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Children of Polish Parents Online - Dimensions and Sharenting Risks

Dzieci polskich rodziców w sieci – wymiary i zagrożenia sharentingu

Abstract: Sharenting, as a phenomenon involving parents sharing their child's image on social media, is becoming increasingly prevalent in Poland and around the world. More and more children have their first digital footprint before birth or before turning 6 months old. Many parents see no harm in showcasing the image and data related to their child on the internet. In this context, it is important to draw attention to the potential consequences and threats associated with publicizing photos and posts related to children. This article attempts to present the phenomenon of sharenting among Polish parents and the potential risks associated with it. It is based on research conducted in 2023 on a sample of 80 posts shared by parents on Instagram and Facebook, as well as an analysis of available research results on sharenting and the resulting threats. In the article, by showcasing various aspects of a child's life and functioning displayed on social media by Polish parents, we aim to indicate how sharing a child's image can pose a threat to their physical and psychological well-being.

Keywords: sharenting, parenting, online parenting, child image, child online, threats to child development, social media.

Introduction

Parenthood has always been one of the most important and fundamental social functions. Its form has changed over the years, and the role of the parent has undergone many transformations. The advent of the Internet and social media has a direct impact on what parenthood looks like today and how it is carried out.

The number of Internet users is rapidly increasing. In January 2023, there were 5.16 billion internet users and 4.76 billion social media users worldwide (Digital 2023: Global Overview Report, 2023). In Poland, in 2023, 88.4% of the population used the Internet, while 66.3% used social media (Ibidem). Therefore, social media is almost universally used nowadays. Here, we adopt Kaplan and Haenlein's (2010, p. 61) understanding of social media, defining them as a "group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content". Among the various types of social media described by these authors, created by combining dimensions of self-presentation/self-disclosure and social presence/media richness (collaborative projects, blogs, content communities, social networking sites, virtual game worlds, and virtual social worlds), we focus on social networking sites due to the subject of our research. The authors define social networking sites as "applications that enable users to connect by creating personal information profiles, inviting friends and colleagues to have access to those profiles, and sending e-mails and instant messages between each other. These personal profiles can include any type of information including photos, video, audio files, and blogs" (Ibidem, p. 63). According to the Digital 2023: Global Overview Report (2023), 94.6% of people aged 16 to 64 used social networks at least occasionally in the three months preceding the study, and one of the most frequently cited reasons for using the Internet, besides finding information, was staying in touch with family and friends.

The nature of social media encourages the disclosure of various types of information, including private ones. Today, on the most popular platforms, individuals can share information of varying degrees of intimacy, including personal data such as date and place of birth, educational background, workplace, and all significant life milestones, such as moving, getting married, getting divorced, or the birth of a child. The internet provides a space for complete 'exposure' of a user's privacy, and an increasing number of people are moving their lives into the online space, as highlighted by K. Miska and A. Musolf-Parol (2012). Contemporary culture and trends promote such

behaviors, rewarding active social media users with likes, shares, the number of friends (e.g., on Facebook), or followers (interpreted as individuals following a particular profile or hashtag on Instagram).

The emergence of the phenomenon of “sharenting” is associated with the increasing trend of sharing parenting-related events in the social media space. People are increasingly seeking different ways to fulfill their parenting roles, distancing themselves from the patterns presented by their own parents, isolating themselves from their immediate social groups, and seeking social connections in the virtual realm. This stems from the characteristic lack of uniform and clear patterns of social role fulfillment in post-industrial societies, the destabilization of value systems, the rise of individualization, and the decline of authorities. Emerging from these phenomena is a sense of both freedom and uncertainty in parenting roles, which can manifest through the phenomenon of sharenting (Brosch, 2017, p. 379-380), a phenomenon that is becoming increasingly prevalent in contemporary society.

The term ‘sharenting’ is a combination of the English words ‘share’ and ‘parenting’ (Borkowska and Witkowska, 2020, p. 7). It refers to the repeated posting by parents of information, photos, and videos about children on the internet. This primarily occurs on social networking sites, but also on various discussion forums, blogs, and streaming platforms (i.e., applications allowing content reception). In other words, it is “the digital sharing of sensitive information about minors, who are often overexposed online in good faith by parents or guardians” (Lavorgna, Tartari and Ugwudike, 2023, p. 473).

