"Mum, seriously!": Sharenting the new social trend with no opt-out.

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Abstract

Children growing up with the normalised practice of sharenting via social networking sites, such as Instagram, will be influenced by the public interactions with the curated portrayal of their identity. The over-sharing of personal childhood moments creates a mediated digital identity with no agency from the child. While research has indicated a number of negative effects from social networking sites (SNS), including lower self-esteem and depression in teenagers and adults, findings have appeared to exclude younger children as the current terms of account ownership on SNS have an age restriction. However, the increasingly popular practice of sharenting intimately shares photographs and content, cultivating an online identity for babies and infants whose parents participate in the habit. With no opt-out for the child, their digital footprint can begin before birth. This paper contends that the potential negative effects on identity formation should be considered and researched further.

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Sharenting, the new vogue in parenting, can influence children's identity development due to mediated representations through networked communication and persistence online via social networking sites. Sharenting through such social networking sites (SNS) as Instagram provide a vehicle for self-presentation and belonging for the parent or guardian, where the online representation of children is motivated and mediated by the parent. Much research has focussed on the egocentric and narcissistic traits of SNS, but in this paper I argue that these parental practices, while providing immediate payoffs to the parent, can alter the identity development of the child being portrayed. Firstly, I define how sharenting provides parental influence on a child's developing identity. Secondly, the development of identity is examined, highlighting the persistence of online digital identity as searchable and enduring with no opt-out for the portrayed child. Thirdly, the parental desire for online acceptance and approval is explored along with the links between identity and SNS. Finally, the practice of sharenting is situated as a current cultural norm, where the sharing of intimate moments of childhood are normalised, as is the essential use of SNS for today's teenager. This article argues that the increasingly popular cultural trend of over-sharing content on SNS by parents through networked communication can influence young children's identity formation through a mediated and enduring online presence.

Sharenting is the increasingly common practice of over-sharing content by parents of their children, creating a digital identity with the potential to commence pre-birth (Choi & Lewallen, 2017). The "ritual of pregnancy" now includes sharing of pregnancy ultrasounds, initiating the digital identity of children before they are even born (Lupton cited in Leaver & Highfield, 2018, p. 31). Goffman (1959) argued that public presentation is a performance of self. Today's SNS such as Instagram offer a public platform for "storytelling and narrative self-presentation" (van Dijck, 2013, p. 200) that curates a persistent identity for children without their agency which can influence self-definition of that child. While research has begun in the legal field on the privacy concerns and data mining of children's identities, the impact on identity formation is less developed. SNS have gained popularity since Facebook started in 2004, with over 2.13 billion monthly active users reported in 2017, allowing the practice of sharenting to be facilitated by technological developments and a growing

audience (Zephoria Digital Marketing, 2018). Instagram, developed in 2010, with over 500 million active users in 2016, is an image-centric social networking site which also contributes to the ability of parents to over-share the lives of their children (Jackson & Luchner, 2017, p. 1). Although the sharing of photos and videos of children may seem innocent and a means of providing and gaining online community support, I contend that this practice has become increasingly normalised and affects the identity formation of young people.

Identity representation by parents on social media has a larger impact than media professionals and mass media in the early years of childhood. Children start developing self-identity from a young age and self-definition is based on observing people around them (Berrymen-Fink, Ballard-Reisch, & Newman cited in Choi & Lewallen, 2017, p. 2). The child's natural model of behaviour and identity is influenced predominantly by their parents or guardians. As children age, their circle of influence is expanded to include more people and the mass media, reducing the significance of the parent. Papacharissi states that self-identity is represented though networked connections, online and offline, in public and private life, with SNS providing a vehicle for self-presentation (2011). The agency of digital self-presentation is determined by the parent through the practice of sharenting, with the average child assuming an online identity by six months of age, while many start pre-birth with ultrasound images shared online (Brosch, 2016, p. 226). This mediated portrayal of identity by the parent affects the self-definition of the developing child, with a digital footprint appearing before the child can walk.

Even though online identity is considered to be always evolving and never complete, the representation by a parent receives no agency from the child, and, as such, the identity is without thought to the future self-concept of the child (Leaver, 2017, p. 2). Leaver and Highfield identify four elements of online identity: the ability to be "persistent, replicable, scalable and searchable" (2018). Each of these components contribute to a long online life with is easily retrieved and redistributed to a potential large online audience. An extreme example of the potential reach and longevity of digital communication is the "Star Wars Kid", Ghyslain Raza, whose video was widely viewed and is still searchable online today (Wikipedia, n.d.). I argue that the persistent nature of online material on SNS will have an influence on the identity development of children whose parents participate in sharenting,

with potentially detrimental effects if the representation is contrary to the child's own self-concept.

