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The Undisclosed Dangers of Parental Sharing on Social Media: A Content Analysis of Sharenting Images on Instagram

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The Undisclosed Dangers of Parental Sharing on Social Media:

A Content Analysis of Sharenting Images on Instagram

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A thesis presented to

the faculty of the Department of Media and Communication

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts in Brand and Media Strategy

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by

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May 2020

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Keywords: Sharenting, Instagram, Child Online Identity, Communication Privacy Management

Theory, Uses and Gratifications Theory, Child Pornography, Parental Rights, Content Analysis

ABSTRACT

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A Content Analysis of Sharenting Images on Instagram

by

Christian Bare

Sharenting is a new term used to define the action of parents posting about their children online. Social media provides parents with an easy to use outlet for image distribution to all family and friends that simultaneously archives the images into a digital baby book. While convenient, once publicly posted anyone can gain access to the images of the children. Instagram is a favorable social media channel for sharenting. A popular hashtag on Instagram, #letthembelittle, contains 8 million posts dedicated to child imagery. A set of 300 randomly selected images under the hashtag were coded. Images tended to contain personal information such as the child's name, age, and location. Communication Privacy Management and Uses and Gratifications theories provided the theoretical frameworks for this study. The results suggested a possibly dangerous pattern of parental oversharing that could negatively impact the child and the child's safety.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my wife, my cat, and anyone and everyone who has helped me
along the way…but most importantly, my cat.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge East Tennessee State University, more specifically the Department of Media and Communication, for their unrelenting desire to educate. They have introduced me to a career path that I would not have previously considered, and for that I am grateful.

To my committee members, Dr. Anthony Mitchell and Dr. Mildred Perreault, thank you for your encouraging insights and assistance not only throughout this study, but throughout my career at ETSU.

And most importantly, I would like to thank Dr. Susan Waters for her exceptional guidance and knowledge. Her kind heart and unwavering ability to inspire have positively impacted me and every student who has been lucky enough to have her.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1. Introduction

Sharenting is a new term used to describe the act of parents sharing content related to their children on social media (Brosch, 2016). The new term is accompanied by a small body of literature that elaborates on the act of sharenting and the motivations for participating in the trend. Social media have been popular outlets for communication since the late 1990s when they first started being created (Samur, 2018). Today, the majority of the population is active on at least one social media platform. There are four different identifiable types of social media that allow for a variety of needs to be fulfilled for each user, creating a popular attraction from the public (Zhu & Chen, 2015). With over 1 billion active monthly users, Instagram is a top performing social media platform that provides its users with a channel for sharing image-based content with their followers ("Our Story," 2019). The popularity of Instagram in addition to the picture-focused content has created a common platform for sharenting.

Hashtags allow social media users to share and enjoy similar content in a central location. The list of hashtag topics is endless and there are many hashtags devoted to sharing images of children. With over 8 million posts, #letthembelittle is a successful hashtag that houses images focused on the lives of children. This hashtag is a direct representation of the sharenting trend on Instagram. Each image is posted by the parent and contains their child, often as the focal point of the image. Once shared on Instagram with #letthembelittle, anyone with access to the social media platform now has access to the images. Previous research on sharenting has defined the term and elaborated on what it entails, but there is a lack of research focusing on the content of the images. This thesis provides an overview of the images of children being posted to Instagram by their parents under #letthembelittle and identifies common characteristics in the posts.

As social media grows in popularity, so does the research on the dangers of social media. Cyberbullying is a frequently mentioned topic when analyzing the negative impact of social media on individuals through their personal social media accounts. However, there is a lack of research that has been conducted to understand how what a parent posts on social media might impact a child. Parental sharing on social media provides online users with access to content about the parent's child. Social media then stores this content unless removed by the user, keeping the content available to anyone and everyone for years to come. This study analyzes the content of sharenting Instagram posts and identifies the oversharing habits of parents on the platform. Potentially harmful dangers to the children within the posts were also identified and elaborated on.

Chapter 2. Literature Review

The History of Social Media

The first social media was a website in 1997 called SixDegrees.com that gave users the ability to connect with others through their profiles (Samur, 2018). In 2002, Friendster launched and gained such quick popularity that their servers suffered. With Friendster struggling to manage the influx of users, Myspace became the go-to rebound site for millions (Samur, 2018). Mark Zuckerberg's Facebook soon followed, gaining one million users within the same year of launching (Samur, 2018). Over the succeeding years, social media and photo sharing sites began to launch everywhere. YouTube, Twitter, and LinkedIn are a few of the sites that emerged before 2006 (Samur, 2018).

Zhu and Chen (2015) divided social media into four types: Relationship, Self-Media, Collaboration, and Creative Outlets. They based this on the two types of posts, customized messages and broadcast messages, and the two types of connections, profile-based and content-based (Zhu & Chen, 2015). Relationship social media includes profile-based connections with customized messages, such as Facebook or LinkedIn (Zhu & Chen, 2015). Self-media is also profile-based but contains broadcast messages rather than customized. Twitter and Weibo are two self-media social media. Like self-media, creative outlets, such as YouTube and Pinterest, are also considered to share broadcast messages but with connections that are content-based (Zhu & Chen, 2015). Lastly, collaboration social media combine customized messages with content-based connections to create social media such as Reddit and Quora (Zhu & Chen, 2015).

In the same article by Zhu and Chen (2015), they categorized the needs of both posters and followers into the four types of social media to explain how each form of social media satisfies the given need. In relationship social media, a poster's need for relatedness and self-

esteem are met and a follower's need for relatedness is also reached (Zhu & Chen, 2015). With self-media social media, the poster receives the popularity-influence and money luxury that they seek, and the follower finds self-esteem and relatedness (Zhu & Chen, 2015). Creative outlet social media provide posters with self-actualization and competence, and followers with pleasure-stimulation (Zhu & Chen, 2015). In the collaboration category of social media, posters satisfy their need for competence and self-actualization and followers find autonomy (Zhu & Chen, 2015).

Negative Effects of Social Media

Children are highly involved in media and social media today, and in return they are exposed to the consequences of using such platforms. The Council on Communications and Media (2013) addresses the actions that should be taken by parents to keep their children safe from cyber harm. Through media, children are exposed to harmful messaging that negatively influences them and leads to potential health problems (Council on Communications and Media, 2013). Media ground rules and parental monitoring of content can reduce the negative effects of the child's media consumption.

