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## SHARENTING DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC: YAY OR NAY

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### Abstract:

In this 21st century, social media has taken over as a dominant form of social interaction and the recent COVID-19 quarantine or 'stay at home' during Movement Control Order (MCO) has left many even more dependent on social media to stay in touch with family, friends and the outside world. Many parents are unaware of the risks associated with excessive sharing of detailed information about their children online and that oversharing information about children on social media poses immediate and long-term risks to the children's physical safety, online privacy, and emotional well-being. Thus, it is critical for parents to understand these risks and realize that their children's right to privacy and safety supersedes the benefits of sharenting. By using a qualitative analysis on library-based sources, the objective of this study is to determine whether the COVID-19 response measures of MCO altered the practice of sharenting by parents. This study will be focusing on the type or content of sharing by parents of the images, videos, stories, and daily activities of their children throughout the quarantine period and the possible future implications to the children. Further, this study intends to understand the effect of 'pranks' played on the children to record their reaction which is trending in social media during the said quarantine period. The study concludes that since it is hard to disapprove of sharenting in today's advancement of technology and the existence of various social media platforms, parents should always keep in mind the adverse effects of sharenting. Instead, the parents are best to value the quarantine time at home with the children with only minimal and suitable sharing to the social media for the safety and privacy of the children.

### Keywords:

Sharenting, Pandemic, Children, Advantages, Disadvantages

## Introduction

The MCO measures implemented by the Federal Government in response to the spread of COVID-19 pandemic is unwittingly shifting our daily interactions and communication into the digital sphere (Saekadi, Dahlberg, Fangstrom, & Warner, 2020). Besides, the explosion of social media like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube provides a platform for parents to instantly share information or providing updates of their children's progress with geographically dispersed family (Ouvrein & Verswijvel, 2019) and friends besides engaging with online followers, which has become a social norm especially during the quarantine or 'stay at home' phase where parents tends to sharent more than usual (Saekadi et al., 2020). Among the contributions to such practice possibly because today's parents grew up sharing their own lives on social media and thus becoming less sensitive of the full impact and potential consequences of sharing their children's information online (Fox & Hoy, 2019). Further, when families are locked down together at home due to MCO, parents will be spending more time with their children thus providing great opportunity to take and share images of their children online besides actively participating or responding to the encouragement from the government, local mass media and organizations for families to share images and updates of their daily activities at home or making a short appreciation video for the front liners.

Children exposed on social media by their parents are in need of greater protection (Nottingham, 2019) as parents sometime fail to critically reflect their sharenting practice which often lead to parental oversharing, jeopardizing the children's privacy (Lipu & Siibak, 2019) and safety. Lack of experience or expertise of the parents to protect their children's privacy put the children at risks associated with online information (Haley, 2020). Lipu and Siibak (2019) found that children often feel embarrassed, frustrated and annoyed by the sharenting practice of their parents and believe that parents should not share any negative and revealing information about them online. It was further argued that some children are not against the positive content shared by their parents but would not agree if the content shared is embarrassing and gives negative visuals of them (Lipu & Siibak, 2019). Although most social media provides an option to the users whether to set their account private and limit those who can see them or to set it in public, it was found that many parents do not utilize this option (Choi & Lewallen, 2017).

This study was carried out by using a qualitative analysis on library-based sources, aiming at highlighting the merits and demerits of sharenting in the midst of COVID-19 pandemic. The discussion is focused on the act of excessive sharing or overexposing by parents about their children's lives. The discussion begins with defining the term sharenting, the act which constitutes followed by deliberating on its positive and negative impacts. At the end of the paper, a series of recommendations are collected in response to the negative implication of sharenting to children.

## Definition of Sharenting

The term sharenting is derived from the words 'share' and 'parenting' which was defined by Stacey Steinberg (2017) in 'Sharenting: Children's Privacy in the Age of Social Media' as a term used to describe the ways many parents share details about their children's lives online. The phenomena of sharing too much (Choi & Lewallen, 2017) or over share of the children's lives on social media by sharing text photos, photographs, and videos that convey personal information about their children (Haley, 2020) frequently or excessively, would be referred to as 'oversharenting' (Nottingham, 2019). Thus, this new phenomenon of sharenting or the

overuse of social media by parents sharing content of their children online is actually creating the children's digital representation (Choi & Lewallen, 2017). Ouvrein and Verswijvel (2019) describes the practice of sharenting to start with the parents giving their contacts an online peek into their children's life through sharing pictures and followed by videos and status updates. There is no specific age for children that can be subjected to sharenting (Ouvrein & Verswijvel, 2019). Emma Nottingham in 'Dad! Cut that Part Out' used the term 'generation tagged' to refer to children who have been exposed on social media by their parents (Nottingham, 2019). Consequently, many children have a plethora of photos, videos and updates about their daily lives on social media before they can even walk (Brosch, 2016).

