

# Sharenting: Making Decisions about Other's Privacy on Social Networking Sites

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**Abstract.** Sharenting refers to the trend of oversharing photos of children on Social Networking Sites (SNS) by parents. At the same time, this trend is increasingly controversial as parents have to balance their right to share and children's privacy interest. Against this background we investigate parents' underlying decision process and the applied strategies to mitigate children's privacy risks when disclosing pictures of them on SNS. Based on a qualitative online survey among 220 mothers, we shed light on the antecedents of parental sharing, resulting in a comprehensive overview to guide future research and advise SNS providers. Results show that, among others, mothers reveal personal information about their children to participate in social interactions and to show their pride. On the flipside, they care about their children's privacy and the risk of their children being embarrassed or hurt. Beyond that, they apply several cost-mitigating strategies like face-covering and blurring of identifiable information.

**Keywords:** Social Networking Sites, Privacy, Sharenting, Photo Sharing, Privacy Risks for Others.

## 1 Introduction

Sharenting is ubiquitous in our digital society. It refers to the phenomenon that parents share pictures of their kids on Social Networking Sites (SNS). As taking photos increases when people have children, it is not a surprise that those get shared on SNS. A study of Nominet among 2,000 parents from the UK has shown that on average 200 pictures of a child are shared yearly [22]. In 2016, parents shared 300 photos of their kids online, with a share of 54% on Facebook [21]. In doing so, parents aim to stay connected [17], get confirmation of their parenthood [2], [32] and receive social support [20].

Despite these benefits for parents, the number of children complaining about their pictures being shared by their parents rises tremendously. Recently, a 13-year old boy sued his parents, because they had shared humiliating photos of him as a baby [3]. Beyond that, one out of ten children asks their parents to delete his/her pictures, whereas 13% felt embarrassed about something which has been shared by their parents based on a study of the Family Online Safety Institute [11]. It appears that while children (whose parents published photos of them on SNS) are getting older, they raise concerns of what and how much their parents disclose about them online. Subsequently, an

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overarching contradiction between parents profiting from information disclosure and children feeling invaded in their privacy emerges. Even though this contradiction received great attention in media and public, it has been neglected in Information Systems (IS) research.

As parents are the gatekeeper of personal information of their children, they are the ones to decide whether and how many pictures they contribute to SNS. Existing research in the field of psychology provides some valuable insights on specific determinants of parental sharing (a term used to describe the information disclosure of children by their parents throughout the paper) [16], [22], [32]. However, little is known about parent's underlying decision process and their strategies to diminish the risks for their children. Therefore, we lack a comprehensive overview of antecedents that influence the disclosure of child's pictures on SNS from a parent perspective. Against the background of this gap and the increased complaints of children, this study follows a qualitative research approach to answer the following questions:

RQ1: *What are the factors parents consider when disclosing personal information about their children on Social Networking Sites?*

RQ2: *What strategies do parents apply when disclosing personal information about their children on Social Networking Sites?*

To answer these questions, we relied on a qualitative approach (with an open-ended questionnaire) that allows an inductive perspective. More specifically, we conducted an online survey among 220 mothers. Thereby, we contribute to theory in three ways: (1) we offer a comprehensive overview of all influential factors for parental sharing, (2) we show that parents weigh up their own benefits and the costs for the child, and (3) we identify strategies parents apply to mitigate perceived risks of parental sharing. Beyond theoretical contributions, our study advises SNS providers on how to support parents to carefully share pictures of their children whereas mothers are informed that they sacrifice their children's privacy in return for their intrapersonal needs and gains.

Our paper commences with related work in the field of parental sharing while outlining its criticality in the digital age. Afterwards, we present our qualitative study along with a detailed description of the applied methodology. We then outline our results and discuss implications for research as well as SNS providers. Our paper closes with its limitations, future research suggestions and gives concluding remarks.

## **2 Theoretical Background**

“Facebook and other online social platforms offer a new and promising platform for mothers to enact and receive validation of good mothering, ...” [12, p. 1310]. Thereby, SNS provide a convenient environment to share pictures with families and friends living abroad and to a wide range of friends in parallel [12], [17]. Especially, new mothers are shown to share pictures of their baby on SNS until it turns two years old [10]. Typically, mothers are sharing cute and funny pictures, but refrain from sharing naked or other self-blaming content [14]. Several factors have been found to drive oversharing of new mothers. Psychologists observed that mothers are sharing either to validate their own motherhood or to give advice to others [28]. While they were