This phenomenon has been growing in significance in recent times. International studies show that 23% of children leave their first digital footprint even before they physically enter the world because parents share photos and ultrasound recordings. In European Union countries, the United States, Australia, New Zealand, and Japan, 81% of children below the age of two have a presence on the internet because their parents have shared their photos on social media. Furthermore, 5% of them have their own social media profiles. The average age at which a child’s image appears on the internet due to their parents is six months (Business Wire, 2010). According to research conducted in the United States, 56% of mothers and 34% of fathers share information about their parenting on social media. More than 70% of respondents are acquainted with individuals who post their child’s image on the internet (Davis, 2015).

Studies conducted in Poland have shown that 40% of parents share events from their child’s life on social media; on average, parents upload

72 photos and 24 videos about their child each year. Among parents who engage in sharenting, 42% share content with groups consisting of more than 200 people (Bierca and Wysocka-Świtała, 2019). As pointed out by Anna Błasiak (2018), sharenting is not an uncommon or extravagant approach to parenting; on the contrary, it tends to take on a popular form of parental narration in many different aspects of a child's life.

As evident from the provided data, sharenting is not a niche phenomenon. The internet has become one of the fundamental environments for the upbringing of young people. Individuals who take on parental roles often start to view sharing their child's image as a natural part of parenting. Children are increasingly growing up in the social media environment, first unknowingly and later consciously, which can have significant implications for their development and future. Sharing a child's image raises ethical, psychological, and pedagogical concerns. Therefore, addressing this issue by educators and professionals appears particularly important. The aim of this article is to present the dimensions of sharenting (in terms of the content categories shared by Polish parents) on social networking sites and the potential risks associated with sharing such information online.

Methodological foundations of research

In pursuit of the stated goal of the article, we draw upon a portion of the research results conducted as part of Gabriela Tofil's diploma thesis. The objective of these research efforts was to describe the dimensions of sharenting among Polish parents. These studies were exploratory in nature and encompassed various aspects of the examined phenomenon. Non-reactive methods were adopted to achieve the specified objective. Qualitative content analysis was employed to seek answers to the research question expressed as follows: What dimensions does sharenting among Polish parents on social networking sites take? The subject of analysis included posts and content constituting the profiles of parents on social networking sites (Instagram and Facebook), as well as legal regulations pertaining to image protection, parental responsibilities, and children's rights. The research was conducted in March 2023.

Content analysis is a theoretically justified research procedure for studying communication processes, allowing conclusions to be drawn based on the features of the message. It enables the examination of spoken or written language expressions, sketches, drawings, including books, magazines, newspapers, websites, social media posts, emails, legal acts, speeches, images, and poems (see: Babbie, 2013, p. 358; Holsti, 1968, p. 601). Therefore, in the

context of the stated goal and subject of the research, its use is justified. The focus was on the features of the message, attempting to demonstrate the dimensions of sharenting among Polish parents, but partially also on the recipients of the message, narrowed down to the children depicted in the analyzed photos, considering potential risks arising from parents sharing information about and images of their own children.

A character was considered as the unit of analysis: the child, whose image and sensitive data are shared on social media by legal guardians. The unit of context was established as the post. In the research, it was understood as a photo of a child shared by their parent along with additional information, comments, remarks, or hashtags (words or phrases marked with the # sign, serving as a summary or tagging of content added on social media). The unit of context also served as the unit of observation. The sample selection was purposive - posts posted by parents on Facebook and Instagram related to their children were chosen. These two social media platforms were selected due to meeting the criteria of the definition of social networking sites, as well as the predominance of their audience activity focused on posting photos and relatively short information in the form of comments or hashtags, and their high popularity in Poland (Facebook had 23 million users in Poland in February 2023, while Instagram had 16 million users in October 2022 [*Przewodnik po Social Media w Polsce*, 2023]). Searching for posts for the sample involved creating criteria in the form of keywords or linguistic expressions, which were developed based on the subject literature confronted with the first obtained components of the research material. For Instagram, posts with hashtags potentially containing content related to children were selected: #synekmamusi [mamasboy], #synektatusia [daddysboy], #coreczkamamusi [mummygirl], #coreczkatatusia [daddysgirl], #rodzicielstwo [parenthood], #bobas [baby], #noworodek [newborn], #brudnedzieckotoszczesliwedziecko [dirtychildisahappychild], #golasekmamusi [mumsnakedbaby], #dziecko [child], #odpieluchowanie [diaperfree], #jestemmama [iamamom]. Content from Facebook was found by entering search terms such as "moje szczęście" [my happiness], "dziecko" [baby], "maleństwo" [infant], "jestem tata" [I am a dad], "jestem mama" [I am a mom] into the search bar. In total, 80 posts were collected and analyzed. These posts constitute the source material used to achieve the goal of this article.

