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Sharenting in Digital Society: Exploring the Prospects of an Emerging Moral Panic

Pamela Ugwudike [ID][a], Anita Lavorgna [ID][b], and Morena Tartari [ID][c]

[a]University of Southampton, Southampton UK; [b]University of Bologna, Bologna Italy; [c]University of Padova, Padova Italy

ABSTRACT

Debates about the risks of sharenting (the practice of parents or guardians sharing information about their children online) are gathering storm in global media reports and academic discourse. This paper analyses media representations of the practice and its risks to examine whether the attributes of a moral panic can be detected. Results reveal the presence of the attributes and the reductive depiction of sharenting risks and harms as the products of situational factors, specifically the sharenters' agency. The paper critiques this finding and argues that a consideration of broader structural conditions marked by the power and ability of social media platforms to structure information flow and diffusion is required. This is necessary to contextualize and advance understanding of risks associated with new and emerging digital cultures such as sharenting which do not necessarily constitute criminal acts but are depicted as transgressive or deviant by the media due to the capacity of embedded practices to produce crimes and broader harms.

Introduction

Sharenting occurs when parents or guardians regularly post images, stories, or other information on social media platforms about the children in their care. The practice can involve anything from sharing images (for example, photographs and videos) of children, to inadvertently disclosing sensitive information about their lives. Consider for example, cases where parents share birthday photos and videos of their children, revealing their date of birth. Apart from parents, relatives such as grandparents (Staes, Walrave, and Hallam 2023) and others including schools (Cino and Dalledonne Vandini 2020) participate the practice.

As global internet usage, and social media interactions specifically, continue to rise exponentially (Constine 2018), increasing opportunities for sharenting, it has been suggested that the number of people utilizing social media affordances for that purpose[1] will increase significantly. Bessant (2017), for example, estimates that most children (80%) around the world will acquire a presence in online spaces by the time they are two years old. As Blum-Ross and Livingstone (2017) observes, commentators suggest that this will deny affected children the opportunity to create and securitize their own identity in digital environments and will also pose implications for their digital footprint, imposing on them "digital tattoos" that will affect their future social prospects.

Parents have been identified as the most active sharenters (Brosch 2018), and sharenting risks have been linked to their agency and self-interested motives such as the quest for self-representation

CONTACT Pamela Ugwudike ✉ p.ugwudike@soton.ac.uk 📧 Department of Sociology, Social Policy & Criminology, University of Southampton, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Southampton, Highfield Road SO17 1BJ, Hampshire, Southampton, UK
[1]Affordances (Bloomfield, Latham, and Vurdubakis 2010) in this context refer to the opportunities provided by social media platforms to anyone with a compatible device (e.g., a smartphone) to broadcast their discursive expressions to an audience.

through their children (Damkjaer 2018). Related risks which include various forms of data misuse are also often traced to the actions of parents and other family members involved in the practice (Bezáková, Madleňák, and Švec 2021).

These issues are increasingly being reported across both mass media and digital communication outlets (e.g., Kamenetz 2019; Macdonald 2022; Pierre 2022) and the academic literature (Bezáková, Madleňák, and Švec 2021; Steinberg 2017; Williams-Ceci et al. 2021). Yet, the question of whether such reportage could be fomenting a moral panic has not been explored. The extant literature on sharenting provides useful insights but ignores how the media construct the practice and describe accompanying risks, using emotive linguistic tones that can elicit the public consternation and punitive overreaction described by moral panics theorists (e.g., Cohen 1972; Goode and Ben-Yehuda 2009; Hall et al. 1978; Young 1971).

To address the gap in knowledge, this paper applies moral panics theory to an analysis of media reports about sharenting practice. The article forms part of a research project entitled, *ProTechThem-Building Awareness for Safer and Technology-Savvy Sharenting*, which is funded by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC).

It is important to analyze media reports about sharenting and other new and emerging digital cultures which pose risks and harms to children, to unravel whether the hallmarks of an emerging moral panic can be observed. Our exploratory study undertakes this task with reference to the dimensions of moral panics outlined by Goode and Ben-Yehuda (2009).

The study also examines whether, as the moral panics literature with its roots in labeling theory suggests (see, Becker 1963), media constructions of sharenting are focusing more on social contexts and processes (in this case, the motives and agency of sharenters). An implication of this, which is also explored in this paper, is that it obfuscates the structural element, primarily the role of digital social media platforms in incentivizing the practice.

As we have noted elsewhere (Lavorgna, Ugwudike, and Tartari 2023a), media analysis is useful for unraveling the emotive social mechanisms which, by emphasizing or even exaggerating potential online risks facing children and young people, can arouse public fear unnecessarily and legitimize punitive policy intervention (; Facer 2012). Such analysis can inform efforts to defuse emerging moral panics and counter them with more useful information that can improve understanding and better inform principled policy making.

Sharenting and the emerging backlash: fueling a moral panic?

Global media coverage of sharenting has been growing in recent years, with headlines highlighting risks and fueling what appears to be a spiraling backlash against the practice in the UK (e.g., Coughlan 2018; Pierre 2022) and other parts of the world (Kamenetz 2019; Macdonald 2022). Alongside negative media reports, the nascent academic literature is also highlighting several risks ascribed to the practice (e.g., Bezáková, Madleňák, and Švec 2021; Lavorgna, Tartari, and Ugwudike 2023b; Williams-Ceci et al. 2021) although reports of actual victimization are rare in comparison (Lavorgna, Ugwudike, and Tartari 2023a). Indeed, sharenting forms part of the new and emerging digital cultures that do not necessarily constitute criminal acts but are depicted as transgressive or deviant by the media due to their capacity to foment criminal acts and broader harms.