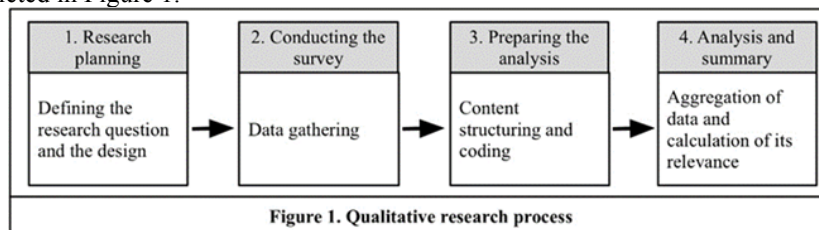
focusing on the drivers, other researchers investigated individual differences and the influence of oversharing on mother's well-being in general [9], [19]. Compared to sharing pictures of oneself, publishing pictures of kids sets itself off as it is a decision about another person's privacy. Petronino (2010) points out that privacy management in families is characterized by co-ownership of information and the corresponding interplay between different needs and concerns. This co-ownership can lead to potential harm to others by obtaining benefits against the risks of others [23].

From a legal standpoint, everybody has the right to be forgotten and thus parents are obliged to ask their children for permission before sharing a picture of them online. Babies and young children (0-14 years old) cannot make decisions because they do not have the necessary information to balance the advantages and disadvantages (do not know their pictures might never disappear completely from the internet, etc.). From the age of 14, the child must be asked and his/her decision must be considered by their parents [also see 27].<sup>1</sup>

This tension between parents' right to share and children's interest in privacy deserves attention which has been overlooked in current IS research so far. Moreover, although previous results provide knowledge for associated benefits, privacy concerns and their mental outcome, their results lack to provide a comprehensive list of influential factors which affect parent's disclosure decisions on SNS. Aiming to fill this gap and shed light on the tension between mother's right and children's need, we conducted a qualitative study which will be explained in detail in the next section. Typically, qualitative methods are used in IS research to develop new theoretical insights and uncover psychological mechanisms behind individual's decision-making [36].

### 3 Qualitative Study

In the following section we will describe our research design thoroughly. The data was collected and analyzed following the qualitative research approach by Mayring (2000) and established content analysis methods [18], [33]. As is usual with exploratory procedures, the research process does not apply to pre-formulated theoretical concepts in the form of hypotheses. This is in line with the suggestion by Parker et al. (2011) who pointed out that qualitative content analysis is especially suitable for the social media context and its fast moving nature [25]. A detailed overview of this process is depicted in Figure 1.



<sup>1</sup>This is regulated in the German BGB and more particularly in the UrhG.

As described in Figure 1, our qualitative research comprised four major steps; step three and four have been performed iteratively. In detail, the procedure has been applied as follows: Firstly, we defined the research questions, target group under investigation and the research design. We were seeking to understand influential factors of parental sharing on SNS. In order to investigate our research questions and to ensure that the research case is of theoretical relevance, an adequate sampling logic has to be defined [26]. We decided to focus on mothers as our target population since they are especially likely to share child photos on SNS [1], [31]. Moreover, they are frequent users of baby forums and related Facebook groups and therefore easily reachable and appeared to be willing to share their thoughts and experiences in an online survey. We decided to conduct a structured online survey with open-ended questions. It allowed us to gather unfiltered and unlimited answers. After ensuring the participants that all answers are anonymously treated and aggregated, they were directed to the main part of our survey.

As our topic under investigation were the drivers and inhibitors of disclosing child photos as perceived by mothers, the following questions were included: “Which potential draw backs do you see when sharing photos of your child on SNS?”, “What are the reasons for sharing photos of your child on SNS?”. To capture specific strategies mothers apply when sharing photos, we also asked: “What are the aspects you pay attention to when sharing photos of your child?”. To be able to control for further characteristics of the respondents, we also included questions regarding demographics, number of children and their corresponding age. In addition, we measured SNS usage frequency [6], use of privacy settings (private versus public profile) and the type of SNS used, while relying on established literature from the SNS research domain.

The second step constitutes the data gathering. The survey was distributed via online forums and Facebook groups dealing with baby-related discussions. In total, 221 participants living in Germany and Austria took part in our survey. Of those, one participant had to be removed because she was not a mother, so finally 220 answers build the basis for further analysis. Table 1 illustrates our final sample characteristics in detail.

**Table 1.** Sample characteristics

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Characteristic</i>
Mean Age	31.1
Mean number of children	1.05
Mean age of children	2

While step 1 and 2 deal with the preparation and the conduction of the analysis unit, in step 3 we prepared the analysis of our final dataset. Step 3 is also referred to content analysis as a systematic coding and categorization of initially unstructured text [6], [27]. We used a technique of first-level coding [19] and assigned codes to all statements. Thereby, abstract statements were made to paraphrase the gathered materials and ultimately lead us to subsumed categories. The first-level coding yielded 33 subcategories. In a subsequent phase, we clustered and summarized subcategories,

conducting a sort of pattern coding [19]. By doing so it emerged that all statements fall into three main categories, namely benefits, costs and cost-mitigating factors.

