DePauw University
Scholarly and Creative Work from DePauw University

Student Research | Student Work

Spring 2021

Communication Ethics of “Sharenting” : A Content Analysis of Instagram Mom Meso-Influencers

Maddy McTigue
DePauw University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarship.depauw.edu/studentresearchother

Part of the Social Media Commons

Recommended Citation

McTigue, Maddy, "Communication Ethics of “Sharenting” : A Content Analysis of Instagram Mom Meso-Influencers" (2021). *Student Research*. 37.
https://scholarship.depauw.edu/studentresearchother/37

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Work at Scholarly and Creative Work from DePauw University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Student Research by an authorized administrator of Scholarly and Creative Work from DePauw University. For more information, please contact bcox@depauw.edu.

DePauw University

Communication Ethics of “Sharenting”

A Content Analysis of Instagram Mom Meso-Influencers

COMM 450: Communication Ethics

Dr. McCall

11 December 2020

Abstract

Among the many concerns of social media, "sharenting," or parents oversharing about their children online, is becoming increasingly prevalent. Millions of children are growing up on the internet with little-to-no control of their digital narrative, instead becoming fashionable or even lucrative props on their parent's social media platforms. The purpose of the study was to explore how much and what type of sharenting parents post on social media. This study explores five key elements of sharenting through a content analysis. Researchers coded 10 Instagram mom meso-influencer accounts within a 30-day timeframe and determined how many posts were embarrassing, intrusive, revealing, child sponsorship, or personally identifiable information. Over half of all content coded was coded as sharenting. Researchers found that individually, over half of almost every meso-influencers' content was coded as sharenting, albeit outliers. The most frequently seen type of sharenting was not one of the five key elements. Instead, the existence of more than one element was observed most frequently among posts. In conclusion, social media users should be cognizant of how widespread sharenting is throughout various corners of Instagram and other platforms. From a communication ethics standpoint, users are recommended to proceed with caution before engaging with sharenting content due to its dehumanizing nature.

Research Problem

As a child matures, it is not uncommon for parents to want to document important milestones. From birthday parties, to t-ball championships, to honor roll, one can usually find a crowd of moms or dads armed with cameras to capture their child's latest achievements. Before the rise of social media, family photographs tended to be printed or saved digitally. However, now parents are taking advantage of the capacity to record their child's life in a permanent digital archive through social media platforms. Not only do social media platforms such as Instagram

and YouTube serve as a way to catalog a child's growth, but they also allow parents to spotlight their child to hundreds of followers instantaneously. This new phenomenon has recently been termed "sharenting." For the first time, an entire generation of children and young adults are facing the reality of having their life documented on the internet, positioning them at considerable risk of harm.

Sharenting puts children at increased risk for identity theft. According to a 2018 report by Barclays financial services, sharenting will account for two-thirds of online identity theft and produce 7.4 million incidents per year of identity theft by the year 2030 (Coughlan). Much of the basic information needed to commit identity fraud is all too easy for thieves to obtain. For example, if a father posts a picture of his daughter at home on her birthday, the child's date of birth, name, and address can be stolen. Additionally, aunts and uncles are not the only ones viewing a parent's post. One survey found that the average Facebook user does not know one-fifth of their Facebook friends, meaning any number of strangers can access seemingly private pictures (Cohen). Once a parent presses "share," their child's safety and identity are put in danger.

Sharenting can also have negative effects on parent-child relationships. According to researchers, "studies indicate that children often feel embarrassed, annoyed, and frustrated by sharenting" (Siibak 117). In a *New York Times* opinion video from 2019, reporters documented children confronting their parents about overexposing their private lives online. One young man explained to his mother that he felt uncomfortable when she posted pictures of him without his approval. Another teenage girl voiced her concerns about her mother posting pictures of her in bathing suits, saying, "Someone out there could look at my body and think something of me that I wouldn't want them to think" (The New York Times). Throughout the piece, children

expressed discomfort with their personal experiences being broadcasted on the web. Even if parents claim to post their children to express pride, many kids are unenthusiastic and even resentful about guardians revealing the intricacies of their daily lives. From a communication ethics standpoint, the problem here is that many children have little-to-no agency over who consumes their photographs or personal information once their parents make it public online.

Perhaps one of the most glaring implications of sharenting is the threat of exploitation. On various social platforms, parents are facing accusations of commodifying their relationship with their children. With over 19 million subscribers, celebrity vloggers Austin McBroom and Catherine Paiz make millions off of their YouTube channel, “ACE Family.” The couple post exaggerated, dramatic videos about their family’s day-to-day lives with clickbait titles such as “I DROPPED THE BABY…*SORRY CATHERINE*” and “THEY DIDN’T THINK I WOULD ACTUALLY DO IT.” Most of their content features their three young children ages four, two, and five months. The couple is not short of critics for their lack of posting scrutiny. A recent 35-minute vlog spotlighting the birth of their second child caused some viewers to question the ethicality of exposing a child to the internet so young (Feng). In 2017, YouTube channel “DaddyOFive” also faced backlash for overexposing their children online in “prank” videos. Parents Michael and Heather Martins berated, assaulted, and punished their five children in videos, much to many viewers’ horror. They later claimed the videos were staged after authorities were contacted. Still, a psychologist at the couple’s trial determined two of the children experienced “observable, identifiable, and substantial impairments of their mental or psychological ability to function” due to their parent’s internet stunts (Hsu). In addition to the trauma of their experiences, the children of “DaddyOFive” and “ACE Family” will never be able to take back the private parts of their lives displayed to millions of people.

