. As cited by Blum-Ross and Livingstone (2017), the practice of sharenting serves as an outlet for creativity and 'voice' (Lenhart & Fox, 2006). The second outlet may be shown in the instance of the parents of autistic children, who find social media sharing as a source of parenting support (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017). However, this is not fully the case for Nina, a parent of an autistic child who faced a dilemma upon receiving an increasing level of traffic on her posts regarding her autistic child, Iris. She finds it difficult to see the balance of postings as a contribution to a wider autism community or speaking on behalf of her child (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017). Even though Nina's posts have raised awareness about autism, she was concerned because she had spoken about herself as much as on behalf of Iris, which could potentially have a psychological impact on Iris as she grows older. To encounter this dilemma, she trained Iris to write her own story. Nina was hopeful that Iris would find a channel to express herself as someone more than her condition.

As for the case of Nina, she outweighs her autistic child's autonomy over her motive, after her posts have gained popularity. Nina understands the benefits of her posts in creating awareness in the autism community, yet she also believes in the importance of giving her child the right to her own voice. This might not be the case for other families with autistic children due to the differences in circumstances. For example, a family with an aggressive autistic child might view sharenting as the main platform to create awareness, especially in shifting the public's view towards autism. Adam's Autism Family is an Instagram account that posts about the daily struggles of the parents and family in taking care of an autistic child, Adam. Other than sharing about the struggles, the family also portrays the loving and caring side of Adam towards the family members which leaves a significant view towards a person with autism that is rarely seen in public settings (Victor, 2023). They have also posted videos of Adam having meltdowns in a shopping mall and explaining what people in the area can do to help the family in that situation. Iman Wan Tuck Meng, the father of Adam mentioned in an interview with the Sun that their social media platform has given them an immense effect in their aim to raise awareness of autism spectrum disorder (ASD). For Adam's case, it could be due to the severity of his condition, the family's sharenting has shifted the community's view on ASD and has indirectly helped other ASD families as well. Apart from that, the practice of sharenting can raise the concern of privacy. Sharenting for some people has involved parents bringing public lenses into their children's private settings, such as the kitchen and bedroom which are supposed to be their children's safe spaces. Is this content okay to share, if so, what are the circumstances? Considering the pros and cons of sharenting, it leaves parents to gauge the need to share and the child's right to privacy.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the phenomenon of sharenting has emerged as a complex aspect of modern parenting in the digital age. As parents share more of their children's lives online, serious considerations about privacy, permission, and the long-term implications on children's digital footprints arise. On the other hand, sharenting also helps parents feel more connected and belong as parenting can be difficult. It is critical for parents to strike a balance between sharenting and protecting their children. The practice of sharenting invokes ethical dilemmas that needs to be carefully considered. Recommendations for Responsible Sharenting for parents who choose to engage in sharenting, there are several strategies they can employ to share responsibly, respect their children's autonomy, and minimize potential risks. First, parents should avoid oversharing embarrassing or sensitive content, such as naked baby pictures or private medical information. They should also give older children veto power over posts and involve them in decisions about what is shared about them online. Additionally, parents can use privacy settings to limit the audience for their sharenting content and create a family social media agreement that outlines guidelines and expectations for online sharing. Second, parents should be mindful of metadata, such as GPS coordinates, that can reveal sensitive location information in digital photos. They can take steps to remove metadata before sharing photos online or use platforms that automatically remove it. Parents can also explore alternative methods of sharing, such as private messaging apps or password-protected online albums, to share special moments with loved ones without exposing their children to the broader internet. Finally, it's crucial for parents to have ongoing conversations with their children about digital privacy, online reputation, and the long-term consequences of social media sharing. They can use real-life examples and age-appropriate language to help children understand these concepts and make informed decisions about their own online presence. By implementing these recommendations and best practices, parents can engage in responsible sharenting that prioritizes their children's best interests in the digital age, while still allowing them to share their parenting journey with others.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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