Studies show there is a correlation between the number of social media accounts used by teens and problems with anxiety, depression, and impulsivity (Barry, Sidoti, Briggs, Reiter, & Lindsey, 2017). There is also a positive association between the increase in frequency of checking social media accounts and levels of anxiety, depression, and impulsivity as reported by the parents of the teens being studied. The fear of missing out, also known as FOMO, is an influencer of social media that results in a positive correlation of the number of social media accounts and reported FOMO (Barry et al., 2017). In turn, checking social media is also reported by teenagers as being positively correlated with FOMO.

Some, but not all of the negative effects occurring through social media are cyberbullying, internet addiction, and sexting (McBride, 2011). Cyberbullying can cause lifelong mental health issues while sexting can lead to depression, suspension from school, and legal issues (McBride, 2011). When images from sexts become shared with others, these consequences are more prevalent and pornography charges are possible. Cyberbullying is known to be associated with negative impacts on self-esteem, relationships, and aggression levels (Hamm et al., 2015). Cyberbullying can occur through insulting messages, rumor spreading, or sharing embarrassing or hurtful pictures of the individual online, and most of the time is a result of an issue in a relationship (Hamm et al., 2015). Cyberbullies use these means for payback or entertainment to hurt the person they are targeting.

Some of the driving factors behind cyberbullying are feeling anonymous and a lack of threat to physical harm (Davison & Stein, 2014). Anonymity allows cyberbullies to feel as if no consequences will happen to them, so they act in whatever manner they please. A lack of physical harm also contributes to the urge to cyberbully by eliminating a potential physical altercation and any concerns about physical fitness. The online nature of cyberbullying also eliminates distance parameters and opens up the pool of victims to everyone who uses social media (Davison & Stein, 2014).

There is a privacy paradox occurring between what teenagers share online and what they are comfortable with their parents knowing (Barnes, 2006). Teenagers often express concern or anger after discovering their parent has read their diary, yet they will post private information on social media. The line between private and public sharing of information is blurred on social media and teens don't realize the private nature of the content they are sharing and the consequences that can occur (Barnes, 2006).

Some of the content being shared by teenagers and pre-teens is motivated by the image they are trying to portray. These groups of children admit to sharing pictures and content online with the intent to get likes, even if the images are inappropriate for their age (Mascheroni, Vincent, & Jimenez, 2015). The children report they are aware of the risks associated with the content they are sharing including risks associated with sexual offenders. The risks are far outweighed by the need to receive likes from followers and remain interesting (Mascheroni et al., 2015). Sharing content of this nature can lead to sexual harassment from strangers on social media. "Fifteen percent of all of the youth reported being the target of unwanted sexual solicitation in the previous year" (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2008, p.354). In both cases of harassment and unwanted sexual solicitation, females are more likely to be the recipients (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2008).

Exposure to inappropriate messaging is also possible. Children are exposed to alcohol marketing content on social media (Winpenny, Marteau, & Nolte, 2013). Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter are some of the platforms that house advertisements and pages encouraging users to purchase and consume alcohol. Out of the three mentioned platforms, Facebook is the only social media that regulates content by age and does not show alcohol related content to users who are under 21 years old (Winpenny et al., 2013). Even then, certain pages can easily be accessed by lying about your date of birth (Moreno & Whitehill, 2014). Based on Social Learning Theory, children who view their peers consuming or sharing alcohol related content can be influenced by their alcohol consumption decisions (Moreno & Whitehill, 2014). As adolescents are learning about cultural norms, this creates an opening for imitation and experimentation with alcohol based on the experiences of peers displayed online.

Instagram as a Social Media Platform

Instagram launched in October of 2010, making it one of the newer social media platforms, by Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger and gained 25,000 users on the first day ("Our Story," 2019). The first post created was by Krieger and was posted to the site in July of 2010 before the official launch (Samur, 2018). The original idea was for an app that allowed users to check-in and share their whereabouts, but after recognizing the similarity to other apps it was decided that the app would be solely image-based communication (Eudaimonia, 2017). The founders decided on the name Instagram because of the ability of users to send a form of instant telegram (Eudaimonia, 2017). Today, Instagram has over 1 billion active monthly users ("Our Story," 2019).

The hashtag was created in 2007 and first adopted by Twitter as a way to organize tweets (Samur, 2018). Instagram noticed in 2011 that their users were in need of a way to communicate through clustered posts and brought on the hashtag as a feature to solve the problem (Popper, 2017). The Explore tab was created the next year and refined in 2014 to make a personalized experience for each user, displaying popular posts and also content tailored to their likes and interests (Popper, 2017).

The age group with the largest percentage of Instagram users is the 13 to 17-year-old range with 72% of their population using the app (Chen, 2020). The 18 to 29-year-old age group is close behind with 67%, while only 8% of 65-year-olds or older use Instagram (Chen, 2020). Instagram continues to grow in popularity and gain followers daily. Currently, 116 million Instagram users are from the United States, making it the country with the most users of the app (Chen, 2020).

Related Laws Pertaining to Children

   Parental rights. As a parent with custody of a child, rights and responsibilities are assumed from the moment the child is born. Until the child reaches adulthood at 18-years-old, the parents are legally responsible for making any and all decisions that affect the well-being of the child (Otterstrom, n.d.). Children are not mentally and physically fully developed, and therefore do not have the same rights as an adult ("What Are," n.d.). In addition to decision-making for the child, parents are also responsible for meeting the basic needs that every child is entitled to from birth.

   Since parents do have the right to make decisions for their children, there is not currently a law in place that prevents parents from sharing pictures or videos of the children on social media without consent. The parental immunity doctrine ensures that children and parents in the United States cannot sue each other for tort claims in an effort to maintain "family tranquility" (US Legal, Inc., n.d.). French privacy law is much stricter and states that anyone who violates another person's privacy by distributing images of them without their consent can face time in prison and be fined (Chazan, 2016). This applies to parents sharing images of their children without their permission.