### Research Methods

This study was conducted in the midst of COVID-19 pandemic and has adopted the method of qualitative analysis on library-based sources. Teti, Schatz and Lienberg (2020) provides that qualitative methods is the best method for capturing social responses to this pandemic with its open-ended nature and focus which is more on "how" rather than "what". It is vital to understand the epidemics for example this COVID-19, the people involved in them and its effective solutions and strategies (Teti et al., 2020). Thus, this method is said to be able to give insight into the current situation as it evolves and teaches on how to effectively manage them (Teti et al., 2020). Further, this method is adopted as it does not involve statistical techniques and mechanics such as in survey research which is facing challenges as a result of this pandemic where the Movement Control Order (MCO) are restricting traditional face-to-face study (Lobe, Morgan & Hoffman, 2020).

As for data collection, this study adopted the method of library-based research which primarily involves the perusal and analysis of data from secondary sources. Throughout this study, the author referred to various online books, periodical articles, reports, newspapers, published and unpublished conference papers, official statistics and other relevant documents to this topic. The online databases such as Lexis Malaysia, Lexis Advance, JStore: Arts & Sciences, Taylor and Francis Online, CLJ Law and Elsevier-Scopus are frequently visited to retrieve online publications from legal scholars on parental, effects of oversharing on social media and other related issues. Besides, the author also referred to eJournals such as Cambridge Journal Online, SAGE Journals and World Scientific Online Journal to obtain more detailed and related data.

### Sharenting: Yay or Nay

Sharing about children is great overall, but there is a flip side particularly when parents excessively share about their children's lives with the public. Different forms of sharenting includes posting a picture of the children online, sending children's picture to family and friends, taking a picture without the children's permission and writing on social media about the children (Saekadi et al., 2020). Further, some parents create profiles of children within various kinds of social media (Kopecky, Szotkowski, Aznar-Diaz & Romero-Rodriguez, 2020) while other parents engage in vlogging or having a YouTube Channel where daily activities of their family including the children was shared and displayed to the public (Nottingham, 2019). Other types or form of sharenting was further listed by Kopecky et al. (2020) to also include creation of online diaries of the children where their life is monitored day by day, child abuse for commercial tool and child abuse for creating extreme content and hateful content. A study carried out on nine Malaysian mothers living in UK to identify the characteristics and type of stories of their children written and shared online (Jomhari, Gonzalez, & Kurniawan, 2009). From the study conducted, it was found that seven of them used photo-sharing platforms such

as Flickr and Instagram, while another two used text-based blogs. Further, two of the parents also uploaded videos of their children as their YouTube content and it was found at the end of the study that ninety-four percent of the photos or content shared focusing on their children (Jomhari et al., 2009).

The undeniable advantages of sharenting in today's technology-integrated environment is that it provides positive motivations to the parents, allows them to instantly gain support (Ouvrein & Verswijvel, 2019) from a large audience in social media and sometimes could provide relief from parenting stress or depression (Fox & Hoy, 2019) especially for 'new parents' in their early period of parenthood which might cause social isolation (Brosch, 2016). Social media is thus a platform for parents to share the joys and challenges of parenthood (Lipu & Siibak, 2019) where parents seek help online as they navigate any uncertainties as a 'good parents' (Fox & Hoy, 2019), seek and share parenting advice, experience validation for their parenting decisions (Haley, 2020) besides communicating or keeping in touch with relatives and friends (Nottingham, 2019). Another positive significance of sharenting is that parents are engaged in creative media production which can enhance parents' digital literacy skills (Choi & Lewallen, 2017) during the stay at home period where many new skills are discovered by most individuals throughout the time.

On the other hand, there are significant harms of sharenting practice from both developmental and legal perspective when parents reveal too much information about their children, or sharing inappropriate or embarrassing content of the children on social media (Haley, 2020), leaving scores of digital footprints of the children online (Brosch, 2016). A survey conducted in early March 2020 by Department of Public Health and Caring Sciences, Uppsala on sixty-eight children found that the children responds negatively towards sharenting where based on the survey, the most acceptable form of sharenting is sending photos to relative while posting photos of the children on social media without their permission is the least acceptable. (Saekadi et al., 2020) Further, it was found from the survey that children prefer their parents to ask for their permission or consent before taking and sharing images of them and would actually listen to their answer (Saekadi et al., 2020).