Meanwhile, the role of digital social media platforms in incentivizing the practice has not received as much attention. But given the nature of their operations and infrastructures, the platforms can, through various means including the amplification of child-centric sharenting data, motivate the practice. Sharenters seeking the visibility and popularity required for lucrative brand endorsement contracts can be particularly motivated to create content. The platforms can also motivate others pursuing benefits such as social networking and access to information. The accompanying content creation benefits social media companies whose profit model relies on the procurement, curation, and sale of user data (Kopf 2020).

Nevertheless, much of the literature on sharenting risks seems to focus on the agency of sharenters, particularly parents. A qualitative study of Instagram sharenters by Holiday, Norman, and Densley (2022) suggests that parents involved in sharenting may be disposed toward protecting their children from associated harms but still engage in the practice for self-representation via child-centric content, presenting their children as extensions of themselves. Some have gone so far as to suggest that sharenters engaging in extreme forms of sharenting or "oversharenting" (which involves constantly posting child-centric content) could be perceived by others as attention seekers (e.g., Klucarova and Hasford 2021). Oversharenting is also often linked to the agency of sharenters and Martindale (2014), suggests that the practice can involve a type of narcissistic self-promotion that involves representing the self through "positive pictures" which allow parents to use their children as "vehicles for likability and social affirmation". The emerging scholarship on sharenting outlines additional risks including privacy issues and again highlight the agency of parents. The studies suggest that, when confronted with the tension between their parental responsibilities and the personal benefits of sharenting, parents do express concerns about associated risks but exercise their agency in favor of the latter (e.g., Blum-Ross and Livingstone 2017).

Together, these studies emphasize the agency of sharenters but recognize that depicting parents as willful privacy violators motivated to exercise their agency purely by self-interest, reductively ignores other explanations, e.g., connecting with family and friends (Brosch 2018), and the "privacy paradox" (Barth and De Jong 2017). This paradox manifests itself in the tendency of internet users to harbor and even express concerns about privacy risks but still share information about themselves and others, often with little or no risk assessment to prevent privacy violations (see also, Ní Bhroin et al. 2022). Sharenters are not immune from this phenomenon which forms part of the broader dynamics of internet use. Ranzini, Newlands, and Lutz (2020) study of 320 sharenters on Instagram with children under 13 in the UK, found that the privacy concerns expressed by the parents did not always influence their sharenting practices.

Added to privacy issues, other problematic correlates of sharenting emphasized by studies cautioning against the practice and highlighting the agency of sharenters, include predatory grooming and cyber-attacks, identity theft and fraud, and contaminated digital identities (Bezáková, Madleňák, and Švec 2021; Steinberg 2017; Williams-Ceci et al. 2021). Sections of the literature on sharenting also cite the ethical issue of lack of consent as yet another problematic feature of the practice, with the focus again placed on the agency of sharenters and the ethicality of sharenting without consent (Ní Bhroin et al. 2022). The studies suggest that although the informed consent of children is not required for digital practices involving them and is typically ignored (Nottingham 2019), children would value the opportunity to provide or withhold their permission (e.g., Sarkadi, Dahlberg, and Fängström 2020).

As already noted, these critical discourses about sharenting and the negative impact on children are also emerging in national and international news media reports (Coughlan 2018; Kamenetz 2019; Macdonald 2022; Pierre 2022). Although the reports do not contain concomitant evidence of actual victimization (Lavorgna et al. 2023), insights from moral panics theory suggest that sensationalized and alarmist stories about sharenting risks can trigger public fear and punitive overreaction.

Moral panics theory

Classic moral panics theory was introduced in sociology and criminology by Young (1971, 2009). It was subsequently developed by Cohen (1972) and Hall et al. (1978) among others through their analysis of social reaction to sensationalized media reports. The reports depicted young working-class men and emerging youth subcultures as dangerous and symbolic of a growing culture of drug use (Young 1971) or rising youth violence (Cohen 1972), which the media and state actors ideologically racialized in the mid 1970s (Hall et al. 1978).

In foundational and contemporary variations of the theory, the instigators of moral panics are portrayed as "moral entrepreneurs" (Becker 1963) or "moral crusaders" (Young 2009: 6). They collaborate with the media to sensationalize and exaggerate the activities of a target group (the folk

devils). According to Cohen (1972: 2), "folk devils" are "visible reminders of what should not be". They are the outsider whose moral rectitude contrasts with internalized notions of the idealized "normal" self, and they constitute a "threat to dominant moral values". Moral panics do not focus on the specific activities of the "folk devils" such as drug taking in Young's (1971) account, or clashes between youth subcultures in Cohen's (1972: 2) analysis, or the crime of mugging in the account developed by Hall et al. (1978). Moral entrepreneurs manage to link such transgressions to a broader social malaise, entrenching in public consciousness, the view that the transgressions are a symbol of a wider social problem or "an index of the disintegration of the social order" (Hall et al. 1978). The aim is to spark fear and outrage and, in the process, elicit public support for social control measures.

More recent iterations of moral panics theory have adapted the concept of the moral entrepreneur to suit the social changes of contemporary society. Drotner (1999) for example, further elaborates on the media's role in both constructing and publicizing moral panics. Goode and Ben-Yehuda (2009) reject classic moral panic's notion that only powerful elites engineer the phenomenon. They propose the grassroots model, the elite-engineered model, and the interest-group model to demonstrate that moral panics can emerge from different groups motivated by their own specific interests and moral imperatives. Our study explored whether moral entrepreneurs can be identified in the media reports we analyzed.

Meanwhile, in further attempts to develop classic moral panic theory, Hier (2019) argues that moral entrepreneurs or crusaders are more successful (in convincing others to join their moral crusade) within their specific social groups and networks. Flores-Yeffal and Elkins (2020) contend that moral panics are disseminated via moral framing networks which are public spaces inhabited by interactants with similar values as the moral entrepreneur. The foregoing counters the notion established by classic moral panics theory, of a group of powerful elites acting as moral entrepreneurs and presiding over moral panics production.