   Child pornography. The United States Federal law defines child pornography as "any visual depiction of sexually explicit conduct involving a minor" ("Child Pornography," 2017). The list of possible visual depictions includes photographs, videos, generated images that appear to be of a minor, and any created or edited images that depict actual minors ("Citizen's Guide," 2017). It is important to note that sexually explicit conduct does not require the minor to actually be depicted in a sexual act. Simply a naked picture of a child can be considered illegal given the circumstances ("Citizen's Guide," 2017). Federal law states that "the production, distribution,

reception, and possession of an image of child pornography" is prohibited and convicted offenders will "face severe statutory penalties" ("Child Pornography," 2017). The United States Department of Justice discusses on their website that the Internet has caused child pornography rates to increase with the ability of offenders to use social media, file-sharing sites, apps, and other forms of technology for distribution purposes ("Child Pornography," 2017).

Sharenting on Social Media

The term "sharenting" is new to the social media world and refers to the actions of a parent in reference to sharing content about their child on a social media platform (Brosch, 2016). Social media is a place where we share our lives with friends, strangers, employees, and acquaintances. Every major event of our life is posted on Facebook or Instagram with an image and an accompanying caption. It only makes sense that the birth, birthdays, and other important milestones of a child's life would be included on our social media accounts. Built in cameras in cell phones have made photographs the easiest way to share content online (Brosch, 2016). This means that parents are willingly sharing pictures of their children with the internet.

A decade ago, there was no social media to cause worry about the effects of its use. Today, social media is a part of everyday life for most people in the world. The controversy of sharenting first developed with the discovery of the negative impacts social media is having on children. The Council on Communications and Media (2013) evaluated the effect social media has on children and determined that media expose children to harmful messages that negatively influence the children and can harm their health. Similar concerns were expressed with a focus on cyberbullying in a study conducted by Hamm et al. (2015). They determined that cyberbullying through social media was linked to negative impacts on self-esteem, relationships,

and aggression levels. Cyberbullying can be achieved through a variety of ways including the spreading of rumors and sharing embarrassing pictures (Hamm et al., 2015).

Studies on the cyberbullying habits of adults have also been conducted. Lowry, Zhang, Wang, and Siponen (2016) determined that the leading cause of cyberbullying between adults was the ability to remain anonymous. Social media allows users to express their unfiltered opinions publicly with the confidence that the recipient will not discover their identity. The feeling of security is created, leading to an expression of feelings that would not necessarily have been shared otherwise. Findings related to the cyberbullying of both children and adults provides a new debate centered around the topic of children being subjected to online bullying before they can even walk.

Bloggers are a group of parents who are struggling with the dilemma of sharenting more than average parents due to their heavily online lives that tend to showcase their children (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017). Some bloggers blur their children's faces and use different names to keep their child's identity safe. Blogging is reported as being an activity completed for the parent's children by providing them with income to take care of the child or to create an online photo album containing images of the child (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017). As a baby, it is often understood and accepted that parents are going to share content about their child. It is now being said that the right of the child to consent to the content should be considered once they are old enough to be aware (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017).

Once the debate spread outside of the blogging community, more interest grew around the topic. The key players in the sharenting debate are the parents who share pictures of their children and the critics who address the potential harms associated with the act. On both sides of the argument, the key players share a common value of the well-being of the child.

17

Child Online Identity

Now that more people are aware of the controversy, conversations are forming about the right of a child to be able to decide what content is shared about them on social media and other publicly viewed websites like blogs (Steinberg, 2017). Even with these conversations, there is still much debate between parents and critics.

Many parents feel the need to begin documenting the life of their child before they are even born. Social media gender reveals, baby shower pictures, and sonogram images are all examples of how a child's online presence can begin before birth. Social media provides an easy system of delivery for parents to quickly share information and announcements about their child with their friends and family (Otero, 2017). Some parents even rely on social media to be an acting baby book that stores all images during the first years of the child (Brosch, 2016). Parents do not realize the harm that can be done by sharing content of their children online and also feel that they have the right to share content pertaining to their own children, especially since it has become such a widely accepted practice on social media (Lupton & Williamson, 2017). Ethically, the parents believe that they are doing their duty to share and store as many memories as possible on one common platform. They are not considering the ethics of what the child would want, or what negative uses someone might have in mind for the content.

By the age of 2 years old, 92% of children already have an online presence, sometimes even before they are born (Otero, 2017). Even if parents have the right to share content about their own children, the children are still entitled to their privacy and also their identity. Sharenting is causing parents to prematurely form the online identity of their children instead of allowing their child to make the decisions about their identity on their own (Otero, 2017). As

children grow up, they will attempt to fit into the identity their parents have already created for them and not explore the possibilities of their identity.

While some parents are unaware of the dangers of sharing content about their children on social media, other parents are considering the outcomes each time they post. Ammari, Kumar, Lampe, and Schoenebeck (2015) examined the content sharing habits of parents on social media. There is a negotiation between parents when it comes to what they post and do not post. Ammari et al. found that most parents were concerned about what types of content they shared on social media and individually discussed the appropriateness of pictures. While they did share concerns about who might see the photos, the parents also shared that with good pictures they feel as if they must share them to Facebook, so their friends and family can see. The problem with this logic is that it is not only friends and family who can see these pictures. These parents are ethically concerned with the well-being of their child, but they are valuing the opinions of their friends and family over the safety of the child.

Critics of child content sharing have made their concerns known. The biggest concerns revolve around the parents unknowingly sharing too much information with their followers and that information ending up in the wrong hands. Digital kidnapping is one of the results of this where an internet user will steal the image of a child and claim the child is their own (Brosch, 2016). There is no way of determining where the image of the child will end up or what story will be attached to it. The internet can make use of the photo however they deem fit. Another potential issue expressed by critics is that parents will share embarrassing photographs of the child that will be used against them later in life (Brosch, 2016). Once an image is on the internet, it stays there forever. As the child grows older, do they still want everyone to know about that picture of them? When they are interviewing for a job does the child want their employer to see

an embarrassing picture of them from when they were little? We are also in the unique position where what we post on the internet now can be accessed by children and their classmates years later. If a bully were to see the embarrassing photo of the child, they could easily use it to cyberbully the child with. The first research question explores the types of embarrassing images that parents are posting on Instagram in two parts.

RQ1a: How often are parents posting embarrassing pictures of their children on Instagram?

RQ1b: What types of embarrassing images are most commonly posted?