Parents beyond the YouTube sphere are facing similar criticisms. In 2019, “mom blogger” Christie Tate received criticism for continuing to write about her children online even when her fourth-grade daughter protested against it. In defense, Tate wrote, “I’m not done exploring my motherhood in my writing” (Graham). Tate has made a living off of sharing the details of her family’s intimate life, contributing to entities such as *The New York Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, and more. Many internet users condemned Tate’s decision to continue documenting despite her daughter’s objections. One Twitter user wrote, “Christie Tate has shown that no matter how much pain her daughter is going through, monetizing that pain is more important than actually doing what she can to help her daughter” (Wang). Tate continues to write about motherhood with the hopes of negotiating more with her family on what she publishes (Wang).

It is unethical for parents to profit off of their children through social media, especially children who are too young to understand the complexities of an online persona. Children are, for the large majority, not receiving direct compensation for their labor as stars of their parent’s social platforms, whether in YouTube videos, vlogs, or other forms of content creation. According to researcher Crystal Abidin, micro-microcelebrity children “and their digital presence are deliberately commercial, framed and staged by influencer mothers in order to maximize their advertorial potential” (Abidin). Children are being strategically propped and posed to catch the attention of internet users, and in turn increase personal profits for parents. Even more egregious, children may not even be aware that their lives are being broadcast on the internet, aside from their parents rolling the tape.

Adolescents are often criticized for oversharing on social media. However, it is becoming increasingly important to examine the ethics of parent’s social posts. From a communication

ethics perspective, the broader implications of this new age phenomenon include matters of internet privacy, consent, and the permanence of digital footprints. “Unlike us as adults,” said digital privacy expert Leah A. Plunkett, “[children] have not yet had a chance to have a childhood and adolescence that is protected; a childhood and adolescence where they can make mischief, even make some mistakes and grow up better for having made them by figuring out who they are, what makes them tick and how they want to be in the world” (Anderson). It is not far-reaching to say internet users are quick to judge how individuals appear online. By posting about their kids, parents are irreversibly manipulating how their child presents themselves not only to the virtual internet landscape, but also to the real world. Furthermore, as Plunkett notes, adolescence should be an exploratory time in which there is room for mistakes and shelter from mass condemnation. In the era of cancel culture, the internet allows for no such forgiveness.

While it is natural for parents to want to share childhood milestones, parental pride paired with the complexities of the internet poses potential long-term and irreversible consequences. From Facebook posts to YouTube channels, communication scholars and internet users alike cannot ignore the growing prevalence of such a seemingly innocent “share.”

Review of Literature

The literature review will be ordered topically. Three themes will be expounded upon to reveal prominent and recent peer-reviewed research on sharenting: reasons behind sharenting, digital representations of child and self, and adolescent perceptions of sharenting.

Reasons for Sharenting

1. *Community*

Research suggests that parents post their children online for a variety of reasons. For some parents, sharenting provides a safe space to express vulnerabilities. A 2019 study from the

Journal of Public Policy and Marketing investigated in part why mothers post content about their children on social media. In a set of interviews with mothers ages 24 to 40, researchers asked questions such as, "Since becoming a mom, have you created rules in your head for deciding what to post about your child?" and "Do you ever get a sense that other moms are competitive in their posting about their children?" (Fox 417). Many young mothers admitted to sharing their children online as a way to cope with the challenges of motherhood. One study participant noted, "There will be, occasionally, a vent session where it would be like, 'Oh my gosh, she was up every two hours last night!' Just kind of needing to hear from other people, 'Oh, my daughter's doing the same thing right now' kind of a thing" (Fox 419). Being vulnerable online made mothers feel stronger and less vulnerable. They could take comfort in shared hardships and rejoice in shared successes. Another survey analysis of mom bloggers from 2011 found posting about parenting online is a form of emotional release for some women, similar to intimate journal writing (Morrison 41). Because motherhood can result in a unique type of isolation, reaching out to other moms through the internet landscape in the form of sharenting can offer a virtual, mutually beneficial support system.

Mothers are not the only parents benefitting from sharenting. Sharenting can also create community online among fathers. In the study, "#dadtribe: Performing Sharenting Labour to Commercialise Involved Fatherhood" researchers observed the internet activity of "Instadads," or Instagram influencer fathers who amassed substantial followings for their content related to domestic fatherhood. While many of the more famous accounts profited off of the success of their dad blogging, their reasons for sharing their journeys online were meaningful. Researchers found that "as torchbearers for an unapologetically involved form of fatherhood, the Instadads congregate, share advice, and provide support to each other, as well as a growing audience of

male and female parents on Instagram" (Campana 479). Similar to the alleviation of isolation new mothers felt through sharenting in an aforementioned study, many of the stay-at-home dads felt seen, heard, and supported by the community of fellow stay-at-home fathers. One father said in an interview, "I guess [that starting an Instagram account] was to give confidence to dads, to show that this should be a way of parenting that you should also adopt" (Campana 475). For some participants, their social media accounts served as platforms to make broader cultural commentary on parental roles. According to the study, Instadad communities even supported each other by sharing tips and tricks for increasing their online presence to attract sponsors. In the internet landscape of Instagram fatherhood, the phrase "it takes a village" endures. Collectively, sharenting can originate from a desire to be supported by a group of like-minded individuals with similar parenting approaches.

2. *Redefinition*

As much as sharenting can create the feeling of community, it can also help women redefine conventional motherhood. For many women, the societal standard of what it means to be a good mom feels far from achievable. The ideology of intensive motherhood refers to the societal expectation that in order be a good mother, women must commit their entire lives to the role of parenting (Song 45). Movies, television shows, and other mainstream media often idolize parenting that features picture-perfect meals and fashionably dressed toddlers. And in an era where women are encouraged to pursue both their families and careers, finding a balance can feel near impossible.