When it comes to social media where parents are making decisions to represent their children, it can have more impacts on developing the children's identity at a very young age (Choi & Lewallen, 2017). Choi and Lewallen (2017) stated that there is lack of general knowledge on whether the content shared on social media upholds an expansion of children's representation and how it revolves around the construction of children's identities, possibly raising the issue of stereotype threat which occurs when people perform worse at a task due to the pressure of a negative stereotype of their group's performance. Example situation explained by Hively & ElAlayli (2014) is when a girl performed worse athletically when a threat inducing comment was made about girls and athletics. Thus, it is vital for parents to understand that by sharing the photos or videos of their children engaged in gender typical activities or wearing gender typical clothing, they actually assigning the children to a gender in-group affiliation (Choi & Lewallen, 2017) and that children would look up to their parents to validate their activities. This would impair the development and independent thinking of the child to have their own social interaction when they see the associations set by their parents since they were much younger.

On top of that, a child is put at risk of digital kidnapping and identity fraud when their parents share identifying information such as children's home or school, reveal physical look of the children, their likes and dislikes and the date of birth of the children (Nottingham, 2019). Haley (2020) defines digital kidnapping as the practice of reposting someone's images on other social media by someone else. The information shared by the parents is collected by fraudsters and could be used to open accounts when the child reaches majority age. Besides, the information of the children also could be collected by data-brokers who collect and sell information to companies for marketing and professional purposes (Nottingham, 2019). Information containing children's current or frequent location which can be identified by tagging photos with locations can put the children at risk for kidnappings and violent crimes.

Parents also tend to exploit their own children for money and fame by featuring the children as tools for their content to attract media attention without considering the psychological effect on the children. Emma Nottingham (2019) provides that the inclusion of children in social media such as by posting selfies or sharing adorable videos of the child have become a common practice by micro-celebrities parents to boost their popularity or for their selfish interest. Marwick (2017) defines micro celebrity as a strategy for self-presentation where the individual presents themselves as public personas by creating effective ties with their social media followers which is viewed as fans. Besides, the trend of having family vlogging and YouTube channels featuring the children living their daily lives actually put the child at risk of being pressured and manipulated by their parents (Talukdar, 2020) as the children may have to endure long hours of filming daily (Nottingham, 2019) and forced to behave in a particular manner for the sake of social media content (Talukdar, 2020) which is bad for the psychological wellbeing of the children. Parents who actively share content for their family vlogging and YouTube channels get paid for filming their daily activities which mostly feature their children in it (Talukdar, 2020). A study conducted by Pew Research Centre on the data collected using YouTube Data API finds that videos featuring children under the age of 13 regardless of whether the video was aimed exclusively at children or not was found to receive nearly three times more viewers on average and tend to be longer in duration compared to other types of video that does not featuring a child (Kessel, Toor, & Smith, 2019). Further, continuous exposure of the children to cameras would have adverse effects on the mental health and growth of the children that makes them vulnerable to mental health issues like depression, identity crisis, low self-esteem and would grow up according to other people's opinion (Talukdar, 2020). Thus, parental oversharing can interfere the child's development besides putting the child at risk of bullying by peers and adults either online or offline.

During the stay at home period, we came across many forms of pranks played on the children that went viral online. Parents should realize that sharing embarrassing and humiliating photos and video of the children could emotionally harm them (Nottingham, 2019). This emotional effect on the child might not be immediately visible as the child is too young to understand effect and consequence. Nisha Talukdar (2020) had listed several YouTube channel and family vlogging which went viral for the pranks pulled off on their children such as channel DaddyOFive which actively uploading pranks pulled on their two younger children whose started to shows symptoms like emotionally hurt and traumatized after the prank. The channel was finally taken down from YouTube for ironically making money out of harassing and abusing their children publically. Although there are always two sides of the same coin, some sharenting through family vlogging and YouTube channels also has helped a few children to successfully form their own identities and be famous through their parents' vlogs. Thus, parents



should keep in mind the safety and privacy of their children and that the videos they put on the internet has the possibility of being used in vulgar and sexual sites such as pedophile websites (Talukdar, 2020).