Further, McRobbie and Thornton (1995) argue that studies of media-generated moral panics should consider the role of new and emerging digital communication environments such as online social media spaces, in moral panics production. They, and others such as Hier (2019), contend that the advent of multi-mediated contexts of news production calls for revisions of key dimensions of moral panics theory. Specifically, the technologies are expanding the pool of moral entrepreneurs and the ability of "folk devils" to reject demonization and social censure.

Walsh and Hill (2022) use the concept of "platformed panic" to expand the point about the impact of new digital communication technologies. They explain that social media platforms for example, structure information production, dissemination, and visibility, and can co-produce moral panics. Muller's (2019) concept of "hypertransparency" echoes this and highlights the platforms' co-productive role. These insights suggest that alarmist mass media reports about the risks and harms associated with sharenting, should consider the role of new and emerging digital media in shaping sharenting practice via opaque processes of content diffusion and amplification which distort understanding of the scale and risks of the practice.

Other critics of the early moral panics model developed by Cohen (1972) and others (e.g., Hall et al. 1978; Young 1971) argue that the concept has been co-opted by actors such as politicians, mass media outlets, and others, and is increasingly applied to public discourse about emotive news reports of various kinds without due consideration of the model's theoretical bases (e.g., Altheide 2009). It is also argued that, amongst other limitations, the theory ignores the pluralism of values and lack of moral consensus in contemporary societies (Hier 2019; Horsley 2017).

These critical insights are valuable and point to several areas requiring empirical attention. But original moral panics theory remains a useful heuristic device for criminological studies such as ours which explore news media constructions of social issues and the capacity of such reports to negatively label specific activities and populations, igniting public fear and consternation and heightening calls for punitive criminal justice intervention. Besides, despite the rise of multi-mediated digital communication outlets, recent statistics reveal the unabated influence of news media reports (such as those on

which our study focuses) in contemporary society. In the UK for example, a survey by Ofcom (2020) which explored news consumption in the country found that almost half of all adults rely on either print newspapers and/or news websites/apps and assess their quality very highly. This points to the capacity of media reports to influence public opinion and produce moral panics.

Although Cohen (1972: 2) set out the processes of moral panic production, Goode and Ben-Yehuda (2009) have gone on to provide an attributional model for unraveling the social indicators of moral panics in contemporary times. The framework comprises five dimensions of model panics: concern, hostility, consensus, disproportionality, and volatility. *Concern* draws attention to the actions of the moral entrepreneurs in constructing a problem, in the process heightening public fear and anxiety. *Hostility* refers to the construction of a designated folk devil, the scapegoated outsider at whom public consternation is directed.

Consensus that the subject of the moral panic (the problem) is a real threat to social order is established after the public are sensitized to the problem and the folk devil, both of which the moral entrepreneurs manufacture via emotive and exaggerated reports. In other words, the sensitization elicits a *consensus* concerning the perceived need for moral regulation and social control to restore order. The concept of *disproportionality* denotes the capacity of moral panics to trigger public fear and anxiety that exceed the perceived threat.

Lastly, *volatility* refers to the capriciousness of moral panics (see also, Schildkraut, Elsass, and Stafford 2015), specifically the capacity of the phenomena to suddenly materialize and subside. A useful indicator of *volatility* is the sudden change in the ebb, flow, or location of media attention to the object of a moral panic. It is argued that volatility can be measured by assessing the life span of media discourses driving the moral panic before attention or media coverage shifts to other topics (Schildkraut, Elsass, and Stafford 2015).

Other studies using the model have advanced the field of moral panics research (e.g., Burns and Crawford 1999; Dai 2020). The studies have applied some or all five dimensions to the study of moral panics. For example, Dai (2020) utilized the framework in their exploration of the moral panic that preceded the overly punitive "the Strike Hard" policy in China. Schildkraut, Elsass, and Stafford (2015) applied the model to their study of moral panics about school shootings and the links to fear of crime among college students. In both cases, moral panics triggered overly punitive policies. Others have explored moral crusades about social media practices of various kinds, including activities that are said to fuel misinformation (Carlson 2020).

Together, the studies indicate that moral panics theory remains a valuable model for understanding how risks associated with digital cultures such as sharenting are constructed as social problems, and how social reaction to such issues can be manufactured to exert control. Although sharenting in general is not a crime, as we have seen, critics and others argue that the practice exposes children to several crimes and other harms. This brings the practice within the purview of the multidisciplinary scholarship on digital cultures that are depicted by the media as transgressive or deviant due to their capacity to produce harm although they are not defined as criminal acts.

Methodology

We used the content aggregator Nexis to collect newspaper articles published in English over 10 years (1.1.2011 to 31.12.2021). After keyword searches to reduce the occurrence of false negatives, we relied on the syntax "(minor OR child!) AND (parent OR mother OR father OR grandparent OR grandmother OR uncle OR aunt OR teacher) AND (sharenting OR oversharing) OR (exposure near/5 information) AND (crime! OR harm! OR danger!)," to identify news articles on how sharenting is constructed by the media and examine whether the attributes of a moral panic can be observed.

This produced a total of 708 results which we screened manually to select 264 articles[2] focusing on discursive constructions of sharenting, and we conducted manual analysis on the articles. Although

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[2]These comprised news articles from Australia, British Columbia, Canada, China, Ireland, Canada, Ghana, Kenya, Latin America, Malta, New Zealand, Pakistan, Singapore, South Africa, UK, and the US.

Table 1. Coding framework.

Code (Nvivo node)	Notes
Risk	Situational contexts of sharenting – What are the risks attributed to sharenting?
Harm or crime (actual victimization)	Situational contexts of sharenting – What harms or crimes are discussed?
Sharenter	Situational contexts of sharenting – Who is identified as the sharenter/s? e.g., mother, father, teacher, other carer? What motives are ascribed to them?
Social media responsibility	Structural contexts of sharenting – Is there any discussion about the ethics and responsibilities of social media platforms?
Moral entrepreneur	Who are those expressing concern? Are they emphasizing the need for control?
Folk devil	Who is identified in the news as legally, ethically or morally responsible for the risks ascribed to sharenting?

the achieved sample is not representative or generalizable, a benefit of our sampling method is that it allowed us to narrow our search and select specific data that are relevant to our study.