Via social platforms, mothers are pushing back. According to research from *New Media & Society*, exploring motherhood through the public sphere of mommy blogging allows women to reveal that parenting is far from perfect. In the article "The radical act of 'mommy blogging':

redefining motherhood through the blogosphere," researcher Lori Kido Lopez writes, "Women who blog about their children are transforming their personal narratives of struggle and challenge into interactive conversations with other mothers, and in so doing, are beginning to expand our notion of motherhood, women bloggers and the mother's place within the public sphere" (Lopez 744). Through candid stories and unfiltered pictures, mommy blogging dually offers a refreshing escape from curated social media and enforces the idea that being a mom is messy, and that is okay. While the internet can often be judgmental, this form of sharenting provides a feeling of comradery among women as they share similar experiences. Backed by the feeling of mutual support, women have even used their platforms to promote change outside of the mommy blogging sphere. Examples include exposing corrupt companies and criticizing offensive commercials. By posting about parenthood, many women discover the power of their authentic voice.

3. *Commercialization*

Parent social media platforms, especially those with large followings, are susceptible to becoming money-making platforms. Instagram, Facebook, Pinterest, and more are becoming increasingly inundated with advertisements for nearly every type of product. Social platforms are also adopting shopping features to their formats. For example, in October 2020 Instagram introduced a designated shopping tab to its layout. As consumer social media expands, it is no wonder brands are capitalizing on parents with popular social media accounts. According to the article, "How influencer 'mumpreneuer' blogger and 'everyday' mums frame presenting their children online," even parents with small followings can catapult their social media to become an online mega marketplace by sharing their kids. The model works as such: a parent garners the attention of a company that sells, for example, eco-friendly infant apparel. Next, the company

reaches out to the parent and asks him/her to post about the apparel in the form of a paid sponsorship. Then, the parent posts about the product, perhaps with a picture of their own baby wearing the clothing and a caption raving about the quality of the brand. The more paid sponsorships a parent posts, the more other brands will want to reach out to make similar transactional agreements (Archer 48).

Still, some parents are conflicted about taking their social media platforms commercial, especially when their content is based so heavily on their personal family life. One panelist named Kim from the Type-A-Mom conference in 2010 explained that before making it big with blogging, she felt irrelevant and unseen by society in her role as a mother. However, once she began blogging, she found a community of women and companies who were willing to recognize everything she accomplished as a mom. The article "The radical act of 'mommy blogging'" writes, "While this recognition alleviated her former sense of insignificance, she confessed that her early excitement at the prospect of gaining cultural and economic power from working in corporate blogging led her to 'compromise her integrity' in her writing, her relationships, and her own original goals" (Song 46). As Kim's online popularity increased, she found herself making content for the sake of selling more, even if it meant favoring money-making opportunities over writing authentic blog posts. For some parents, the line between earning revenue and producing content for its original sake is becoming blurred.

Commercialized sharenting is a slippery slope of unethical communication. In the case of Kim, one could argue that her blogging morphed into a form of deception. In this way, she dehumanized her readers by writing for the sake of selling more and not for the sake of writing truthfully (Johannesen 102). According to Leah Plunkett, "we [parents] need to take it upon ourselves to have a heightened sense of ethical and practical concern about what we're sharenting

because the law will not regulate it for us" (Anderson). Without regulation, sharenting can fade into monotony of social media timelines by becoming synonymous with regular advertising. And as guardians, parents are the only ones preventing their children from becoming tools of financial gain.

4. *Social Clout*

Evidence also suggests that parents post their children for the purpose of social clout. A pre-technology version of showing off one's kids was to feature them in the yearly Christmas card. Now, posting online introduces the competitive element of engagement from family, peers, and strangers. A study from *The New Educational Review* in 2016 analyzed what types of baby pictures Polish parents post on the internet. Through social media ethnography, researchers sampled 168 parent Facebook users and studied what types of pictures they posted between the months of September and December 2015. The results of the study revealed that there was a positive correlation between the number of Facebook friends parents had and how many pictures of their kids they shared within the given time frame (Brosch 233). Additionally, the study suggested that sharenting may be a type of social competition in which parents compare themselves to other parents' "daily life, outings, special events, embarrassing, and professional" life moments," as categorized by researchers (Brosch 230). The pressure to look the best and have the most fun online is real. And the more positive attention a parent receives on social media about their child, the more likely they are to post content related to their child.

In connection with communication ethics, sharenting for the sake of receiving positive attention corresponds with Martin Buber's Monologue-Dialogue Continuum. Rather than sharing about their children online for the sake of authentic communication, sharenting can cause parents to "manipulate others for their own selfish ends" (Johannesen 56). According to Buber,

communicating with others without inclusion, confirmation and the spirit of mutual equality, among other qualities, is a form of monologue, not dialogue. Sharenting can cause parents to evaluate each other on how good they and other families look online, rather than evaluating each other for their integral personhood. In this way, sharenting is detrimental to the parents' ability to ethically communicate.

Digital Representations of Child & Self

Due to its virtual nature, it can be difficult to portray oneself authentically on social media. A degree of verbal or visual filtering frequently takes place when posting online. For example, Instagram users are infamous for altering posts to make them look more visually appealing. This duplicity of identity increases when paired with the phenomenon of sharenting. When parents engage in sharenting, they may frame the online identities of their children.

In a 2018 study from the *Howard Journal of Communications*, researchers conducted a content analysis of 510 Instagram posts to explore how parents gender stereotype or racially categorize their children on social media compared to mainstream media. A range of variables were analyzed, including photo editing level and child activity level related to stereotyped gender activities. The study found that although some minority groups such as children of color and young girls gained visibility on parents' social platforms, there were still many examples of gender and racial stereotypes among content. By posting their children involved in stereotypically gendered activities, parents are "rigidly assigning their child to a gender ingroup affiliation" (Choi 152). Another similar study from Russia found that "parents mention sons more often than daughters on social media," adding to an imbalance of gender equality (Sivak 2040).