Brosch (2016) expressed another concern that had not been considered before. If children are growing up with their own privacy being limited, they will grow to have a different idea of privacy. If the current generation is already changing the privacy scale for children, then their children's children will likely have even less privacy (Brosch, 2016). The critics are focused ethically on any possibility of the content getting in the wrong hands and being used with any kind of malicious intent.

Theoretical Framework

CPM Theory. Communication Privacy Management Theory is outlined in Sandra Petronio's (2002) *Boundaries of Privacy: Dialectics of Disclosure* where she defines Communication Privacy Management as the following:

A map that presumes private disclosures are dialectical, that people make choices about revealing or concealing based on criteria and conditions they perceive as salient, and that individuals fundamentally believe they have a right to own and regulate access to their private information. (p. 2)

To summarize this definition, Communication Privacy Management is about understanding why and how people decide to share or not share information with others. Before Petronio (2004) had fully defined Communication Privacy Management, she referred to the theory as Communication Boundary Management, based off of her initial developments in 1991. Prior to this research, Petronio completed her undergraduate degree in interdisciplinary social science at The State University of New York at Stony Brook and received both her master's degree and Ph.D. from The University of Michigan (IUPUI, n.d.).

To further explain the nature of Communication Privacy Management, Petronio (2002) breaks the theory down into five suppositions. The first supposition is that the nature of the information being concealed or revealed is private. The second supposition revolves around the metaphor of privacy boundaries that illustrate the division between what remains private information and what is shared, becoming public information. Control and ownership is the third supposition that means the information of the individual is owned by them and they have control over who that information is shared with. The fourth supposition is about the rule-based management system that controls the process of deciding to reveal or conceal. This system is what makes the process not a matter of individual choice. The final supposition is management dialectics which cause the individual to weigh the risks and rewards of deciding to conceal or reveal the information to someone else (Petronio, 2002). These five suppositions provide an accurate and concise overview of Communication Privacy Management.

Communication Privacy Management is easily applied to media theory in a variety of ways. Metzger (2007) conducted a study aimed at understanding the anxiety revolving around privacy concerns when disclosing information in an e-commerce situation. Metzger determined that individuals who are online shopping put up boundaries when trying to decide if they should

share private information and how much of that information they should share, by using a set of

rules (2007). Other media related research studies have been conducted that utilize

Communication Privacy Management theory. Petronio (2013) outlined some of the latest uses

related to social media. In her discussion she shared that privacy management for online

bloggers, Facebook usage, publicness in social media, online dating, and parental behavior on

social media have all been able to further their research with the help of Communication Privacy

Management (Petronio, 2013). The study that centered around Facebook usage examined the

motivations behind millennials' decision to disclose on Facebook and the consequence they

believe follow this disclosure (Waters & Ackerman, 2011). The nature of Communication

Privacy Management Theory that leads to disclosure of private information on social media

generated the second research question.

RQ2: How often are children's names included in the posted images where you can see

their face?

Outside of media theory, Communication Privacy Management is also being used in

many other areas of research. One of the areas involves family communication. Petronio (2013)

shares how there have been different studies that have examined family privacy topics including

stepfamily members feeling caught, concealment, topic avoidance, and parental invasion of

privacy. Relationship issues is another area where Communication Privacy Management is being

used to better understand conflict and topic avoidance in a variety of relationships including

workplace and student-faculty (Petronio, 2013). The final category that Petronio mentions is

health communication. Health privacy issues have grown over the years and involve topics from

doctors' disclosure of medical related mistakes, how patient care is impacted by privacy issues,

disclosure questions, and the online nature of healthcare and information (Petronio, 2013). Based

off of these applications and the previous applications mentioned related to Media Theory, it is obvious that Communication Privacy Management will continue to be applied to many research studies in the future. It has already provided countless studies with a helpful framework and it will continue to do so as time goes on.

As previously mentioned, Communication Privacy Management has been applied, and will continue to be applied to many different research studies. This is one of the strengths of the theory. The theory has become a heuristic that allows researchers to easily and practically apply it to their research studies (Petronio, 2004). In addition to this, another strength of the theory involves its evolution from previous studies. Before Petronio developed Communication Privacy Management, the studies were focused on the individual, or at most two people. Petronio's research includes communication situations from a large combination of people involved (Petronio, 2004). This drastically widened the value of the theory and its application.

Uses and Gratifications. Research into the gratifications resulting from media use began as early as the 1940s with Lazarsfeld and Stanton, but it was Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch (1973) who solidified the theory by building off of the previous research. Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch (1973) recognized that the previous studies had holes that did not allow for a theoretical statement to be crafted. Previous researchers acknowledged the benefits of media but believed the audience was passive, while Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch (1973) found that the audience was actually actively seeking out different forms of media in an effort to gain the desired gratifications that would fulfill their current needs.

In recent years, research has specifically been conducted on the uses and gratifications of social media. One study found ten different uses and gratifications reported by social media users: Social interaction, information seeking, pass time, entertainment, relaxation, expression of

opinions, communicatory utility, convenience utility, information sharing, and surveillance/knowledge about others (Whiting & Williams, 2013). In their study, Whiting and Williams (2013) found that 88% of social media users studied reported *social interaction* as their main use for social media. Several of the gratifications mentioned by respondents pertaining to social interaction on social media were "have more contact with people via social media than face to face" and "social media gives them a social life" (Whiting & Williams, 2013, p. 366). The next most popular theme of social media use in this study was *information seeking* with 80%. Respondents reported that they used social media for access to a variety of information including sales, events, friends' birthdays, business information, how-to instructions, and even math (Whiting & Williams, 2013). *Information sharing* was reported by 40% of respondents as a personal use of social media. Posting status updates and sharing pictures were two common ways respondents stated they share information and some even mentioned that sharing information on social media is a way to "market themselves" (Whiting & Williams, 2013, p. 367). In this study, 32% of respondents mentioned *surveillance/knowledge about others* as a use of social media. Individuals stated that social media allows them to "know what others are doing and that they try to keep up with others" (Whiting & Williams, 2013, p.367). Common verbiage used by respondents regarding this theme were "nosey," "spy on people," "creep on people," "spy on their kids," and "look at stuff about others without them knowing about it" (Whiting & Williams, 2013, p.367).