Our focus on news media analysis is justifiable on the basis that studies continue to document the impact of the news media on public opinion. For example, as previously noted, a survey by Ofcom (2020) which explored news consumption in the UK found that almost half of all adults rely on either print newspapers and/or news websites/apps. The survey also revealed that users who rely on television news and newspapers are more likely to give the outlets a rating of above 80% when asked to assess them according to their: trustworthiness; importance; accuracy; utility for understanding world affairs; capacity to offer diverse opinions.

Our media analysis involved reading through each article and interpreting passages to understand their meaning and code indicators of moral panics as defined by Goode and Ben-Yehuda (2009) – i.e., concern, hostility, consensus, disproportionality, and volatility. Added to these attributes, as Table 1 shows, our analysis was also informed by other features associated with moral panics, namely the role of "moral entrepreneurs" and the construction of a "folk devil".

Further, Table 1 shows that we were guided by codes relevant to sharenting and useful for understanding the situational and structural contexts of the practice. Situational contexts refer to the sharenters, their agency (actions), and the ascribed risks, whilst the structural context refers to social media infrastructure and ethics. To present our results in a coherent fashion, we conducted thematic analysis. This involved organizing emergent codes into overarching themes (patterns), with the codes representing dimensions of the themes.

Results

Raising concern about sharenting

The media analysis revealed indicators of moral panics as outlined by Goode and Ben-Yehuda (2009). In numerous instances, moral entrepreneurs expressed considerable *concern* about sharenting by highlighting the scale of the associated risks, and the importance of social control measures. The top moral entrepreneurs were: representatives of companies offering cybersecurity services (number of references = 31); health practitioners such as doctors, clinical psychologists, and family therapists (26); teachers (21); parents concerned about privacy violations and lack of consent (20); governmental institutions/actors including politicians (17); both charities and NGOs (15). Law enforcement and legal professionals (6); financial institutions (4); and celebrities or influencers (5) also expressed concerns but did not feature in news articles as heavily as the top moral entrepreneurs. This diverse group of moral entrepreneurs reflects Goode and Ben-Yehuda's (2009) interest group model whereby various actors with a shared interest interactively produce a moral panic, sometimes in collaboration with the media (e.g., Burns and Crawford 1999; see also McRobbie and Thornton 1995).

In the news articles we analyzed, the various moral entrepreneurs and the media outlets themselves used alarmist terms throughout to express *concern* about sharenting, depicting the practice as a fast-

growing and problematic digital culture involving the excessive exposure of sometimes sensitive information about children on social media sites without consent:

> Facebook, Instagram and YouTube, as well as parenting blogs, have pulled the world into the nursery with questionable photos of diaper-clad kids ... [...] The worrying rise of "sharenting" - parents overusing social media to post about their children - has been noted by MPs. [...] What is worrying to us is the number of parents who are not considering their child's opinion in the future, and the sheer volume and frequency of these posts and the risk that brings.[3]

Parents opposing the practice cited privacy risks, lack of consent, embarrassment, and exposure to cybercrimes:

> From early on I took the decision that I did not want my baby on social media. If my friends take pictures of her and put them on Facebook, I ask them to remove them. When she's old enough and she wants to be on social media that's fine [...] I never share anything about my kids that would hurt or embarrass them deeply [...] I know the dangers of posting a photo of my son ... on Instagram. You will never find that on my feed.

Several reports depicted parents as the key actors fueling the practice. Reflecting insights from the extant literature on sharenting (e.g., Fox and Hoy 2019; Lavorgna, Ugwudike, and Tartari 2023a), mothers were described as the main sharenters (105 references) compared with fathers (21), teachers (7), and grandparents (4).

To reinforce *concerns* about risks, several reports described how some affected children were reacting to the practice by resorting to preventative measures such as requests to delete content:

> My mother had Instagram before I even had a phone – so I wasn't aware that photos of me had been published... I really don't like photos of me online anyway – I don't even post photos of myself on my Instagram account – so when I followed my mother and saw them on her profile, I told her to take this down, I've not given you permission.

There are reasons to believe that the alarmist media reports were exaggerating the risks of sharenting. For example, a recent media analysis focusing on sharenting victimization by Lavorgna, Ugwudike, and Tartari (2023a) revealed that media reports about sharenting risks far exceed reports about actual victimizations, indicating that although there is a possibility of under-reporting, the media could be exaggerating the risks. In the current media analysis, we similarly found a paucity of reports about cases where sharenting led to actual victimization of children. Yet, media representations of the practice as a fast-growing problem were quite profuse and comprised numerous comments by moral entrepreneurs united in their aim to exert social control. In line with the tenets of moral panics theory (Cohen 1972; Goode and Ben-Yehuda 2009), the moral entrepreneurs, having expressed *concerns* that were likely to sensitize the public to the issue at hand, considered the need for social control measures to deter sharenters:

> [The American Academy of Paediatrics] is considering asking paediatricians to warn parents against sharing photographs of their children online ... [...] Back in the UK, some academics have suggested the government should educate parents to ensure they understand the importance of protecting their child's digital identity.

Views such as these which suggest that parents should be targeted and should devise and implement preventative measures, focus attention on the *situational* contexts of sharenting as well as the agency and responsibilities of sharenters. More broadly, situational preventative measures (e.g., Clarke 2008) such as the ones proposed by the moral entrepreneurs, responsibilise ordinary citizens by imposing on them crime prevention tasks (including the creation of "target removal" or "target hardening" measures) whilst obscuring criminogenic structural conditions. Of relevance here are the structural contexts of sharenting, particularly the influence of powerful social media companies that incentivize content creation without adequate user safeguards (Lavorgna, Tartari, and Ugwudike 2023b).