Online, parents are dually responsible for what they post about their children and how they present who their children are to the world. As suggested in these two studies, parents can be guilty of reinforcing potentially harmful stereotypes by sharenting. Choi writes, “Before children develop their independent thinking and have their own social interactions, parents are the sole guardians who set the path for their children” (Choi 153). Children should be able to explore and navigate different forms of identity and expression without the pressures of the digital world’s gaze. For example, young girls and young boys should not have to feel like they have to wear certain clothes or act a certain way to be worthy enough for their parent’s Facebook page. Due to sharenting, children are being photographed and catalogued permanently in public digital archive, and often without room for freedom of expression.

Another danger of posting about one’s child is limiting the dynamic nature of the human personality. There is only so much information that can be captured about an individual within a Facebook post or YouTube video. Complex stories may be constricted to 10-15 second videos. Content dealing with difficult topics, for example child behavioral problems, may be pared down in severity to be more digestible for viewers. On the other hand, content dealing with less severe topics may be exaggerated to increase viewership. As much as individuals can reveal about their life on the internet there are limitations to what realistically can be included. In essence, posting children on social media causes a type of distortion of real life. Social media only captures a single moment in time usually from a single person’s perspective. From an ethical standpoint, the restrictions of social media are unethical for the people posting content, the people viewing content, and the often unwitting subjects of content: children. Through sharenting, a child’s holistic personhood is minimized, especially if he/she is unaware of how they are being portrayed.

In the study, "“Sharenting,’ parent blogging, and the boundaries of the digital self,” one mother explained how conflicted she felt when her blog about her autistic daughter rose in popularity. Although she received positive feedback on her videos featuring her interpreting her daughter, she worried that she was speaking for her daughter and centering herself in the conversation about autism awareness, rather than creating a space for her daughter to exist authentically. Her “blogging persona” dominated her contribution to the autism awareness community (Blum-Ross 118). In the same study, another mother reflected on how it seemed the older her children grew, the less they were featured in her blog, writing, “the trajectory seems to be that until your child can read...you have a kind of...content ownership of your kid or something…” (Blum-Ross 117). When her children were younger, she freely posted content about their lives without their input. It was only until her children could communicate in support or in protest of such content that she allowed them to help frame what she posted online.

Parents are not reporters. They are not writing a story with the intention of presenting an unbiased news article and they are not always receiving consent from their interviewees, their children. As indicated in such research, sharenting can result in a misrepresentation of a child’s authentic story. It is unlikely that anyone can perfectly capture a person’s true identity in speech or writing, but by blogging and posting about their children so young, parents are neglecting their child’s input in how they are presented to an internet audience.

Adolescent Perceptions of Sharenting

The victims of sharenting are most often the very subject of sharenting content: underage children. Various studies identified that children and young adults are not oblivious to their presence on the internet employed by their parents’ camera lens. In fact, they are deeply

conscious of the lack of control they may have over their online identity once parents post about them.

In the article, “Sharenting: Parental adoration or public humiliation?” researchers conducted a focus group study of 46 young adults between the ages of 12 and 14. This age group was selected because young adults begin to explore their identity as early teenagers. Through various group discussions, researchers asked participants about their thoughts on how parents construct their online image and about how they deal with sharenting, among other questions. Although about 50% of respondents said they understood why their parents posted, for example, to commemorate important events, the other 50% of respondents voiced concerns about parents oversharing. One young adult said, “My mom used to put a lot of pictures of me on Instagram when I was little, but that didn't matter then, because you are just a kid and everyone does this when you are little, but once you are our age, it is just embarrassing” (Ouvrein 323). Another child reflected that he/she sometimes got so angry when their parents posted about them, that they went into the social account themselves and deleted the photo. Overall, the study proposed that adolescents have strong feelings about being posted online by guardians.

A study from the University of Antwerp, Belgium, found an even more glaring impression of sharenting by adolescents. In preliminary analyses, adolescent respondents indicated that they largely disagreed with the act of sharenting. Although some respondents recognized the information-archiving aspect of sharenting, adolescents who were aware of online privacy issues were more likely to not agree with sharenting (Verswijvel 5). Combined with the tumultuous teen years, sharenting can put a strain on parent-child relationships as young adults come into their individual identities. It is naive of parents to potentially assume that just because their child did not disagree with a picture of them at the playground at age four, that they would

also be comfortable with a similar picture at age 15. Adolescents are understandably often worried of the implications of sharenting.

Critical Evaluation

From the literature review, it can be understood that despite the risks, many parents are willing to engage in the popular activity of posting their children on social media. Research suggests that posting children can provide many benefits to parents in the form of peer approval, empowerment, shared feeling of community, and even social clout. Still, dangers lie in sharenting. For some parents, it can evolve into a way of commodifying familial relationships, as posting about children online introduces the complex temptation of commercializing accounts for profit. For other parents, sharenting may muffle authentic voices of their children. The literature review also supports the idea that even if they are posting with good intentions, parents hold a large responsibility in shaping how their child is represented online. By sharenting before the complex adolescent exploration of identity, parents risk imposing a set of gender or racial ideals on their children. They also risk harming their relationship with their child who may not feel comfortable being presenting to a world of possible critics. Adolescents are aware of the implications of sharenting on their own lives. Growing up in an internet world, adolescents are perhaps even hyper-aware of the truth in the phrase, "the internet is forever." As social media platforms expand and more children are introduced to the internet, it is increasingly important for communication scholars to examine the sharenting phenomenon.

Methodology

Sampling

The purpose of the study was to explore how much sharenting content and what type of sharenting content mom meso-influencers post on Instagram. Meso-influencers are account users

who have "national visibility" and 10,000 to one million followers (Campana 478). The research was conducted through a content analysis of 10 active mom meso-influencer Instagram accounts. A content analysis is applied for "sorting messages into different categories according to some set of classification criteria" (Rosenberry 42). Therefore, a content analysis allowed researchers to assess the specific qualities of each post. Instagram was selected for analysis because it is one of the most popular social media platforms, with over 1 billion monthly active users (Clement). Additionally, Instagram's picture/video and caption format allowed researchers to uniformly analyze each post the same way.