The collected research material was organized based on the adopted categories, which we present below when describing the dimensions of sharenting among Polish parents on social networking sites. Following Mayring (2000), the validity of such a procedure was ensured by combining

deductive and inductive strategies in relation to content analysis categories - they were developed through a review of the literature on the research topic and through confrontation of these categories with the obtained research material. This allowed for coding individual posts into appropriate categories. However, it should be noted that analyzing the content posted on such a specific medium as social networking sites, due to its characteristic features - variability, the possibility of editing and deleting posted content, as well as the large amount of available content in a short period of time, may pose challenges in ensuring full replicability of the research.

The dimensions of sharenting among Polish parents

In order to discuss the phenomenon of sharenting among Polish parents, it is necessary to examine its dimensions. These dimensions simultaneously serve as categories in which, within our own research, content related to children shared online by parents was captured. So what parents actually showcase on social networking sites is crucial since the content shared by legal guardians may, in many cases, be associated to varying degrees with the potential for specific threats.

The conducted research allowed for the identification of elements of a child's life that are shared by parents on social media. Among the analyzed posts and entries made by parents, the majority depicted the child's ordinary, everyday activities (21 out of 80 posts on Instagram and Facebook). These posts covered situations such as children playing with their toys, riding in a stroller, lying in their cribs, or being on walks or shopping outings.

Another dimension that seems to be prevalent is the announcement of pregnancy or the gender of the child during the prenatal period by sharing ultrasound images. Among the 80 analyzed posts, 10 featured a picture of the fetus, and in 6 of them, all relevant information about the conducted examination, the child's mother, and the doctor who performed the examination could be found. Therefore, Poles align with global trends. Studies conducted in EU countries, Canada, the USA, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand have shown that 23% of children have their first online footprint even before birth (Business Wire, 2010).

The birth of a child represents another dimension that leads many parents to engage in sharenting. Among the 80 analyzed posts, 5 posts were made by parents announcing the birth of their child. Some of these posts contain fairly detailed information about the child, including their name, surname, place of birth, date and time of birth, height, weight, and APGAR score. As the child grows, additional dimensions of their life are documented

by parents on social media. These dimensions include various family celebrations such as the child's birthdays, events related to religious ceremonies, and milestones in their education. The research material included 2 posts related to these aspects, although it can be assumed that sharing a child's image in this context constitutes a much larger category. According to declarations made by parents in Clue PR research (Bierca and Wysocka-Świtała, 2019), 75% of them share their child's image on social media in connection with special events and occasions.

On the other hand, parents also share their child's image in less positive contexts, attempting to find solutions to various parenting problems or seeking understanding in difficult situations. Among the analyzed material, 7 posts were related to issues concerning the care and upbringing of young children (developmental leaps, tantrums, boundary testing, etc.), while another 3 posts focused on situations related to a child's illness and hospitalization.

Another dimension of sharenting visible in the collected research material is posts depicting children in intimate situations. In 4 posts from the gathered material, children are shown sitting on a potty, and in 13 posts, naked children are depicted (e.g., in the bath, in a pool, at home). In the case of 11 posts, images of dirty children are presented (e.g., as a result of expanding their diet, eating, playing in sand, or mud). In 3 posts, children are depicted in potentially embarrassing situations (strange hairstyles, photos of parents with their child in the background). Another issue is parents creating social media accounts on behalf of their young children, where their image is publicly shared, and the narrative is conducted from their perspective. Such accounts can be used for financial gain. Through the research, one such account was found, but it can be presumed that this phenomenon may have larger dimensions.

Sharenting takes on various dimensions and covers different aspects of a child's life. These seemingly harmless actions, often motivated by love, joy, pride and concern, can have serious and long-term consequences, not so much for the parent but primarily for the child. Sharing a child's image on social media carries potential dangers, and awareness of these dangers can vary. Therefore, it is important to consider these risks in the context of the content shared by parents.

Potential risks of sharenting for a child's needs, development and safety

Presenting the phenomenon of sharenting and the associated risks is important in the context of the transformations taking place in modern families (Matyjas, 2020). Nowadays, parents face new challenges that have

arisen with the widespread use of the Internet. The online reality sets trends and fashions that parents and children attempt to meet (Dobrołowicz, 2014). These socially accepted demands for sharing one's life and image, especially in the case of children, can lead to many negative consequences that are rarely the subject of deep reflection by parents. We present potential risks starting from external ones that may pose problems for a child's physical safety and, in the long run, their well-being, and then moving on to more internal ones that can affect their psychological, emotional, and social development. However, it is essential to remember that these categories of risks can be closely interconnected.