The use of SNS as a communication tool through imagery is often considered ephemeral, but online searches and the ability to save or screenshot online content affords the possibility of "repurposing and reframing" at any time, facilitating "context collapse" (Goodwin et al cited in Hodkinson, 2017, p. 277). The innocent sharing of childhood developments by parents may be considered disposable, instantaneous communication, but the facilitation of Web 2.0 tools results in searchable images which can be viewed out of context and out of sequence, constituting new meanings and potentially conflicting with identity as children age and develop. The blurring of public and private spaces is expedited by the extended networks of unknown audiences on SNS, however, Hodkinson argues that context collapse is also relevant in a user's own network (2017). The illusion of ephemerality is facilitated by the SNS functionality (such as Instagram stories), and the use of time lines to create attraction to the latest updates, rather than historic posts. The latent ability to save and share at a later time reinforces context collapse and potential effects on young people's developing identity.

The standardised practice of photo improvement and manipulation on SNS (in particular on Instagram, where multiple filters and enhancements are available), results in a curated presentation of an individual user. Rosenberg and Egbert argue that the use of SNS allows for a selective and more positive appearance of everyday life to be publically displayed (as cited in Jackson & Luchner, 2017, p. 1). The public presentation of selective and edited photos of children, controlled by parents, shapes the memory of these children, influencing self-definition. Raynes-Goldie describes the potential of social networking sites to be "totally permanent and public", with parents constructing a permanent, public record of curated childhood memories (as cited in Hodkinson, 2017, p. 277). This representation by parents on SNS can impact a child's identity development, not just at the time of sharing, but in the future, as a persistent, searchable and public post that can be resurfaced at any time by a potentially large public audience (Choi & Lewallen, 2017). Compounding the judicious selection of imagery and representation is connectivity theory which suggests that memory is shaped by connected communities and digital repositories (Schwarz, 2014, p. 8). These persistent, mediated materials are able to influence self-identity, often unconsciously, with the capacity to reconstruct childhood memories through online SNS presentations.

The social practice of sharing parenting online provides benefits to the parent in the form of group acceptance and belonging, but arguably, the child is merely a vehicle for parental representation. The platform is content curated and image-centric, with the opportunity for comments and the capacity for likes and feedback from other users. In contrast to a traditional baby photo album, online portrayal is influenced by the approval of an Instagram audience. This audience typically consists of a community of strong ties, but grows to include weak ties with the utilisation of hashtags to build a larger, potentially global, viewership (Papacharissi, 2011; Hodkinson, 2017). The use of hashtags provides social networking users with the ability to search, explore and find points of interest. The benefits of folksonomy, facilitated by Web 2.0, allows users interested in topics, such as parenting, to join an online community and converse about the topic (Highfield & Leaver, 2015). The parent's choice of hashtags determines the audience and facilities the growth of weak ties (Papacharissi, 2011, p. 313). The parent's identity is intrinsically connected to parenting and the medium is the represented child, with each social post publically visible with the availability of feedback through likes and comments, both complimentary and critical (Bauman & Lyon cited in Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017, p. 112). The sharenting parent seeks approval and validation through online community acceptance utilising the child in the narrative. The performance of the child is directed by the parent, with specific hashtags to target a like-minded audience, with the two identities (parent and child) becoming linked and co-presented.

The desire for online approval is fostered by the sharenting parent. Nadkarni and Hofmann contend that two needs are satisfied through the social practice: "the need to belong and the need for self-presentation" (as cited in Jackson & Luchner, 2017, p. 2). This linked identity is reinforced by the liking and commenting of other SNS users, where Michikyan, Dennis and Subrahmanyam state that identity is influenced by other's online approval (as cited in Jackson & Luchner, 2017, p. 2). The practice of sharenting results in the reinforcement of these presentations, perpetuating the cycle of "virtual approval" (Jackson & Luchner, 2017, p. 1). It could be argued that the identity of the child is also shaped by the feedback and comments of other users, where online identity is a "co-creative process" (Helmond cited in Leaver & Highfield, 2018, p. 32). The platform used shapes the online identity of the parent and the child in a narcissistic need for belonging and group approval by the parent, where the child is a player with no agency in this public and permanent representation.