The Instagram mom accounts were randomly selected based on if the user describes herself in association to her role as a mother in her biography, such as "mom," "wifey," "momma," or "family." Only accounts with over 10,000 followers were selected because accounts with large followings have more viewers, and therefore greater internet influence. Accounts with many followers, but infrequent postings were not selected for analysis. Although the selected Instagram mom accounts feature various themes such as fitness, cooking, and celebrity-lifestyle, they are all similar in the fact that their content is related to modern mothering. For scope, accounts were only analyzed from August 1, 2020, to September 1, 2020. This range was selected because each user could be analyzed for the span of 30 days and the time period is relatively recent.

Selected Meso-Influencer Moms

The following meso-influencer accounts were selected for analysis. The number of followers of each user are reflective at the time of writing and could be subject to fluctuation.

1. Amber Fillerup Clark (@amberfillerup); 1.3 million followers
2. Christine Andrew (@christineandrew); 1.1 followers

3. Aspyn Ovard (@aspynovard); 2.1 million followers
4. Madison Fisher (@madisonbontempo); 1.6 million followers
5. Dede Raad (@dressupbuttercup); 1 million followers
6. Sazan Hendrix (@sazan); 1.1 million followers
7. Louise Pentland (@louisepentland); 2.5 million followers
8. Yasmin Maya (@beautyybird); 1.1 million followers
9. Lydia Rose Bright (@lydiabright); 1.2 million followers
10. Chantelle Paige-Mulligan (@chantellpaige); 991k followers

According to Helen Morton in her article "Computer-mediated communication in Australian anthropology and sociology," online research can either be distanced or involved. The latter includes communicating with internet users through emails, messaging, etc. (Morton 6). This study will strictly use a distanced approach. Coders will not contact the selected meso-influencers via Instagram direct messaging, email, or any other form of communication. Distanced research was determined to be the best approach for this study because an involved approach could decrease coder objectivity. For example, after communicating with a meso-influencer, a coder could be inclined to code a meso-influencer's posts more favorably. Additionally, it is unlikely that upon being asked, meso-influencers could provide an accurate, unbiased analysis of their content since they themselves are the content creators. Overall, interaction with meso-influencers would complicate the study in such a way that would divert from the critical, in-depth analysis of the Instagram posts.

Coder Training

Two individuals served as coders for the research, including the primary researcher. Both individuals are active Instagram users, but were not familiar with the accounts selected for

analysis. The dual coder was provided instructions for analyzing sharenting content, examples of Instagram sharenting, and definitions of the types of sharenting content via email from the primary researcher. The two coders analyzed three accounts separately. The dual coder clarified directions with the primary researcher via text message. After receiving the dual coder's findings, the primary researcher created a dual coder reliability coefficient which was calculated to be 0.83. Based on the dual coder reliability coefficient, it was determined that dual coding of three accounts was sufficient. The primary researcher coded all ten accounts, which will be explained in detail in the content analysis section.

Operationalized Terms

The following terms are important to define before proceeding with the study. The terms are organized alphabetically.

- Child related post: an Instagram post that includes a picture of a child or mentions a child in its caption.
- Child sponsorship content: image, video, and/or caption that promotes a product or service in reference to a child or promotes a product/service alongside a video/image of a child.
- Embarrassing content: image, video, and/or caption that makes fun of a child's appearance, cleanliness, behavior, and/or actions or captures the child in a goofy or unflattering posture.
- Intrusive content: image, video, and/or caption that exposes a potentially private aspect of a child's life, for example, a child's emotional outbursts or academic struggles.
- Non-child related post: an Instagram post that does not include a picture of a child or reference a child in its caption, e.g., content about a spouse, exercise, or cooking.

- PII (personally identifiable information): child's name, child's birthday, and/or child's location. Note: PII can also include social security numbers, driver license numbers, and telephone numbers, but it is likely that account users with such large followings are cognizant enough to not reveal such risky information.
- Revealing content: image or video that captures a child in nude or semi-nude, or in clothing that sexualizes the child by making them appear older than their true age.

Pilot Study

In the pilot study, a single account was analyzed for embarrassing, intrusive, revealing, PII, and sponsorship content. It was found that many posts included more than one type of sharenting content. For example, some posts were coded as both embarrassing and PII. To accommodate this finding, the coders added another category: more than one (type of sharenting content). This category was applied to the main study. The pilot study also identified that four users initially selected for analysis were not very active on their accounts, therefore limiting the number of posts that were available for analysis. These four accounts were substituted for mom meso-influencer accounts with at least 15 posts between August 1, 2020, and September 1, 2020.

Content Analysis

Each account was analyzed for the following types of sharenting content: embarrassing, intrusive, revealing, PII, sponsorship content, and more than one type of sharenting content. Posts coded were both Instagram pictures and/or videos.

First, researchers counted and logged the number of posts on a user's page between August 1, 2020, and September 1, 2020. Next, the coder counted how many of the total posts were child related and how many were non-child related. Then, researchers examined each post between August 1, 2020, and September 1, 2020, for its potential sharenting content. A post was

counted in the table if it correlated with a type of sharenting content (embarrassing, personally identifiable information, child sponsorship, or revealing). If a post included more than one type of sharenting content, it was coded as "more than one" and denoted for type of sharenting content it included. The number of posts in each category for each influencer were totaled. The primary researcher coded the posts over the span of two days and took breaks in between coding each account. Calculated percentages were all rounded to the nearest whole number.

Results

The following tables and graphs present the content analysis of number and types of posts, and types of sharenting content for each meso-influencer.