The first risk is related to the inherent characteristics of the medium used to publish a child's image and data. Sharenting is a way of sharing one's parenthood on the Internet, making it subject to the same issues related to the protection of personal data online, problems of misuse, copying, and reproduction of information posted online. Regardless of the content parents share, the situation in which they showcase their child, by posting their child's photo on social media, they must accept the potential use of it in a way that goes against their motivations or intentions. Materials once posted on the Internet remain there - they can be beyond the control of those who posted them. The content of many of the analyzed posts does not appear to be controversial or harmful, but the parents who uploaded these specific pictures and data of their child cannot know by whom and for what purpose they may be used. This could pose a risk to the psychological, physical, or social well-being of their child.

An example of uncontrolled use of information about a child is online identity theft, more widely known in the literature as digital kidnapping (Nottingham, 2019). In the context of sharenting, any Internet user can steal a child's identity and image, creating a different profile on social media, narrating a different story (Brosch, 2017). The likelihood of such a situation increases with the availability of online photos of the child and information about them, especially personal data. According to British researchers' predictions, by 2030, two-thirds of identity thefts will be caused by sharenting (Coughlan, 2018).

There are also other specific risks associated with sharing a child's image on social media. Even the specific content posted by parents can pose a threat. Parents often share materials that were intended to be funny, and sometimes these situations are deliberately provoked. The aforementioned posting of photos of naked children, children sitting on a potty, children dirty from play, in intimate or potentially embarrassing situations, bears the

characteristics of troll parenting (Borkowska and Witkowska, 2020). This phenomenon is based on posting content with ironic or mocking narratives, and, as shown by our own research, out of the gathered 80 posts, as many as 18 of them serve as an example of troll parenting.. The content of these posts can often be humiliating for children, especially in the context of future peer relationships. Furthermore, such actions by parents undermine the child's sense of security, which is a fundamental component of the bond between adults and children.

In the context of sharenting, one must not forget that the online space is not free from pedophilic content. Photos of naked children can be a potential source of interest for individuals with pedophilic tendencies. Currently, it is estimated that even half of the materials acquired by pedophiles come from social media platforms (Borkowska and Witkowska, 2020). According to the research, 13 posts out of the gathered material depicted a child naked. Furthermore, they are tagged with hashtags that simplify the search for such materials, for example, #golasek [nakedbaby], #golasekmamusi [mumsnakedbaby]. Sharing such content therefore poses a real threat to the well-being of the child.

An issue associated with pedophilia on the internet is “baby role play” (Lumsden, 2014). This practice involves stealing images of a child found on social media and then creating a fake profile using those photos. Individuals who engage in baby role play often come up with a new name for the child, describe their personality and preferences in detail, and sometimes refer to the described child as an “orphan.” Some of these behaviors do not have a pedophilic basis, but many of these accounts are created with a sexual narrative involving the depicted child. To make it easier for users to find such accounts and posts, they are tagged with hashtags ending in “rp,” such as #adoptionrp, #babyrp (Borkowska and Witkowska, 2020). As of 2023, there are over 33,000 posts on Instagram under the hashtag #babyrp. This issue goes beyond the scope of our own research, but a review of the literature indicates the occurrence and spread of this phenomenon.

The threats described above are mostly external threats to the child, although they can, but do not necessarily have to, impact the child's development, social functioning, and well-being. However, there are also threats associated with sharenting that affect the child's sense of security and their relationship with the parent.

Many studies in developmental psychology show the importance of stable relationships with caregivers in a child's development, based on the child's sense of security in having their fundamental needs met (Trempała,

2011). During infancy and early childhood, the child's parent has the greatest influence on their development in every aspect. They are a key factor in the child's stable emotional and social development. Their role begins from the very beginning when the child starts making its first attempts at communication, trying to increase its chances of survival in a world where it couldn't manage without a caregiver. The infancy and early childhood period is very intimate for the child because it enters the realm of experiencing various emotions and building new social relationships. Often, the child struggles with regulating emotions and expresses them directly and forcefully, such as through crying, screaming, or uncontrolled anger. The role of the caregiver, typically a parent, is to protect this intimacy, allowing the child to go through these natural stages without additional stressors (Davis, 2015). In this context, one should ask whether recording or taking photos of a child at a time when they need support and help from the most important person in their life would negatively affect their sense of security or their relationship with the parent.