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[3]To improve the presentation and legibility of the extracts, we used ellipsis in brackets ([...]) to merge quotations relating to the same issue.

Expressing hostility

The focus of media reports was on the agency and actions of parents, particularly mothers, with some moral entrepreneurs expressing hostility toward parents in general and outrightly condemning their actions:

> [A] 31-year-old writer ... has built up a loyal following – at its peak, two million page views a month – by chronicling the worst excesses of "oversharing" displayed by mums and dads over Facebook, Twitter and the rest. Now her blog, STFU Parents (a shortened version of "Shut the f*** up"), has just spawned a book [...] [The 31-year-old writer] claims that the bar for private information continues to be raised as we crave more extreme confessions. (often to garner more "likes")

Part of the hostility directed at parents involved in sharenting stemmed from the perception that they were selfish attention seekers:

> "[Parents who are sharenters] may be actively seeking attention. We are evolving into an increasingly narcissistic, exhibitionistic and voyeuristic world where people think nothing of exposing themselves and anyone else," says [a] child and family therapist.

Comments such as these and several others appeared to ideate a view of sharenting as part of a broader digital culture that is socially harmful in that it promotes relentless attention seeking at the expense of children. This portrayal of sharenting as a feature of problematic cultural trends reflects a fundamental tenet of moral panics theory which is that social reaction and the accompanying moral indignation are typically targeted at the morally questionable culture attributed to the subject of the moral panic and do not focus solely on their activities (e.g., Young 1971).

Reinforcing this tendency to connect sharenting to broader cultural developments in digital society, some moral entrepreneurs described the practice as an abusive manifestation of a negative parenting culture which involves the online exposure, objectification, and exploitation of children:

> Pity the little darlings if they are being raised by parents who like to share; There's little to stop social media obsessives exploiting children who are too young to say no [...] [Sharenting by parents] is an abuse of the role of the adult in relation to his or her role of upbringing, looking at the child as an object and not as a subject.

Framed this way, sharenting forms a negative part of contemporary "digital parenting" although this term is more commonly associated with the more positive act of parental mediation and protective oversight over children's interaction with digital media (Mascheroni, Ponte, and Jorge 2018: 9).

Nevertheless, alarmist media reports such as the examples provided, situated sharenting within negative cultural developments in digital society and depicted parents as the most prolific sharenters whose actions expose children to risks. As moral panics theory suggests, such negative reports inform the construction of the "folk devil" at whom public fear and *hostility* should be directed (e.g., Goode and Ben-Yehuda 2009), in this case the parents involved in sharenting.

Building a consensus

Added to the media reports expressing *concerns* about sharenting and potentially fueling hostility toward sharenters, we detected a *consensus* (amongst various moral entrepreneurs and ordinary members of the public) on the capacity of the practice to foment several risks. Only few counter-narratives were observed. To provide an example, below a sharenter endorses sharenting although they highlight the importance of consent:

> My children who are five and eight years old. [...] I've always been open with them ... and every photo that goes on Facebook has their approval.

Another sharenter who posts about her two children aged four and two also defends sharenting practice:

> I do realise I'm doing it, . . . but I don't see any harm in it. . . . It's a way of showing family and friends what you've been doing.

Below, yet another sharenter defends her actions and calls for tolerance after Facebook deleted a photograph of her husband and son in the shower, which she had shared in a previous post:

> . . .it's just innocent pictures that people are twisting and getting offended by.

Celebrity sharenters expressed similar sentiments. Some explained that sharenting allows them to share their lived experiences of family life:

> [Posting images allows me to] show a little snippet of something silly or good that's happened to myself or my family to bring a smile to friends' faces [. . .]. My children are my whole life, I couldn't imagine not sharing them.

Some professional sharenters alluded to incentives such as monetization and networking opportunities:

> My brand is "lifestyle" and I think it's completely OK to include them in my story on social media. I share moments with them, items that I love . . . It's a great way to connect with other moms, and to, of course, keep it real [. . .] For us it opened doors. [My son] got modelling jobs and he gets invited to lots of kiddies' events. He has a better quality of life.

Comments such as these were few amidst an apparent consensus on risks of cyber harms and cybercrimes linked to sharenting. McRobbie and Thornton (1995) suggest that "folk devils" increasingly offer such counter-narratives on digital platforms such as social media (see also Walsh and Hill 2022), and future research can explore this possibility. Meanwhile, what the observed paucity of counter-narratives suggests is that concerns about cybercrimes and other harms affecting children may transcend the pluralism to which some critics of classic moral panics theory allude (Hier 2019; Horsley 2017) and instead generate a consensus.

In terms of the consensus we observed, risks of privacy violations such as exposing children's locations were often cited (117 references) as well as the harms of exposure to predatory pedophiles (61) and identity misuse (37). Future problems including contaminated identities (46), and psychological problems, particularly emotional and mental health issues (51) were also amongst the frequently discussed risks.

With respect to the risks of privacy violations, several reports depicted parents involved in sharenting as inconsiderate and willful violators of their children's privacy and other interests:

> [A law professor] cites the dangers of parents' thoughtlessly posting children's names and dates of birth and potentially putting them at risk [. . .] [A recent report] reveals some parents share information they know will embarrass their children - and some never consider their children's interests before they post.

The reports drew parallels between privacy violations and the exposure of information that can leave intransigent digital trails capable of denying affected children the opportunity to develop and shape their own online identity. This type of identity is created as people interact with and in digital environments. Here, one news article encapsulates the point expressed by several other reports about the construction of children's online identities:

> There is a more serious risk in [sharenters] establishing the digital presence of their child in a way that may interfere with that child's ability to later establish his or her own online identity.

Media reports equally claimed that sharenting leaves an indelible mark on the digital identity of affected children, with implications for future prospects including access to employment:

> It could prove very costly to the kids in the future. Thanks to the development of big data, many employers now investigate candidates' background on the internet.