The curated standard of the Instagram community is inherently linked with self-concept and identity, and is strongly influenced by feedback on the platform. Jackson and Luchner contend that self-presentation and emotional reactions to Instagram feedback is dependent on an individual's personality traits (2017). Sharenting exposes children who are still developing self-worth and identity to the feedback and approval of others. The effects of Instagram reactions on children are not widely researched as accounts on SNS have age restrictions, which makes quantifying data difficult. Blatt posits that personality developments disrupted in early childhood result in amplified extremes of "relatedness and self-definition at the expense of the other" (Jackson & Luchner, 2017, p. 2). These intensifications of personality developments mean a prioritisation on either fitting-in and belonging, or a self-definition, with one at the detriment of the other. Adding to this argument, Marcus contends that Instagram users do not value relationships with others on this platform, but rather prioritise the selection of carefully constructed images to "promote self-concept" (as cited in Jackson & Luchner, 2017, p. 2). The research on teenage and adult users of Instagram suggest that personality determines their reaction to feedback on the platform. Facebook has been linked to many negative outcomes, including depression and low self-esteem in certain users (Jackson & Luchner, 2017, p. 1). I would argue that children who have underdeveloped self-concept, in comparison to teenagers and adults, are more likely to be influenced by the public displaying of their parent-managed identity, and the possibility of detrimental effects on their identity formation are increased.

The social practice of sharenting on Instagram is not just evident in the willingness of parents to share photos of their children online, but also by the contrary example set by Instagram in verifying the accounts of celebrity babies (Leaver, 2017, p. 8). This acceptance is contrary to their terms of use which state children under 13 years of age are prohibited from creating an account (Instagram, n.d.). The encouragement of posting images of children and sharenting by Instagram is highlighted by the Instagram verified accounts of 'Boomer Phelps' (son of Michael Phelps and Nicole Johnson with 786,000 followers) (boomrrphelps, 2018), Asahd Khaled (son of DJ Khaled with 1.8 million followers) (Asahdkhaled, 2018) and Alexis Olympia Ohanian (daughter of Serena Williams with 299,000 followers) (Olympiaohanian, 2018). These Instagram endorsed accounts promote the practice of sharenting, encouraging non-celebrity parents to replicate the "mediation and sharing of their own children" (Leaver,

2017, p. 8). The example set by Instagram, with officially verified celebrity baby accounts normalises the practice of sharenting to become an everyday, mundane social convention.

Online, persistent, stereotypical representations can have harmful effects, as from an early age children understand these portrayals which influence their developing self-identity (Choi & Lewallen, 2017, p. 3). While many may contend that social media has provided an opportunity to combat stereotypical depiction of gender, race and lifestyles in the mass media by representing ordinary people, the normalisation of sharenting contradicts this. Choi and Lewallen contend that gender representation via sharenting is dominated by stereotypical depictions which are evidenced by clothing, activity and setting choice (2017). This parental "impression management" of the child potentially conflicts with the construction of an "autonomous identity" desired in the development of adolescents (Mascheroni, Vincent & Jimenez, 2015). The rite of childhood lived through SNS is conforming to societal stereotypes, rather than breaking cultural conventions, with the potential to influence the teenage conflict of self-discovery and self-concept.

The teenage years are widely accepted as a time of conflict, including struggles with self-identity and how an individual fits within contemporary society, with much of this identity development now carried out through social networking (boyd cited in Hodkinson, 2017). Hodkinson argues that identity presentation via social networking sites is mandatory for teenagers through the normalised practice of online identity construction with a determined choice of friends and public performance (2017). The consequences of a pre-existing online identity created by a parent are still to be comprehended. Children growing up with sharenting on Instagram are likely to be under ten years old, considering Instagram was only launched in 2010, and, therefore, these children have not yet experienced the identity conflicts of adolescence. This online representation that parents have crafted on Instagram, with no agency by the child, makes an unrealised contribution to the child's self-identity (Leaver, 2017, p. 2). The parent's self-expression and participation in SNS has formed a mediated version of the child's identity, along with intimate milestones. This unsanctioned narrative is cultivated by the parent, with little consideration of the ramifications to the child's now established inveterate digital identity.

Conclusion

The real-world effects of sharenting through SNS on children's identity are yet to be discovered as this practice has only gained cultural popularity in the last ten years since Instagram was launched. The effects of social media on the self-concept of teenagers and adults has been researched and there are numerous studies connecting negative outcomes, such as depression and low self-esteem, with the approval seeking practice of SNS. The emotional reactions of teenagers and adults are an indicator of the future issues that children growing up on Instagram are being exposed to from a very early age. Research into sharenting is currently limited to future privacy concerns and data mining capabilities that record online data collection from before birth. The identity formation of children is a hidden side effect to the parental practice of sharenting that is yet to be disclosed and examined. This topic needs further research to discover the full effect on identity development for children's identity portrayed online in the public arena by parents.

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