Table 1. Number and Types of Posts

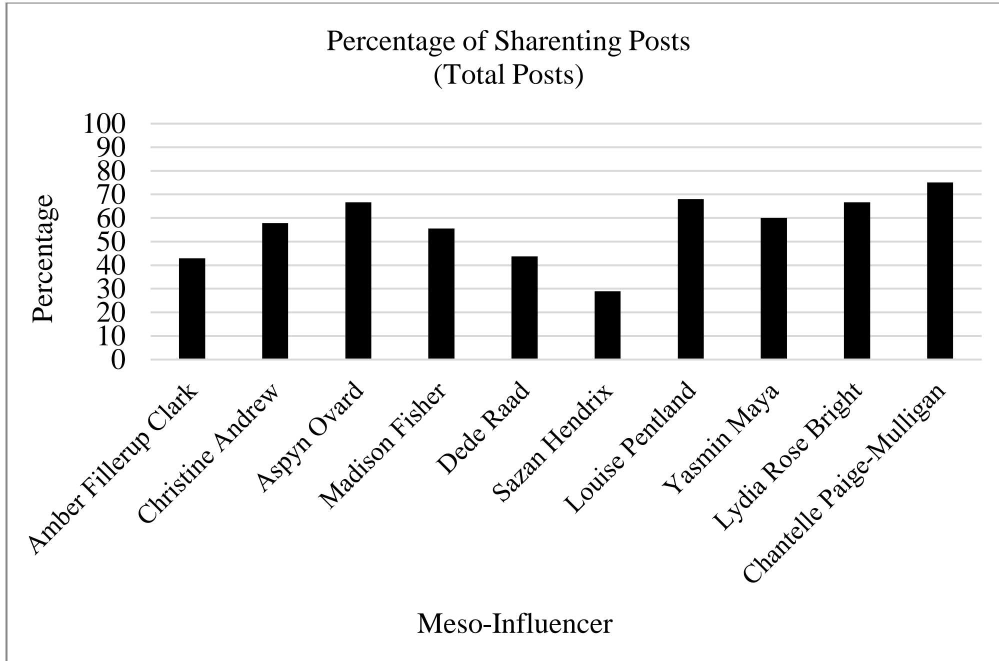
Meso-Influencer	Total Number of Posts	Child-Related Posts	Non-Child-Related Posts
Amber Fillerup Clark	35	24	11
Christine Andrew	19	14	5
Aspyn Ovard	15	10	5
Madison Fisher	18	18	0
Dede Raad	16	9	7
Sazan Hendrix	31	16	15
Louise Pentland	25	18	7
Yasmin Maya	20	13	7
Lydia Rose Bright	15	11	4
Chantelle Paige-Mulligan	24	19	5

Table 2. Types of Sharenting Content

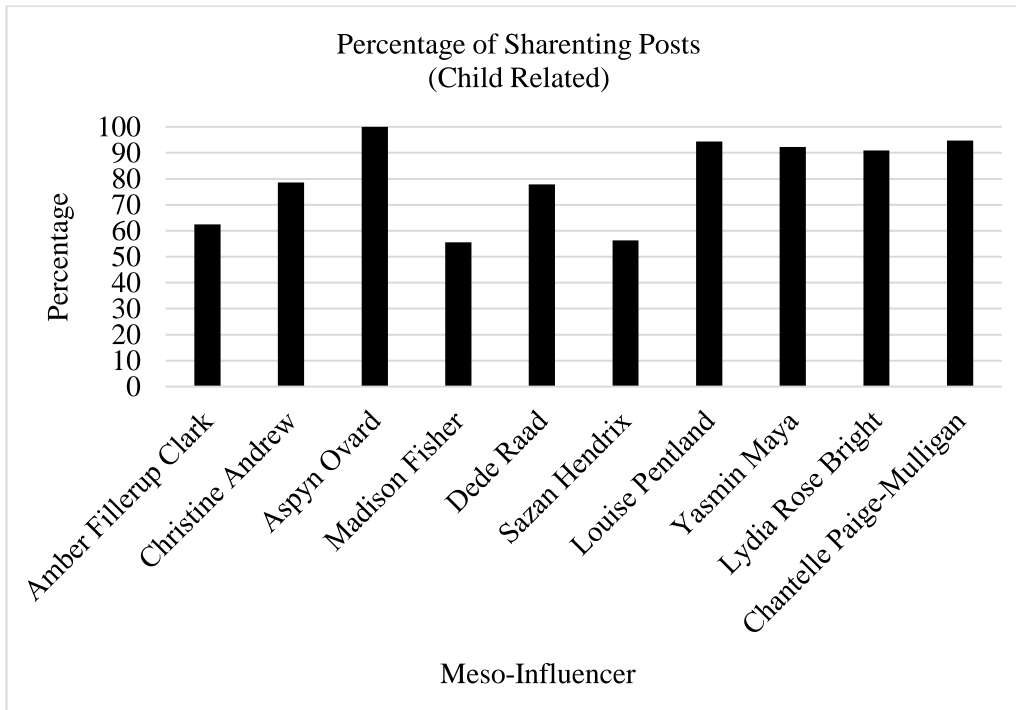
Meso-Influencer	Embarrassing	PII	Child Sponsorship	Intrusive	Revealing	More than one
Amber Fillerup Clark	5	4	1	0	0	5
Christine Andrew	0	4	0	0	0	7
Aspyn Ovard	2	2	1	0	1	4
Madison Fisher	1	5	2	0	0	2
Dede Raad	0	3	1	0	0	3
Sazan Hendrix	4	0	1	0	0	4
Louise Pentland	0	9	0	0	0	8
Yasmin Maya	1	6	0	0	0	5
Lydia Rose Bright	0	4	0	0	0	6
Chantelle Paige-Mulligan	2	6	4	0	2	4

Out of the 218 Instagram posts coded in the content analysis, it was found that 70% were child related. A total of 55% of the posts coded were sharenting. "More than one" example of sharenting was the most frequent type of sharenting coded (22%). PII and child sponsorship were most commonly coded together as "more than one." PII was the second most frequent type of sharenting coded and was most commonly seen in the form of a child's first and/or last name or geotagged location. Embarrassing posts made up 6% of the total content and child sponsorships made up 5% of the total content. Just over 1% of the content coded was found to be revealing.