Reports such as this and others implied that sharenting can impair the ability of affected children to develop and maintain the untarnished data trail and digital identity required in contemporary societies where technologies (driven by demographic, biometric, and other data) increasingly inform access to

services across the public and private sectors (Beduschi 2019; Feher 2021). Our analysis revealed profuse media representations of sharenting as a practice that can pollute the digital identity and reputation of children. There was an emphasis on the permanence of such harms and the adverse impact on the digital future of affected children:

> [Sharenters are] building an accessible online database of [their] child's history [...] For its part, [a child safety organisation] in the United Kingdom warns that "every time a photo or video is posted, a fingerprint of the child is created that can follow him in his or her adult life."

Other reports about the social implications of sharenting emphasized that parents were denying their children the opportunity to develop their own self-identity, an issue that has also been discussed in the academic literature (e.g., Steinberg 2017). Referring to a recent case involving the actress Gwyneth Paltrow's daughter, Apple, who went on social media to question her mother's decision to post a photo of her on Facebook, an academic/researcher was quoted as saying that:

> "It's not surprising for daughters like Apple to act that way" ... "When they get to their early teens, they have a massive change with hormones, a sense of self-awareness and wanting to form their own identity ... If their mothers are constantly posting, it's robbing those girls of the opportunity to work out how to express themselves".

Privacy violations such as the sharing of sensitive information about children's lives were linked to high risks of exposure to both online and offline crimes perpetrated by pedophiles. Indeed, as already noted, such exposure was another commonly cited risk of sharenting, attracting 61 references, followed by identity theft and fraud (30). With respect to the risks of exposure to predatory pedophiles, there were alarmist reports about rampant cyberstalking and the overall *consensus* was that the risks were extremely high, with dangerous predators constantly prowling the internet, searching for opportunities to digitally harvest images and harm affected children:

> We offer school name, school uniform, school street name, sometimes a jackpot picture of home, geolocations ... that could provide someone with a persuasive connection to your child either in the park or the shopping mall. Paedophiles hunt 30–40 kids at a time, and they hunt all the time.

The risk of predatory grooming has been discussed in the extant literature which draws attention to how predators use stolen information to gain the confidence of child victims (Bezáková, Madleňák, and Švec 2021).

As mentioned earlier, identity theft and fraud were also cited as risks:

> Doorstep pictures could even put your child at risk of fraud in the future, according to research by Barclays Bank, because they provide valuable insights that fraudsters can exploit [...] Posts that refer to the child's name will then give a fraudster enough information to try to take out a loan or credit card in their name once they are older, or to access their bank account.

Alongside identity theft and fraud, there were additional reports about cognate harms related to identity misuse. An example is digital adoption (where predators bid on images of children they can claim as their own), and digital kidnapping (predators passing photos off other people's children off as their own). Cyber hate and bullying were also mentioned, echoing themes from the literature (e.g., Bezáková, Madleňák, and Švec 2021).

An emerging *consensus* on the psychological risks of sharenting was also observed in the various reports about the impact of the practice:

> Many children recognize feeling embarrassed, violated, and angry when their parents post something about them without warning," according to [a cybersecurity expert] [...] "Parents who overshare photos of their children could be putting them at risk of long-term mental health issues, experts have warned.

Media reports generally viewed sharenting as a source of emotional harm and broader psychological distress to children, with references made to its capacity to cause annoyance, embarrassment, betrayal, humiliation, loss of self-esteem, and long-term mental health problems.

Disproportionate social reaction

Given the antecedents discussed so far, it is perhaps unsurprising that evidence of disproportionality (social reaction that far exceeds the supposed threat) (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 2009) was also visible in the various discourses around the world about sanctions regulations, and legal provisions to deter sharenters:

> The French National Gendarmerie has warned that parents could face jail or hefty fines if they post their children's photographs on Facebook.
>
> In countries like France and Austria, children can sue their own parents for putting their childhood on display without their permission.
>
> A Democratic state representative in Illinois [USA], [is attempting] to make the shaming of children on social networking sites an offence. Offending parents should face a penalty, he has argued . . .
>
> In China, the privacy right is prescribed in Article 2 of the Tort Law as a separate civil right. Anyone who infringes on another person's privacy rights is subject to legal liability, including a parent violating his/her children's rights.

These and other discourses about punitive sanctions appeared disproportionate, not least because the discourses were in themselves speculative. They focused primarily on the sharenters (mainly parents) and the perceived risks of their online practices, with very limited evidence of actual cases of victimization (see also, Lavorgna, Ugwudike, and Tartari 2023a). This is not to say that sharenting risks are non-existent. But studies and discourses on the topic appeared to ignore structural conditions including systemic vulnerabilities capable of fueling such risks. For example, although social media affordances encourage user engagement (Koumchatzky and Andryeyev 2017), studies show that platform companies currently lack effective preventative interventions for safeguarding children affected by sharenting (e.g., Lavorgna, Tartari, and Ugwudike 2023b). Yet media reports about sharenting risks focused primarily on the agency and actions of parents, with 66 references to them followed by celebrities or influencers (8 references). Social media platforms were only mentioned twice.

Volatility in media reporting: constructing unpredictability and persistence

Our analysis of the chronological order in which media reports about sharenting risks were published revealed that in some cases, the reports emerged in quick succession immediately after a notable event such as the publication of a new study. An example is the study in May 2018 by a major bank highlighting sharenting risks:

> Barclays bank predicts that by 2030 "sharenting" will lead to two thirds of online identity theft committed against young people, costing an estimated £676 million a year.