In so called feedback loops, the coding was screened several times and revised accordingly [16]. To ensure reliability of our data analysis, two researchers coded the materials independently and discussed their assignments afterwards. As the two coders eventually identified different subcategories, they were renamed, adjusted or even merged. Exceptional statements with no possible assignment have been compiled in a category called 'Others'. These were unclear statements like "*A beautiful moment that is important to you*" with regard to other benefits and unique statements like "*need to talk*" which was mentioned only once among our participants. The complete process was repeated iteratively throughout the data analysis step in order to reflect new assumptions and ideas [16]. To be plausible and consistent, we spell out explicit definitions and rules for each subcategory. The underlying subcategories were taken from former self-disclosure literature whenever possible. The orientation to existing drivers and inhibitors of content sharing on SNS enables the relation to past research while identifying differences. Finally, 17 determinants of photo sharing of parents emerged and theoretical saturation was reached [35]. Descriptions of the applied categorization are presented in Table 2, 3 and 4.

During the last step we analyzed our coded data [16]. Against this background, we calculated the relevance of each subcategory assuming that it is reflected by the number of statements. As a result, we retrieved tables with benefits, costs, cost-mitigating strategies, its deeper explanation and the accumulated relevance of each determinant. These tables serve as units for further analysis in the next section.

## 4 Results

After categorizing and quantifying the narrative materials of our qualitative study, the results have to be analyzed and interpreted against the background of common knowledge and theory. Thereby, the aim of this section is to respond to the research questions [26].

Most participants used Facebook (86%) or Instagram (13%) frequently and their profiles are predominantly set private (91%). The posting behavior showed that 60% of mothers in our sample have never shared a picture of their children and 26% share photos of their children less than once a month. This demonstrates that mothers in our sample mostly feel that the costs of sharing their kids' photos outweigh the benefits. 26% of the participants believe that they have no right to decide whether to share their children's photo. These comments were coded as 'Right of the Child' and are not part of any subcategory, because these mothers don't consider the benefits and costs to make any decision. This is reflected by statements like "*My child, if it is old enough, should decide for himself what gets shared online*" or "*It's the right of my child to decide about its ownership. Only my child can decide if and when photos should go online. Parents should not post photos to protect their child's personal rights*" complying with legal requirements in Germany delineated in section 2.

The results section is organized around the three identified determinates of photo sharing about ones' own children: perceived benefits, perceived costs for the children as well as cost-mitigating factors. Since most participants stated more than one determinant, the total number of counted benefits and costs is higher than the sample size. In order to be comprehensive and to narratively describe our results we present certain quotes from our dataset along with each subcategory [31].

#### 4.1 Benefits

As depicted in Table 2, our study reveals that five benefits that drive mothers to share photos of their children on SNS: social participation, pride, confirmation, envy of others and perceived convenience. Beyond that, 36 percent of the participants do not perceive any benefits with regard to 'sharenting' on SNS.

**Table 2.** Identified benefits along with their description and relevance

<i>Determinant</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Relevance (%)</i>
Social participation	Inform others, keep others up-to-date and document the child's development	18
Pride	To show their pride of their own child	11
Confirmation	The need to be liked, approved and accepted by others	5
Envy of others	To make others	3
Perceived convenience	Sharing information on SNS is easy and effective	3
None	Considering no factor	36
Other	Unclear or unique statements	4

First of all, social participation leads mothers to disclose photos of their children on SNS. Thereby, they are able to keep their families and friends up-to-date about their lives even though they don't see each other frequently in person. This corresponds to the statements "*I would like family and friends to participate in my life*". The driver of being able to inform others is also discussed in extant literature on self-disclosure on SNS. This is often referred to as relational benefits [10], [20]. In contrast to prior studies about posting behavior in SNS many mothers mentioned the emotional driver pride. That is not surprising, because pride is the predominant affect when feeling accomplished and successful [34]. A typical statement for the determinant pride was "*I am proud of my child and therefore I would like to show it to the whole world*". Some mothers even admit that the envy of others is also a driver, exemplified by "*It feels good to show my child to others and maybe some even get a little bit envious*". Corresponding to posting in general, confirmation is also a determinant in case of sharing children's photos. Statements like "*Who aims to get as many likes as possible, has good chances with baby and children photos*" imply that photos with one's child are used to get 'Likes' in return, but it is not clear if mothers want to get confirmation especially in the context of their mother role. Some describe SNSs as an effective

communication tool to share information quickly to a broader range of audience: “*In the case of an extensive network of friends and family, it is of course advantageous if one can show his children without immense effort.*”, which is subsumed in the category perceived convenience.