It's worth mentioning E. Marciniak's concept of security (2009) here. She defines security as "the interactively perceived stability and certainty in various interpersonal relationships, based on an individual's relationship with their environment" (ibidem, p. 59). This construct is essential in the context of sharenting because it assumes that individuals assess their security based on the consequences of their interactions with the environment. The earlier-cited research shows that 20% of parents share images of their children with distant acquaintances and strangers, often with an audience numbering over two hundred people (Bierca and Wysocka-Świtała, 2019). Other studies by American researchers have shown that the most frequently shared photos of children are those where 77% of respondents provide the child's name, and over half share the full date of birth (Minkus, Liu, Ross, 2015). This suggests that a child's data, image, and sometimes significant information about their life reach many people, often strangers. In the context of Marciniak's definition (2009), this constitutes a disturbance of security, a need that, from a social perspective, aims to predict behaviors and interactions among people. No one can predict the actions of individuals who come across photos and information about a child online, neither the parents nor, more importantly, the child to whom the shared content relates.

Also, in the context of a child's emotional and social development, the issue of consent for sharing images online can be considered. It's safe to assume that none of the children whose images were shared in the research material gave consent for their pictures to appear on the internet. Even if they

did, they could not give informed consent due to their lack of awareness of potential consequences. All the collected posts featured images of children whose age – roughly estimated – did not exceed 10 years, and sometimes the posts concerned unborn children. A child whose image is shared by parents on social networking sites eventually begins to operate in these media themselves. Contemporary social changes suggest that this will become an increasingly important aspect of everyone's life. Publishing a child's image on the internet may face disapproval in the future and be perceived as harmful. In our own research, posts exhibiting characteristics of troll parenting can be confidently interpreted as being perceived by the children depicted in them as embarrassing or humiliating. We cannot speak with similar certainty about other posts, but it is difficult to assess the sensitivity and needs of the children depicted in them, so potentially they too may violate the child's psychological well-being in the future. Especially since sharing a child's image on social media deprives the child of the decision regarding their presence in these sites.

The posts made by parents influence the child's entire digital history. For example, the use of social media in job recruitment or university admissions is becoming increasingly popular. According to Eric Schmidt (Wardrop, 2010), former CEO of Google, in the future, young people will massively change their names to disconnect from their previous digital footprint. The specificity of the internet means that such materials are particularly dangerous because, in the online world, something is practically impossible to permanently erase (Wojtasik, n.d.). Publishing materials related to a child prevents them from creating their own online presence in the future and does not give them the choice regarding their desire to exist in the online space or not (Borkowska and Witkowska, 2020). Sharenting by a parent can, therefore, be a significant breach of a child's trust, likely affecting the parent-child relationship and potentially having a negative impact on emotional stability, peer relationships, and professional activities.

In light of the aforementioned threats, it can be concluded that sharenting has a negative impact on fulfilling one of the fundamental tasks assigned to the role of a parent: building a child's sense of security and ensuring stable conditions for development in all its aspects. Furthermore, sharenting can pose a threat to a child's physical safety by providing access to their data and location.

Conclusion

As demonstrated, sharenting is becoming an essential part of the lives of an increasing number of parents worldwide, including Poland. The associated risks are becoming more substantial, affecting a child's development and potentially posing real dangers. Consequently, sharenting raises ethical concerns and is even regarded by some as a form of violence against children (see: Keskin, Kaytez, Damar, Elibol and Aral, 2023; Lavorgna, Tartari and Ugwudike, 2023).

However, research conducted on behalf of Clue PR (Bierca and Wysoka-Świtała, 2019) revealed that a staggering 76% of sharenting parents are aware that the materials they post online can end up in the wrong hands. Furthermore, 54% of them understand that, as a result of such actions, their child loses their anonymity forever, and 40% confirmed that their child will always be recognizable online due to algorithms in social media. Thus, the declared awareness of the risks does not seem to be low, yet it does not deter parents from sharing their child's image. This is particularly important from an educator's perspective. Does this awareness merely remain in the realm of declarations, and do further awareness-raising actions need to be taken to inform parents about the potential consequences of sharenting? Or is the public sharing of a child's image with a high awareness of the risks associated with a psychological effect of reinforcing decisions and a way to solidify their chosen actions? What actions should educators take? Is sharenting a way for parents to fulfill their own interests (boosting self-esteem, pursuing unfulfilled ambitions, building social prestige)? If so, what skills should be developed in such individuals to prevent them from exploiting their child's image? Certainly, further and in-depth research into sharenting, the motivations and causes behind such behaviors, should be conducted to serve as a basis for educational efforts.

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