News articles in the UK (England and Scotland) and beyond (Latin America) repeated this story over several days. Another example is the repeated reports in the UK (England) and internationally (Australia and Ghana) in March 2019 in response to another event, this time involving the actress Gwyneth Paltrow's daughter, Apple, who expressed her dissatisfaction with a post her mother had created showing an image of both of them on a skiing holiday. We observed the sudden eruption of negative media attention in such cases, and the equally sudden subsidence as new topics of interest emerged. We also noticed that some of the media reports contained references to older research findings regarding sharenting risks. The sudden flare-up and diminution of media attention, and the linkages to previous studies about risks, can create the impression that the social problem in question presents an unpredictable but persistent or "continuous" danger (Schildkraut, Elsass, and Stafford 2015). This, along with the other attributes identified by Goode and Ben-Yehuda (2009) can fuel a moral panic.

Discussion

Various indicators of moral panics as identified by Goode and Ben-Yehuda (2009) were present in the media reports we analyzed. We observed an emerging *consensus* or collective agreement that sharenters are solely responsible for the risks and harms of the practice, and that sharenting poses a "real" threat to the safety of affected children. As Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994: 157) suggest, even if an emerging moral panic is not accepted or felt by everyone, a *consensus* is achieved when the threat is generally perceived to be "real, serious, and caused by the wrongdoing of group members and their behavior." Goode and Ben-Yehuda's (1994) framework further suggests that this sentiment can trigger public fear and reinforce the *hostility* directed at the subjects of the moral panic, in this case the sharenters.

It is argued that the efforts of moral entrepreneurs to establish a *consensus* in these circumstances often centers on the need for social control, to restore the moral and social order they believe has been threatened or destroyed by the actions of the "folk devils" (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994). The *consensus* they foment eventually legitimizes punitive social control measures in the form of "tougher or renewed rules, increased public hostility and condemnation, more laws, longer sentences, more police, more arrests, and more prison cells" (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 2009: 30). Meanwhile, by emphasizing the actions and motives of parents in particular, the media reports we analyzed overlooked less newsworthy but important structural dimensions of the practice, and in particular the nature of sharenting as part of a wide range of new and emerging digital cultures and the role of platform power, both of which we consider in the next sections.

Ignoring structural conditions: the influence of new digital cultures

It is important to juxtapose discourses about the risks of sharenting with an analysis of broader structural conditions regardless of whether or not they are newsworthy and capable of attracting public interest. Social incentives that encourage sharenting, for example, are important but did not receive as much attention as the putative agency of sharenters in willfully and negligently exposing children to risks. Motivational factors were mainly described using pejorative language that portrayed parents as indulging their self-seeking impulses or engaging in a digital culture that endangers children. But the advent and broad availability of social media technologies have given rise to new digital cultures that are transforming the dynamics of social interaction and offering users such as sharenters opportunities to combat social isolation (Brosch 2018), form useful networks, and access both information and support (Haslam, Tee, and Baker 2017), all of which can enhance their wellbeing and that of their children.

Media reports condemning sharenting and demonizing sharenters paid limited attention to these developments. Nevertheless, much social activity in the past decade has been migrating increasingly to digital spaces where new cultures of digitized communication, interaction, and networking are emerging. Sharenting specifically, forms part of a new culture of "digital parenting" (Autenrieth 2018) that is mediated by intricately networked platforms on which the practice, and other modes of parenting, are increasingly conducted (Mascheroni, Ponte, and Jorge 2018). Yet, media reports mainly described the digital culture in which sharenting is embedded in negative terms. The culture of "digital parenting" was also depicted as a harmful driver of sharenters' selfish and relentless quest for the self-gratifying benefits of content creation.

Ignoring structural conditions: the influence of platform power

The discussion so far, shows that the media reports also paid limited attention to the technical aspect of sharenting which is a sociotechnical practice that is driven by platform technologies operating via the intersections of user activities (the human dimension involving for instance, social networking) and algorithmic mediations (the technical dimension). The latter comprises

a constellation of data-driven computations for structuring information diffusion, flow, and spread, across social media sites whilst amplifying certain content over others (Ugwudike and Fleming 2021). But media reports did not give much consideration to this dimension which relates to the structural conditions in which powerful owners of digital communication technologies encourage sharenting via incentives such as algorithmic amplification for hypervisibility and popularity, and through monetization.

With professional content creators, the desire for monetized amplification encourages frequent sharenting which could also involve lucrative brand endorsements featuring their children without consent (Abidin 2017). In this scenario, algorithmic amplification drives constant content creation and other activities capable of pulling into the sites, users searching for visibility and influence (Barassi 2017), in the process producing valuable data for the companies.

The companies themselves are driven by a profit model that relies on the accumulation of user data for various business-related purposes including advertising (Kopf 2020). Disregarding these dynamics, several moral entrepreneurs (including politicians and so-called cyber experts) focused their concerns about sharenting, on parents. Nevertheless, a consideration of platform ethics and governance as part of the broader structural contexts in which sharenting occurs is vital when we examine the practice and its sociotechnical ramifications (see also Lavorgna, Tartari, and Ugwudike 2023b). In this respect, it is important to consider the role of platform companies in structuring both information production and visibility. On this, insights from the multidisciplinary literature on social media ethics and governance are instructive.

Bucher (2012), for example, describes the power of social media algorithms to structure visibility and invisibility via practices such as content curation using recommender and content moderation systems, as a manifestation of "algorithmic power" (see also Ugwudike and Fleming 2021). Berg (2014) similarly refers to social media operators as holders of "algorithmic metapower". These concepts draw attention to the structural contexts of sharenting and other social media practices. They highlight the power asymmetry between the companies and users, which must be considered in any discourse about risks including those related to the misuse of user data for various cyber harms. Reinforcing this, Dolata (2017) discounts any notion of algorithmic neutrality in social media platforms, and argues that "their technical protocols, interface designs, default settings, features and algorithms, structure and characterize the online activities of their users in a variety of ways".