The topic of parental disclosure related to children on social media has also been studied related to uses and gratifications. A study by Kumar and Schoenebeck (2015) uncovered three themes of uses and gratifications by mothers who share images of their children online. The ability to archive childhood photos, identifying as a mother, and receiving validation of

motherhood were the three themes discovered (Kumar & Schoenebeck, 2015). Social media is an easy and convenient way to store images of all types. One mother referred to her Facebook profile as a "modern day baby book" that she could reference exact dates and milestones of her child (Kumar & Schoenebeck, 2015, p.1306). The third research question explores strategies that parents are using to continue to create their digital baby books while still protecting the identity of their child.

RQ3: What anti-sharenting strategies are parents using on Instagram?

In terms of identifying as a mother, respondents shared that social media allowed them to portray themselves and their children however they wanted, giving them the ability to pick and choose what their followers see. By displaying a large quantity of images of the baby or with the baby, the mothers feel that they are announcing their identity as "mother" by creating a focus around the new relationship (Kumar & Schoenebeck, 2015). Lastly, social media allows users to feel validated as mothers. The mothers interviewed stated that their baby photos posted to social media receive far more likes and comments than other content they share on Facebook (Kumar & Schoenebeck, 2015). One mother stated, "You know that you're doing a good job, but it feels better when somebody else confirms that," pertaining to the social media engagement she received on her pictures of her baby (Kumar & Schoenebeck, 2015, p. 1307). This comment, and the other sentiments of interviewed mothers, showcases a prevalent association between popular social media posts and good parenting. While the interviewed mothers stated that they do not post specifically for the validation, they did say that the high quantity of likes and comments on baby-related posts is a driving force behind their decision to continue to post, outweighing many of their concerns with oversharing on social media (Kumar & Schoenebeck, 2015). The fourth

and final research question was created to discover how often parents go beyond posting images of their children.

RQ4: How often are parents creating online identities for their children and how are the children being portrayed?

The process utilized to answer the research questions in this study is explained in the following method section.

Chapter 3. Method

Content Analysis

A content analysis is defined as "the systematic, objective, quantitative analysis of message characteristics" (Neuendorf, 2002). To examine the presence of sharenting and child online identity, this study conducted a content analysis of Instagram posts. The main themes analyzed in the study through content analysis were the types of child-related images being posted, the amount of personal information being shared with the public, and the response from the followers.

Instagram Post Selection

Public posts on Instagram were selected from a popular parenting hashtag. The hashtag was chosen based on the common usage by parents and mommy bloggers. With over 8 million posts, #letthembelittle, provided a variety of pictures posted by parents containing images of children. Within the hashtag, "Recent" was selected to avoid only seeing the top posts that have been shared. This also allowed the researcher to have a sample that was more than just images posted by popular Instagrammers with a large following. Even with "Recent" selected, images are not displayed in order of how they are posted, providing a second level of randomizing to our selection process. When "selecting" the images, every sixth post in the hashtag was chosen. To give the content analysis validity, 300 images from the hashtag were analyzed. In an effort to avoid the interference of irrelevant data, posts that were not of children posted by parents, such as giveaway entries and product ads, were skipped.

Variables

   Type of photo/video shared. To classify the type of photo or video being shared, the images were classified as being one of five types (i.e., 1. Outing, 2. Daily Life, 3. Professional, 4. Milestone, and 5. Embarrassing). These categories were based on those used in a previous study conducted by Anna Brosch in Poland regarding sharenting on Facebook (Brosch, 2016). If the image was considered "embarrassing," it was then further analyzed and labeled as one of four categories (i.e., 1. Nude, 2. Semi-Nude, 3. Funny, and 4. Messy) which were also based on the previously mentioned study (Brosch, 2016).

1. An **Outing** was defined as any image taken at a destination not typically traveled to daily. Some examples of outings are images taken at the beach or the zoo.

2. **Daily Life** images were defined as scenes from routine activities in the child's life such as eating and playing at home.

3. **Professional** images are pictures taken by a professional photographer, who is often tagged within the post to designate the difference from images taken by a parent.

4. **Milestone** images mark an important step in the child's life and include birthdays, first steps, first words, and more.

5. **Embarrassing** images include any instances that the child might not appreciate being posted online.

  1. A **Nude** embarrassing image displays the child naked, most often the child is taking a bath.

  2. **Semi-Nude** embarrassing images involve the child being partially clothed or covered, but their top or bottom half is exposed.

28

3. **Funny** embarrassing pictures often involve the child making strange faces or posing in an unusual way that the child might not necessarily want shared on social media.

4. **Messy** images are those that show the child in a dirty situation. These images often take place while the child is eating or outside playing.

Personal information shared. In order to gain a better understanding of the amount of personal information regarding the child shared on social media, the following variables were coded using 1 (yes) and 0 (no): Name of Child, Date of Birth, Age Included, and Location Identifier.

- The **Name of the Child** was marked present if it was included within the image, caption, hashtags, or within the biography of the posting Instagram account.

- Similarly to the name of the child, the **Date of Birth** was also regarded as present within the actual image, caption, hashtags, and biography of poster. Even if the date of birth was not explicitly listed, posts were considered to contain the date of birth of the child when sharing birthday related images and videos. An example of this would be a post that says, "Happy Birthday to my son who turns 2 today."

- **Age** was marked present when displayed in the previously mentioned ways while also including birthday posts or biographies that include the date of birth, allowing for the age to be calculated.

- **Location Identifiers** were marked present on posts that state the location in their caption or comments, include a location tag on the post, or include an easily recognizable landmark or sign in the image or video.

Image characteristics. The attributes of the images themselves were analyzed using the following variables: Probable Age Range, Sex, Perceived Ethnicity, Child's Face Showing, Emotion Level, Instagram Account for the Child, Number of Children in the Picture, and Anti-Sharenting Type.

- **Probable Age Range** was identified based on the reviewer's discretion and was broken down into **Infant** (1), **Toddler** (2), and **Young Child** (3) for simplicity. Infants were considered as children ages 0 to 12 months, toddlers were 1 year to 3 years old, and young children were older than 3 years of age. Designated ages of children were based on the classifications used in a study by Choi and Lewallen (2017) that used infants, toddlers, and preschoolers and up to define the child's age.

- Merriam-Webster defines **Sex** as "either of the two major forms of individuals that occur in many species and that are distinguished respectively as female or male especially on the basis of their reproductive organs and structures" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Based on this definition, children in the images were designated as either Male (1) or Female (2).