The practice of sharenting also can be considered to infringe a child's right to privacy which has been a growing concern even prior to COVID-19 outbreak. Pineda and Jiminez (2020) provides that the protection of the privacy of children is one of the debates that require special attention in this digital era owing to the fact that the overexposure of personal information of children on the internet or online risks the child's privacy. Now, with the COVID-19 pandemic preventive measures to control its spread such as MCO, social distancing, work from home and school closure has impacted parenting activities as parents now spent more time at home and involved fully in daily caregiving of their children (Lee, Ward, Chang & Downing, 2021). Some parents are aware that their children resented sharenting but still continued the practice and justifying the action by referring to their right to share about the children on social media and considering that the child is still too young to decide (Lipu & Siibak, 2019). In the long term, this practice of sharenting by parents who shared embarrassing information that disclose the child's behavior, revealing intrusive information of the children which can negatively impact their ability to get enrolled in college or for job acceptance (Brosch, 2016) through their participatory surveillance which is accessible to dataveillance firms that collect information to be sold to advertisers, employment agencies and colleges (Haley, 2020). Further, privacy is an integral component to form trust and respect in a parent-child relationship (Haley, 2020). Ouvrein and Verswijvel (2019) provides that people will protect other's privacy better according to the strength of the relationship they had with that person thus making parents one of the best protectors of their children's privacy. However, the ability to maintain this trusting relationship might be impossible when the parents have not enough understanding of privacy settings (Ouvrein & Verswijvel, 2019) and constantly overshare photos and information about the children on social media ignoring the potential risk awaits.

Despite its negativity, there is no legal provision provided on the issue specifically in Malaysia. By looking at the trend whereby the act of sharenting is not uncommon nowadays, a legal framework is needed to curb the harmful effects of it (Md Salleh & Mohd Noor, 2019).

### **Recommendation and Conclusion**

Considering the benefits and risks associated with the practice of sharenting, it is hard to disapprove it in this technology-connected society. Thus, parents are expected to always be alert and keep updated on the adverse effects of sharenting and to refrain themselves from oversharenting which could jeopardize their children's safety. Parents who acknowledge the privacy concern that exists should prevent themselves from continuing posting information about their children on social media thus preventing themselves from being a privacy paradox parents (Haley, 2020).

Kopecky *et al.* (2020) provides three recommendation for safe and controlled sharenting by parents which includes first; when sharing any information about the children either a photo, videos or the children's health condition, parents are required to think about whether the material shared can be misused not only in the present day but also in the future as once the material or information is shared, parents will lose control over its spread. Next, parents must also consider whether the material or information that is about to share can affect the children negatively in the future as no parents would want their children to become a target of ridicule

or become bully-victim when their future classmates discovered their embarrassing photos shared by the parents previously. The third recommendation is that parents should resist the urge to upload or share too personal photographs of the children such as the photo of the child on a potty, smudged by food, pooped or peed. Parents must keep in mind that what seems to be cute, adorable and funny to them might not be the same to others as there can be various thoughts, be it positive or negative on a single photo uploaded.

Thus, it is important for parents, society as well as the children to be better educated on the impact of sharenting especially on the types of information of the children that is regarded as suitable to be shared online (Nottingham, 2019) either by establishing a boundaries (Saekadi et al., 2020) or to obtain consent of the child (Kopecky et al., 2020) before uploading any content featuring him or her. On the other hand, it is important to balance the competing interest where parents would still have the ability to share and disclose information about their children online while the children would have the option to request that search engines removes the links containing content that he or she disproves when his or her name is searched (Haley, 2020) which can only be achieved with strict and efficient data protection regulation.

To conclude, the current COVID-19 pandemic where everyone is advised to stay at home and the new norm of work from home indicates that parents will continue to use social media as a form of 'media accounting' (Nottingham, 2019) more often. There exists several views on the practice of sharenting in current situation; parents as the gatekeepers of the personal information of the children should be able to decide and control what and how much information can safely be shared and disclosed to the public while balancing their personal gain and right to share with the children's safety and right to privacy (Lipu & Siibak, 2019). Further, some claim that parents should fully protect their child's privacy and are expected not to share any personal detail and information of the children until he or she can choose to disclose it or not. (Lipu & Siibak, 2019). However, this would limit the right of parents to enjoy the advancement of technology in this increasingly technology-connected society. Thus, it is suggested that this issue of sharenting to be further analyzed and an effective framework should be implemented in controlling this practice to ensure that the society especially parents and children in this context could live adequately with the technology available these days.

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