Taken together, these insights suggest that social media companies preside over data sharing, circulation, and related practices. Therefore, the labeling of sharenters as the sole sources of the criminogenic risks posed by sharenting decontextualizes the practice and can be considered reductive. The role and efficacy of self-regulating social media operators in safeguarding users' data and privacy, and the lack of an adequate legal framework for child protection (see, Lavorgna, Tartari, and Ugwudike 2023b), are ethical issues that also deserve attention in any discussion about the risks of sharenting.

Content moderation laws can be introduced for child protection purposes although they may ignite fears of censorship and be considered threats to freedom of expression. Nevertheless, the United Nations (2019) acknowledges that such restrictions are justifiable where the aim is to prevent harm. Besides, platform companies do censor user content, using for example, the previously mentioned automated moderation techniques (Gorwa, Binns, and Katzenbach 2020). Indeed, insights from the multidisciplinary scholarship on AI ethics and the cognate literature show that algorithmic opacity or lack of transparency is a fundamental accountability issue affecting platform algorithms (Roberts 2018). It also affects other data-driven models deployed across the private and public sectors and transforming key aspects of social life including criminal justice decision making (Ugwudike 2020, 2022).

Conclusion

Our study has shown how various news media outlets construct sharenting practices using emotive discourses that reflect the attributes of moral panics production as defined by Goode and Ben-Yehuda (2009), with an emphasis on: concern, hostility, consensus, and disproportion. The findings also demonstrate that moral panics do not always require moral entrepreneurs who are powerful elites or other rule makers (Cohen 1972; Hall et al. 1978; Young 1971). Ordinary citizens can engineer moral panics to institute both moral regulation and social control (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994).

Reinforcing the core tenets of moral panics theory, our study demonstrates how the media and interest groups construct the social issue of sharenting using alarmist frames that blend their interests and concerns with that of the public, consolidating understandings of the issue around specific themes (sharenting risks) capable of igniting fear and hostility toward a target group conceptualized as the "folk devil" (parents involved in sharenting) (see also Ugwudike 2015). As the proponents of the theory have long suggested (Cohen 1972; Hall et al. 1978; Young 1971), in this scenario, the creation of a moral panic becomes a means of mobilizing public support and legitimacy for sometimes authoritarian mechanisms of moral regulation and social control. We saw examples of this in media reports where moral entrepreneurs expressed concerns and established the targets (the folk devils) at whom hostility was directed. We also observed signs or indicators of an emerging consensus about the risks of sharenting and calls for punitive interventions that appeared to be disproportionate to the presumed threat.

Our findings show that, again reflecting moral panics theory, media hysteria about a specific issue linked to a folk devil can sensitize the public to view existing social problems as key axis of the specific harms attributed to the folk devil, hardening public perception of the group and fueling support for punitive intervention. Sharenting was on several occasions depicted as the symptom of both a morally questionable digital culture and the related negative culture of digital parenting. Linking sharenting to bad parenting in this way can trigger fears that the practice is undermining good parenting which is often deemed an important source of social and moral control (Edwards and Ugwudike 2023). Further, by drawing parallels between the actions of sharenters and broader sociocultural issues, the reports reflect the tendency (noted in moral panics theory) of moral entrepreneurs to portray both the subject and object of a moral panic, respectively sharenting and sharenters, as threats to social order.

Our findings suggest that intersectional analysis incorporating not only the agency and actions of sharenters, but also the broader contexts of sharenting including the social incentives and structural conditions, is required to contextualize current knowledge of risks and develop a framework of effective remedies. Social incentives stem from the various affordances of digital communication technologies, from the opportunity to form networks, to avenues for accessing advice and support. Adequate consideration of these and other motivational factors can inform understanding and the creation of responsive risk-reduction measures.

Structural incentives originate from the profit model operated by social media companies. The model hinges on the immediacy and constancy of content creation for user engagement and it encourages sharenters and other users to create content interminably, often without adequate policies in place to protect children. The current tendency to ignore this structural factor and focus on sharenters can entrench the notion that they are solely responsible for exposing children to risks and can legitimize governance mechanisms that are targeted solely at them. Spotlighting the agency and actions of sharenters can obscure the broader structural conditions in which platform companies preside over the curation, flow, spread, and diffusion of user data, beyond the control of users including sharenters.

Biographical notes

Pamela Ugwudike is Associate Professor of Criminology at the University of Southampton. She is also a Fellow of the Alan Turing Institute and her research focuses on the ethics of Artificial Intelligence systems and strategies for remediating the harms associated with such technologies.

Anita Lavorgna is Associate Professor in the Department of Political and Social Sciences at the University of Bologna, and Visiting Fellow at the University of Southampton (where she was previously Associate Professor of Criminology). Anita has led several research projects pivoting around cybercrimes and digital social harms, and her work is mostly based on interdisciplinary approaches.

Morena Tartari is a postdoctoral Research Fellow at the University of Padova. Currently, PI of the project Re-Green, Morena was postdoctoral Research Fellow at the University of Southampton for the project ProTechThem, and Former Marie Sklodowska-Curie Research Fellow at the University of Antwerp.

Notes on contributors

Pamela Ugwudike is Professor of Criminology at the University of Southampton. She is also a Fellow of the Alan Turing Institute and her research focuses on the ethics of Artificial Intelligence systems and strategies for remediating the harms associated with such technologies.

Anita Lavorgna is Associate Professor in the Department of Political and Social Sciences at the University of Bologna, and Visiting Fellow at the University of Southampton (where she was previously Associate Professor of Criminology). Anita has led several research projects pivoting around cybercrimes and digital social harms, and her work is mostly based on interdisciplinary approaches.

Morena Tartari is a postdoctoral Research Fellow at the University of Padova. Currently, PI of the project Re-Green, Morena was postdoctoral Research Fellow at the University of Southampton for the project ProTechThem, and Former Marie Sklodowska-Curie Research Fellow at the University of Antwerp.

ORCID

Pamela Ugwudike http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1084-7796
Anita Lavorgna http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8484-1613
Morena Tartari http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2207-3473

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