- **Race/Ethnicity** was based on the categories used in a similar study involving Instagram. Webb et al. (2017) used White/European American (1), Black/African American (2), Hispanic/Latino (3), Asian/South Asian American (4), or Other (5) as their categories for defining race and ethnicity.

- While analyzing the images on Instagram, whether or not the **Child's Face was Showing** in the picture was also coded as yes (1) or no (0). If their face was visible, we then coded for the **Emotion Level** of the child as either positive (1) or other (2). These simplified categories were used by Choi and Lewallen (2017) in their previous study due to the wide array of possible emotions. "Other" includes both negative and neutral expressions.

- An **Instagram Account for the Child** was coded as present (1) or not present (0) if the child's account was tagged in the post or if the post came from a child's Instagram account ran by a parent.

- The **Number of Children** in the image were also counted and noted for each picture.

If the face of the child was not showing, it was considered an example of anti-sharenting and five types of anti-sharenting (i.e., 1. Partial, 2. From Behind, 3. Far Away, 4. Disguised/Hidden, and 5. Digitally Edited) were coded for using categories based on those created by Autenrieth (2018).

1. **Partial** images of children occur when the parent only shows a small amount of the child's body such as part of the face or just the child's hands.

2. **From Behind** indicates that the image is of the back of the child and you are unable to see their face.

3. Photographing the child **Far Away** allows for the child to be facing the camera, but the distance makes the child's figures indistinguishable.

4. **Disguising or Hiding** the child in a picture involves a hat, costume, mask, or other covering to be placed over part of the face, making the child difficult to identify.

5. **Digitally Edited** images as a means of anti-sharenting involve altering the image with a digital element to mask the identity of the child. This can include placing an emoji over the face, blurring the face, or another means of digital editing.

Follower response. The reactions from those following the Instagram user were measured by coding for the **Likes/Views**, **Total Comments**, **Negative Comments**, **Positive Comments**, and **Neutral Comments**. For each photo posted, the number of likes it received was recorded while the number of views were recorded for videos. The total number of comments on

the posts were also listed and then broken down into the number of negative, positive, and neutral comments based on the verbiage and emojis used.

Intercoder Reliability

This study consisted of 300 images that were coded for by an initial coder. A second coder was then responsible for coding 30% of the images a second time. Intercoder reliability was then calculated using Cohen's Kappa indicating a suitable level greater than .7 (Cohen, 1960, 1968).

Chapter 4. Results

This study examines the post behaviors of parents on Instagram and the amount of private information they share with strangers about their children. This results section shares the findings from the content analysis of 300 pictures of children posted to Instagram by parents under #letthembelittle. Using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software, frequency tables were constructed to describe the qualitative variables. The same SPSS software was also used to create a two-way contingency table analysis using crosstabs.

First, research question one was explored in two parts.

RQ1a: How often are parents posting embarrassing pictures of their children on Instagram?

Each of the 300 images posted under #letthembelittle was coded as one of five types (i.e., Outing, Daily Life, Professional, Milestone, or Embarrassing). Using the Frequencies feature on SPSS, Table 1 was constructed to describe the types of photos and videos posted by parents of their children. It was discovered that 15% of the pictures were embarrassing images of their children ($n = 45$). Please see Table 1 below.
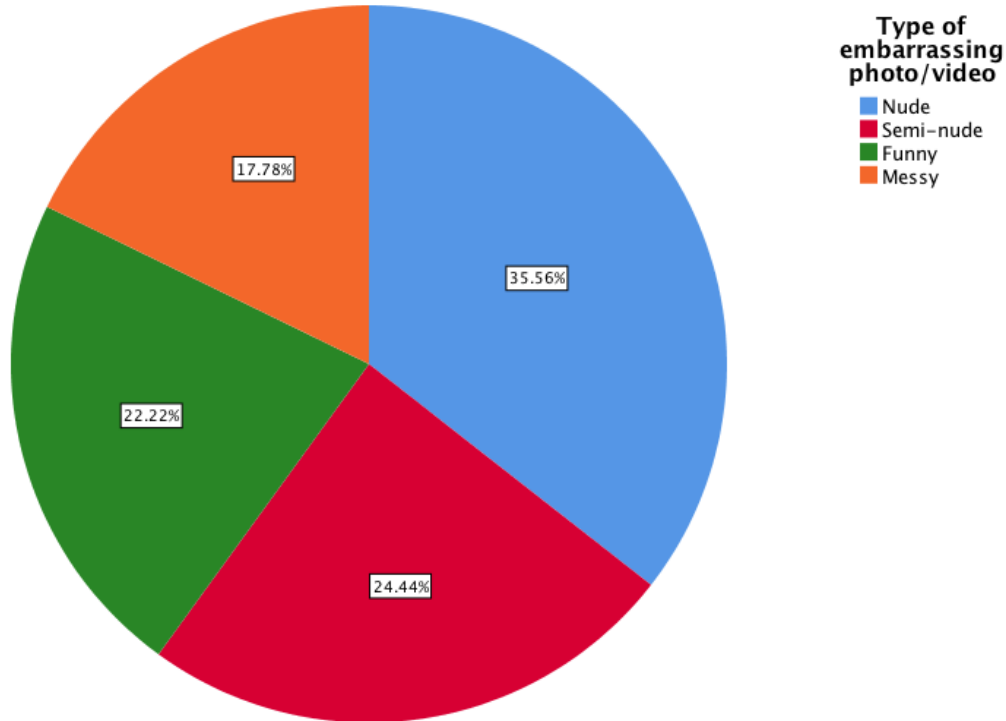
Table 1

Frequencies and Percentages of Type of Photo/Video

Type of photo/video	Frequency	Percentage
Outing	52	17.3
Daily Life	164	54.7
Professional	13	4.3
Milestone	26	8.7
Embarrassing	45	15.0

RQ1b: What types of embarrassing images are most commonly posted?

The embarrassing images were then broken down into four types (i.e., Nude, Semi-Nude, Funny, or Messy). The Graphs function on SPSS was then used to build a pie chart to depict the distribution of embarrassing images posted to Instagram. Figure 1 displays the types of embarrassing photos/videos. Based on the pie chart and percentages, 35.56% of the embarrassing photos or videos included the child nude ($n = 16$). Semi-nude images accounted for 24.44% of the embarrassing photos ($n = 11$), funny images made up 22.22% of the embarrassing posts ($n = 10$), and messy images were 17.78% of the total embarrassing photos ($n = 8$). This distribution is displayed in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. Type of Embarrassing Photo/Video

Research question two was then discussed.