#### 4.2 Costs for the Child

Derived from our study, two perceived costs of parental sharing are identified: privacy risks and face risks for the children as outlined in Table 3. The relevance of 41% shows that mothers mostly care about privacy risks for their children. A typical comment for privacy risks for the children was “*The photo is quickly distributed and might fall into wrong hands*”. Contrary to privacy risks, mothers also care about the face risk of their children. “*There is a fundamental risk that the child will be ashamed of the picture later*” was a typical statement. The comments are constituted of two axes: the concern that the child might feel ashamed about the picture and the concern that others might see the picture as blameworthy and thus the child will feel embarrassed.

**Table 3.** Identified costs along with their description and relevance

<i>Determinant</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Relevance (%)</i>
Privacy risks for the child	The risk of privacy invasion for the child. Mothers are afraid to lose the control over private information about their child.	41
Face risks for the child	The fear of the child being embarrassed, being the victim of cyber-bullying or simply being negatively evaluated.	6
None	Considering no factor	4
Other	Unique statements	<1

Although two cost factors are predominant, one mother mentioned that she is concerned about “*the envy of others*” which impedes her from sharing. This unique comment was categorized as other costs. Additionally, it is important to note that only 4% of the participants do not consider any cost factor associated with the sharing of their children pictures.

#### 4.3 Cost-mitigating Factors

To respond to RQ2, we also analyzed the strategies mothers apply to reduce their perceived risks when sharing children photos. While mothers seek to obtain certain benefits, they would like to limit or even avoid the perceived costs for their children. Thereby, we identified the following strategies: identifiability, hiding of information, appropriateness, avoidance of oversharing and the age of the child as potential strategies. This is expressed in Table 4.

**Table 4.** Identified cost-mitigating strategies along with their description and relevance

<i>Determinant</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Relevance (%)</i>
Identifiability	To actively cover the child's face with emoticons or to take a picture without showing a face	40
Appropriateness	Harmless content of the picture	37
Avoidance of oversharing	Sharing only special and no daily moments to reduce the number of posts	5
Hiding of information	To hide information like name, location and age	2
Age of child	Pictures get shared as long as the child is within a certain age range	1

The most frequently mentioned strategy was identifiability. Mothers protect the children's personal information by covering the face in different ways: *"I share my children's photos only if the child is not recognizable. For example, from the back or anonymized by putting stickers on its face"*. Mothers also pay attention whether the content of the picture is appropriate. Mainly, they focus on the clothing. Thereby, they mitigate the face risk for the child; *"Should be beautiful, not naked, nothing that evokes feelings of shame for the child in the future"*. To hide information is another strategy of mothers to mitigate especially privacy risks for the children. A typical statement was *"Not recognizable where it was shot: not at her school or kindergarten. Nameless"*.

Mothers also intent to share only special moments like milestones of the development of their children. This strategy was called avoidance of oversharing: *"I'm not trying to post pictures permanently"*, *"I only share pictures of birthdays etc."*. Just a few mothers said that they only share children pictures within a certain age range as babies look similar and thus their privacy is not invaded: *"The child soon looks quite different"*.

## 5 Discussion

In the following, we relate our findings to extant research and discuss the implications for research and practice. The goal of our research was to unveil parents' decision-making process along with its antecedents when sharing photos of their children on SNS (RQ1). Moreover, we were seeking to identify strategies mothers are applying to reduce the perceived costs for their child when disclosing their photos on SNS (RQ2).

In total, 11 antecedents for parental sharing have been identified. 4% of our participants were unable to think of any costs whereas 36% were only stating concerns. Among the latter 41% are concerned of their children's privacy. In order to mitigate the perceived costs, mothers are following different strategies like appropriateness and identifiability.

By conducting a qualitative research study [16] we provide a deep understanding of the costs, benefits and cost-mitigating factors perceived by parents based on an open-ended survey study among 220 participants. Thereby, we contribute to IS research in



two ways: First, we expose that the disclosure decision for child photos is different from self-disclosure previously investigated in IS privacy research [12] as parents weigh their own benefits with the costs for others. Particularly, they focus on the perception of privacy risks for others instead of ones' own privacy risks. Parents are solely concerned about the privacy risks of their child, whereas self-disclosure decisions are usually affected by the intrapersonal trade-off between ones' own privacy risks and benefits [5]. Although, past research has shown that individuals are far less concerned about others' privacy when they feel that they pertain others' information [33], we found contradictory results. Apparently, privacy risks for others associated with the disclosure of photos might be dependent on the closeness and thus the relationship to the other person. As parents are obliged with the responsibility to care for their children, our results show that a great share (36%) of our participants can only associate costs with parental sharing.