Graph 1. Percentage of Sharenting Posts (out of total posts per meso-influencer)



Graph 2. Percentage of Sharenting Posts (out of child related posts per meso-influencer)



On average, 57% of meso-influencer's total posts were sharenting across the span of 30 days. On average, 80% of meso-influencer's child related posts sharenting across the span of 30 days. User Chantelle Paige-Mulligan posted the most sharenting content with 75% of her 35 total posts coding as one or more types of sharenting. The least amount of sharenting content was posted by Sazan Hendrix, with just 9 out of her total of 31 posts coded as sharenting. User Aspyn Ovard was an outlier in the study, with 100% of her child related content coded as sharenting.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that sharenting is occurring frequently among popular mom Instagrammers. Also, Instagram famous moms are not just succumbing to one single type of sharenting, but more than one, throughout their posts.

It is interesting to note how the coded elements of sharenting were exhibited among different influencers. For example, Yasmin Maya geotagged the location in almost every post of her daughter. Similarly, Louise Pentland revealed her daughters' names in many posts and videos. Pentland was also infamous for featuring her oldest daughter in sponsorship posts to advertise child internet safety products, which seems paradoxical in context. Embarrassing content was frequently seen as toddlers covered in dirt or birthday cake or falling down. Minimally, revealing content was seen in the form of children semi-nude for diaper changing or swimming.

A lot of PII sharenting content was coded for posts surrounding a child's birth. In such cases, moms tended to post multiple maternity pictures leading up to the child's birth with captions like, "Can't wait to meet you, (child's name)!" Some moms catalogued their child's birth all the way into the delivery room. Moms did not hesitate to showcase infants' full name, weight, height, and even hospital of birth. Following birth, some influencers showed off

themselves and their babies in a newborn photoshoot. The postings surrounding newborns seemed to be as much about the meso-influencer as they were about the baby.

Most often, posts included more than one element of sharenting. For example, Amber Fillerup Clark paired an embarrassing picture of her children wearing sunglasses and making silly faces with an advertisement for a salon. Likewise, Lydia Rose Bright was notorious for posting sponsored self-care products for “me time” after putting her baby to sleep. Both Yasmin Maya and Chantelle Paige-Mulligan frequently promoted their clothing lines by posting matching outfits with their children.

According to Dr. Edward Hirt, professor of psychological and brain sciences at Indiana University Bloomington, sharenting coincides with Robert Cialdini’s theory of Basking in reflected glory or BIRG. In consultation for this research, Hirt wrote, “The best examples of this [theory] are parents living vicariously through their kids or sports fans living vicariously through their team’s accomplishments” (personal communication, December 9, 2020). It is likely that some of the mom’s in the study attach a certain sense of accomplishment and pride to how people react to their children online. They may even frame their child online in a certain manner that makes them more appealing to viewers. Perhaps from a broader societal standpoint, sharenting is an example of how parents may sometimes promote their own image through their children.

In conclusion, social media users should be cognizant of how inundated their social media timelines might be with sharenting content. At first glance, the posts of children in cupcake-covered faces and exaggerated sunglasses seem innocent enough. These posts are easy to gloss over while scrolling through one’s feed. However, even mindless engagement with such posts further propagates children’s exposure online in the form embarrassing content, intrusive

content, and more. Simply tagging a friend on a sharenting post can cause the post to reach more people. Additionally, by "liking" sharenting posts, individuals send a subliminal message to sharenting parents that what they are doing is acceptable. Based on the negative implications of sharenting perceived from a communication ethics standpoint, social media users should limit their engagement with sharenting content. Furthermore, parents should seek alternative ways to present their children to the world besides sharenting, or risk potentially harming their child's wellbeing.

Limitations

There are limitations to this study. Only 10 meso-influencer Instagram mom accounts were analyzed and only within a period of 30 days. It is also important to note the gender limitations in this study, as only female Instagram influencer mothers were selected for analysis, rather than Instagram influencer fathers, co-parents, or non-binary parent(s). Several U.S. current events may have affected what the mothers chose to post between August 1, 2020, and September 1, 2020 such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the presidential election. For example, due to the pandemic, it could be inferred that mothers were limited to posting about activities in which social distancing can be enforced. Coding could also be a limitation to the study because individuals may disagree whether or not a post is embarrassing, intrusive, etc. Such terms can be open to determination depending on the viewer. Coding could also be a limitation because only five elements of sharenting were analyzed.

Future Research

In future studies, it might be beneficial to analyze how mom meso-influencers' posts have changed since they began their accounts. Researchers could explore if the amount of sharenting content has increased or decreased as the mothers amassed more online prominence.

Subsequent studies could also explore how sharenting manifests on other social media platforms besides Instagram. As mentioned in the research problem, multiple YouTube family channels are facing repercussions for revealing too much about their children's personal lives. This study strictly focuses on how parents participate in sharenting. Communication researchers could also explore why parents overshare about their children on social media through conducting individual interviews with influencers. Researchers could refer to Helen Morton's involved online research approach to inquire motivations behind sharenting to expand on current literature. Another element of this study that needs further exploration is if sharenting content performs better on social media as far as engagement in comparison to non-sharenting content. Lastly, more research should be conducted on the long-term implications of sharenting for the generation of youth growing up on the internet. Researchers might investigate how adults react to being posted as children through a longitudinal study.