RQ2: How often are children's names included in the posted images where you can see their face?

A two-way contingency table analysis was conducted to evaluate whether the images with the child's face showing were more likely to also include the child's name in the post. The two variables, Child's Face Showing and Name of Child Included were found to be significantly related, Pearson $X^2(1, N = 300) = 3.79$, $p = .05$, Cramer's V = .11. Table 2 shows the Chi-Square Tests crosstabulation results and Table 3 shows the Symmetric Measures that led to these findings.

Table 2

Chi-Square Tests- Child's Face Showing, Name of

Child Included Crosstabulation

	Value	Df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	3.785	1	.052
Likelihood Ratio	3.539	1	.060
Linear-by-Linear Association	3.772	1	.052
N of Valid Cases	300		

Table 3

Symmetric Measures- Child's Face Showing,

Name of Child Included Crosstabulation

	Value	Approx. Sig.
Phi	.112	.052
Cramer's V	.112	.052
N of Valid Cases	300	

Next, the third research question was posited.

RQ3: What anti-sharenting strategies are parents using on Instagram?

In this study of 300 Instagram posts, it was found that 10.7% of posts included anti-sharenting, meaning that the child's face was not showing in the picture ($n = 32$). The most popular method for anti-sharenting found through this study was taking a picture of the child from behind ($n = 14$). Partial images of the child that only show non-descript parts of the body was also a common tactic ($n = 10$). Children whose faces were disguised or hidden by objects were also posted to Instagram ($n = 6$), while parents also posted images of their children from far away to obscure their features ($n = 2$). Table 4 provides the frequencies and percentages of the anti-sharenting types found during the study.

Table 4

Frequencies and Percentages of Anti Sharenting Type

Type of anti-sharenting	Frequency	Percentage
Partial	10	3.3
From Behind	14	4.7
Far Away	2	.7
Disguised/Hidden	6	2.0
N/A	268	89.3

Lastly, the fourth research question was explained.

RQ4: How often are parents creating online identities for their children and how are the children being portrayed?

All of the images in this study are examples of parents creating online identities for their children. Some parents took this a step further by actually creating and running accounts in the child's name. Table 5 shows that 17.3% of the images in this study involved a child with an Instagram account that was created by their parents ($n = 52$).

Table 5

Frequencies and Percentages of Instagram Account for the Child

Instagram account for child	Frequency	Percentage
no	248	82.7
yes	52	17.3

By analyzing the portrayed emotions of the children in the images, this study found that 33.3% of the images shared appeared to show the child in a state of emotion other than positive ($n = 100$). The children expressed positive emotions 56.3% of the time ($n = 169$). The emotion level findings are displayed in Table 6 below.

Table 6

Frequencies and Percentages of Emotion Level

Emotion level	Frequency	Percentage
Positive	169	56.3
Negative/Other	100	33.3
N/A	31	10.3

Chapter 5. Discussion

Discussion of Findings

The results addressing the research questions reveal the current trend in sharenting on Instagram and the findings are discussed in this section. Previously published articles have expressed concerns and potential dangers revolving around sharenting (Brosch, 2016). Cyberbullying is an online danger that is already known to the public, but additional concerns are coming to the surface that have not been considered previously. Publicly posted photographs getting into the wrong hands, digital kidnapping, and photos being used against the child in the future are all potentially problematic situations that are new concerns (Brosch, 2016). Popular hashtags and trends on social media, such as #letthembelittle, encourage the sharing of related images involving children. Seemingly harmless, these images are public and create an easy target for misusers. The hashtag itself implies that children should be allowed to experience a carefree childhood while they can. Given the nature of the meaning behind the hashtag, embarrassing images were posted that reflect the common themes of childhood such as nudity. The results have found several characteristics of sharenting on Instagram that will now be discussed.

Embarrassing images. As shown in Table 1, out of the sample of 300 images within #letthembelittle, 45 were considered embarrassing in nature. These embarrassing images are now widely available through the internet and can go beyond the eyes of the parent's followers. Additionally, most of the embarrassing images were classified as "nude" or "semi-nude," as viewed in Figure 1. Embarrassing images on social media are targets for cyberbullying and more recently the new concern is that they could be used against the child in the future due to the ability of social media to archive posted images (Brosch, 2016). Revealing images of the children are likely embarrassing to the child in the future, but also pose the current risk of misuse

by internet users. Child pornography is a concern that should not be forgotten when posting revealing images of children online. Social media has become a popular source for child pornography that also provides a method of distribution ("Child Pornography," 2017).

        Identifiable information. As shown in Table 2 and Table 3, the relationship between images including children's faces and the post including the child's name are statistically significant. These findings suggest a positive correlation between the two factors, linking identifiable images of children with additional information being shared to followers. Due to the latest trend of digital kidnapping of children posted on social media, parents should limit the amount of information they disclose along with the images of the children. Digitally kidnapping a child involves using an image posted on social media within your own posts and claiming the child as yours (Brosch, 2016). Accurate information posted pertaining to the child in addition to the image creates a more believable and acceptable story.

        Anti-sharenting strategies. In opposition to sharenting, parents have begun to utilize anti-sharenting strategies on social media. In this study, 32 out of the 300 analyzed images contained an anti-sharenting technique that allowed them to share their children without making them identifiable. The most popular techniques were photographing the child from behind and including the child partially in the picture, as shown in Table 4. These actions have been noted in other articles pertaining to bloggers who are also making an effort to keep the identities of their children private (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017). Pictures and accounts that include anti-sharenting strategies do not lose any value or relatability and instead create an aesthetic theme.

        Child online identities. Every image in the sample could be seen as parents creating online identities for their children, but some parents go as far as to create Instagram accounts for their children. As depicted in Table 5, 52 of the images were linked back to child Instagram

accounts created by the parents. By creating the online identity of their child, sometimes before they are even born, the parent is not allowing the child to pursue their own identity individually (Otero, 2017). From the beginning, the parent is choosing how the child is depicted. Additionally, these accounts often included a large amount of personal information pertaining to the child. Parents believe that it is their right to share images of their children on social media and legally, it is (Lupton & Williamson, 2017). Ethically, critics of sharenting believe that the child is entitled to their own privacy and identity when it comes to the images being shared of them. As noted in Table 6, half of the sampled images portrayed the child as expressing an emotion other than positivity. Without further research into the opinions and feelings of the children in the studied photos, it cannot be determined if the children were willingly and knowingly supplying the content for their parents' posts.