Narratively showing that parents apply cost-mitigating strategies to reduce the perceived privacy risks of their child constitutes our second theoretical contribution. By doing so, we shed light on the guidelines parents apply when they reveal personal information about their family members. These guidelines are consistent with Communication Privacy Management theory (CPM) [27]. Apart from the risk-benefit-trade-off, the main element of CPM is that people "... construct rules to determine if and when they will disclose personal information ..." [12 p. 337]. Transferred to our results, parents coordinate privacy boundaries by applying certain specification on pictures which they are willing to share on SNS. While parents highlight that they are reluctant to share insensitive information, they avoid to share sensitive information that make their child identifiable. For instance, they tend not to share pictures that are offensive or blameworthy, which obviously applies to naked pictures. But beyond certain rules for non-sharable pictures, parents edit or abstract the information that gets shared. They do so by masking or hiding the face of their kid and by withholding their location data. Applying these privacy boundaries, parents protect their children from privacy invasion while obtaining desired benefits of photo sharing. Although our identified strategies sound reasonable, research found evidence that there is an intention-behavior gap underlying those mitigating factors [15] with parents oversharing photos of children while stating the opposite.

Finally, our qualitative study showed that 3% of mothers share photos of their children because they seek to be envied by others. This sounds surprisingly at first sight, but can be explained by Foster's self-esteem theory [7]. Foster coined this factor competitive axis. It refers to individuals' enjoyment of outperforming others. Individuals present their accomplishments or their superiority over others to be seen as valuable. This competitive axis has been neglected in past research, whereas it is shown that envy is the strongest feeling when using SNS passively [13]. Apart from envy, our results revealed that pride is the major affective factor which drives mothers to disclose photos of their child. Taken together, mothers seem to show their pride while enjoying the pleasure of being envied by others.

Beyond theoretical contributions, we also provide practical implications for policy makers, parents and SNS providers. Policy makers should work on clear regulations to guide parents on when to disclose personal information about their children. Parents

should be made aware that they are obviously sharing information about their child driven by their own benefits like pride by sacrificing risks for their children.

SNS providers can implement features to easily edit photos of children by offering functionalities to conveniently cover faces. Moreover, SNS providers should give parents a check-list at hand, which needs to be considered before sharing pictures. This check-list might include picture requirements like appropriateness, identifiability etc. to avoid parents from sharing potential embarrassing pictures of their children while still profiting from the benefits of parental sharing.

## **6 Limitations, future research and conclusion**

As every research project, our paper is subject to limitations. Firstly, we focused exclusively on mothers living in Germany or Austria in our research sample. As females in general and mothers in particular are the more frequent users of SNS, they are assumed to be oftentimes confronted with the decision to share photos of their children. By doing so, we excluded fathers and did not consider cultural differences. To be able to transfer our knowledge to parents in general and fathers in particular, our results should be validated with a broader sample.

As extant research did not provide adequate insights on the disclosure formation process of parents, we relied on a qualitative approach. This constitutes our second limitation. Unlike quantitative methods, qualitative research is biased in the direction of the foreknowledge and the subjective interpretation of the content [36]. We were trying to mitigate this disadvantage by having two researchers coding the dataset in parallel. The predominant critic of qualitative research is its issue of generalizability [4]. Given that sharenting is still an emerging phenomenon in research, with concerns related to others' privacy as a new determinant and existing theories lack in terms of offering a comprehensive set of factors that individuals might consider when making the decision of parental sharing, an exploratory qualitative study offered a rich mechanism to elicit these factors. Future research can base their assumptions on these factors to test the model using a quantitative study while enhancing generalizability of our results.

To conclude, sharenting is discussed controversially as parents have to balance their benefits and their imminent right to share with their children's interest in privacy. Our results show that mothers undergo a complex decision process between benefits for themselves and risks for their children. In total, 11 antecedents have been identified. In order to reduce children's privacy costs, mothers are applying creative strategies like hiding faces with emoticons. Additionally, two 'deadly' sins (own pride and others' envy) have been found to drive parental sharing. SNS providers can build on our results to better guide mothers in their decision process. For research, we provide a comprehensive overview of antecedents for sharenting highlighting the multitude of factors affecting the decision to share information about children.

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