The theoretical frameworks for this study supplied the key established ideas for the body of research. Communication Privacy Management Theory (Petronio, 2002) provides a framework for understanding the internal process of disclosure. Sandra Petronio's five suppositions outline a breakdown of the five steps that ultimately decide whether or not someone will choose to share private information on social media. Parents unknowingly go through these five suppositions mentally when posting about their children. The fifth and final supposition is what causes the parent to weigh the risks against the rewards and make the decision to reveal or conceal private information related to their children (Petronio, 2002). Uses and Gratifications Theory provides a framework that explains the driving need gratifications that people are searching for in relation to their media use (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973). On the topic of parental disclosure, previous articles found that mothers posted images of their children on social media to archive childhood photos into digital baby books, identify as a mother, and receive

validation as being a good parent (Kumar & Schoenebeck, 2015). These mothers also associated high like counts with positive parental characteristics and would use this ideal as a deciding factor in posting child content that was previously questioned in terms of appropriateness (Kumar & Schoenebeck, 2015).

Limitations and Future Directions

Limitations. While sharenting images on social media are abundant, the study was limited by restricting the content to one hashtag on Instagram. Using the popular #letthembelittle, the content analyzed was limited to only those who use that specific hashtag. Even though "Recent" was selected to avoid only seeing the most popular posts, the content was still mostly posted by mommy bloggers. This meant the data did not express the everyday parent that most often posts to social media. Additionally, because Instagram was the only social media platform researched, the findings cannot be positively assumed to apply to other social media platforms. For example, a platform such as Facebook that is prone to a higher frequency of posts and few, if any, hashtags, could potentially produce a different set of data related to sharenting images.

Future directions. Based on the results of the content analysis of sharenting images, it is evident that parents are often publicly sharing images of their children on Instagram. Future research could explore what happens with the images after they have been publicly shared and the impact that has on the children and their families. This study would also benefit from the incorporation of a longitudinal study. In addition to the content analysis, focus groups of parents and their children could provide primary data related to the firsthand experiences of both the parents and the children. This would further the research on the topic that is otherwise primarily based on external researcher observations.

Conclusion

Sharenting is a common practice on social media that many users take part in due to the readily available built in camera in cell phones (Brosch, 2016). The dangers that accompany sharenting are often ignored and outweighed as parents place value in social media popularity rather than the potential harms. On Instagram, #letthembelittle is a representation of parental oversharing on Instagram that could place their child in danger. This study is an overview of the ways in which parents publicly share images of their children and the characteristics the images contain.

It is evident from this study that sharenting images posted with popular hashtags on Instagram are easily accessible by anyone and everyone online. Due to the sometimes-embarrassing nature of the publicly posted images, parents are subjecting their children to a variety of harmful scenarios. Cyberbullying is an online trend that is damaging to people of all ages. The distribution of embarrassing images, often through social media, is a tactic frequently used by cyberbullies (Hamm et al., 2015). Social media stores every image posted by a user, supplying cyberbullies with a collection of embarrassing images that previously would have only been available to those who physically had access to the printed image.

In addition to the threat of cyberbullying, revealing images of children posted publicly on social media are often at risk of being misused by users outside of the parent's trusted followers. Child pornography and digital kidnapping are two of the most concerning threats of misuse to child images online. While digital kidnapping results in an outside user claiming ownership of the image and child, child pornography would have much greater level of misuse through the disturbing nature of the crime. Actual kidnapping is an additional concern that parents should fear as they overshare personal information about their children, such as location identifiers and

descriptive image details. An Instagram post with the location set to "Miami, Florida" that includes the image of the child in their easily identifiable school uniform provides online predators with plenty of information to abuse.

While all of these previously mentioned scenarios are of concern, there is an additional worry that parents should consider. Sharenting revolves around the parents' legal right to post whatever they please about their children. Ethically, they are ignoring the wants and needs of their children. Even if the child is too young now to voice their opinion on the matter, the posts will already be public before they have the ability to do so. The sharenting decisions made by the parents on social media also create the child's online identity, limiting the child to fit into a mold that has already been created for them, sometimes since before they were born.

The findings from this study allowed for the development of the following best practices of child online safety: Parents should avoid posting personal information (name, date of birth, age, location) of their children on social media, exclude location identifiers that could lead to obtainment of the child's current position, omit embarrassing, specifically revealing images of their children online, request their child's feedback before posting images of them when of age, and closely monitor the child's online identity as it is created.

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APPENDICES

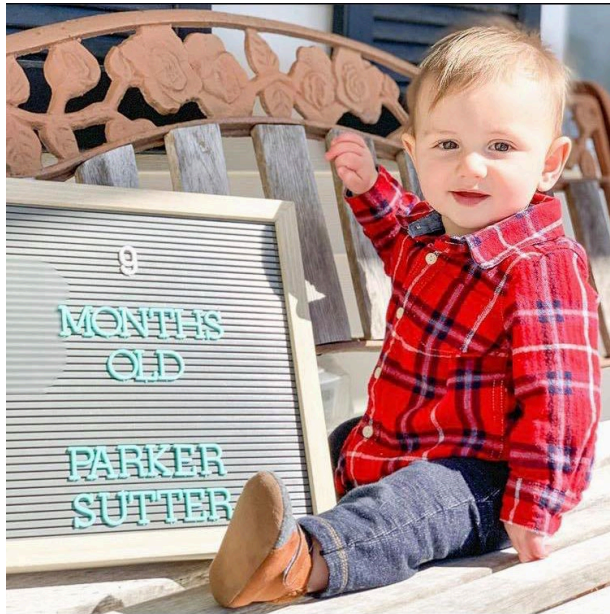## Appendix A: Sharenting Images on Instagram

Photo number 1

Photo number 2

Photo number 3

Photo number 4

Appendix B: Anti-Sharenting Images on Instagram

Photo number 1

Photo number 2

Photo number 3

Photo number 4

VITA

CHRISTIAN BARE

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