Works Cited

Abidin, Crystal. "Micromicrocelebrity: Branding Babies on the Internet." *M/C Journal*, vol. 18, no. 5, Oct. 2015. *Communication & Mass Media Complete*.

Anderson, Jill. "Harvard EdCast: The Pitfalls of Online Oversharing." *Harvard Graduate School of Education*, 18 Dec. 2019, www.gse.harvard.edu/news/19/12/harvard-edcast-pitfalls-online-oversharing. Accessed 7 Dec. 2020.

Archer, Catherine. "How Influencer 'Mumpreneur' Bloggers and 'Everyday' Mums Frame Presenting Their Children Online." *Media International Australia*, vol. 170, no. 1, 22 Feb. 2019, p. 1329878X1982836, 10.1177/1329878x19828365. Accessed 6 Dec. 2020.

Blum-Ross, Alicia, and Sonia Livingstone. "'Sharenting,' Parent Blogging, and the Boundaries of the Digital Self." *Popular Communication*, vol. 15, no. 2, 3 Apr. 2017, pp. 110–125, 10.1080/15405702.2016.1223300. Accessed 17 Oct. 2020.

Brosch, Anna. "When the Child Is Born into the Internet: Sharenting as a Growing Trend among Parents on Facebook." *The New Educational Review*, vol. 43, no. 1, 31 Mar. 2016, pp. 225–235, 10.15804/tner.2016.43.1.19.

Campana, Mario, et al. "#dadtribe: Performing Sharenting Labour to Commercialise Involved Fatherhood." *Journal of Macromarketing*, vol. 40, no. 4, 25 June 2020, pp. 475–491, doi.org/10.1177%2F0276146720933334, 10.1177/0276146720933334. Accessed 16 Oct. 2020.

Choi, Grace Yiseul, and Jennifer Lewallen. "'Say Instagram, Kids!': Examining Sharenting and Children's Digital Representations on Instagram." *Howard Journal of Communications*, vol. 29, no. 2, 25 July 2017, pp. 144–164, 10.1080/10646175.2017.1327380. Accessed 15 Apr. 2019.

Clement, J. "Instagram: Age Distribution of Global Audiences 2020." *Statista*, Statista, 2020, www.statista.com/statistics/325587/instagram-global-age-group/#:~:text=With%20over%201%20billion%20monthly.

Cohen, Jackie. "You Don't Know One-Fifth of Your Facebook Friends." *Adweek*, 13 Jan. 2011, www.adweek.com/digital/you-dont-know-one-fifth-of-your-facebook-friends/. Accessed 19 Oct. 2020.

Coughlan, Sean. "'Sharenting' Puts Young at Risk of Online Fraud." *BBC News*, 21 May 2018, www.bbc.com/news/education-44153754. Accessed 18 Oct. 2020.

Feng, Phyllis. "Family Vloggers Are Exploitative And Must Be Stopped." *Arts + Culture*, 27 June 2020, culture.affinitymagazine.us/family-vloggers-are-exploitative-and-must-be-stopped/. Accessed 19 Oct. 2020.

Fox, Alexa K., and Mariea Grubbs Hoy. "Smart Devices, Smart Decisions? Implications of Parents' Sharenting for Children's Online Privacy: An Investigation of Mothers." *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, vol. 38, no. 4, 10 July 2019, pp. 414–432, 10.1177/0743915619858290. Accessed 28 Sept. 2020.

Graham, Ruth. "That Outrageous Mommy Blogger Who Refuses to Stop Writing About Her Kid Highlights a Key Parent-Child Generational Gap." *Slate Magazine*, 8 Jan. 2019, slate.com/human-interest/2019/01/mommy-blogging-christie-tate-generation-gap.html. Accessed 19 Oct. 2020.

Hsu, Hua. "Instagram, Facebook, and the Perils of 'Sharenting.'" *The New Yorker*, 2019, www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/instagram-facebook-and-the-perils-of-sharenting. Accessed 7 Dec. 2020.

Johannesen, Richard L, et al. *Ethics in Human Communication*. Vol. 6, Long Grove, Ill.

Waveland Press, 2008.

Lopez, Lori Kido. "The Radical Act of 'Mommy Blogging': Redefining Motherhood through the Blogosphere." *New Media & Society*, vol. 11, no. 5, 21 July 2009, pp. 729–747, 10.1177/1461444809105349. Accessed 26 Apr. 2019.

Morrison, Aimée. "'Suffused by Feeling and Affect': The Intimate Public of Personal Mommy Blogging." *Biography*, vol. 34, no. 1, 2011, pp. 37–55, 10.1353/bio.2011.0002. Accessed 2 Oct. 2019.

Morton, Helen. *Computer-Mediated Communication in Australian Anthropology and Sociology*. Adelaide, Dept. Of Anthropology, University Of Adelaide, 2001.

Ouvrein, Gaëlle, and Karen Verswijvel. "Sharenting: Parental Adoration or Public Humiliation? A Focus Group Study on Adolescents' Experiences with Sharenting against the Background of Their Own Impression Management." *Children and Youth Services Review*, vol. 99, Apr. 2019, pp. 319–327, 10.1016/j.childyouth.2019.02.011. Accessed 17 Oct. 2020.

Rosenberry, Jack. *APPLIED MASS COMMUNICATION THEORY: A Guide for Media Practitioners.* Boston, Pearson Education, Inc, 2017.

Siibak, Andra, and Keily Traks. "The Dark Sides of Sharenting." *Catalan Journal of Communication & Cultural Studies*, vol. 11, no. 1, 1 Apr. 2019, pp. 115–121, 10.1386/cjcs.11.1.115_1. Accessed 28 Sept. 2020.

Sivak, Elizaveta, and Ivan Smirnov. "Parents Mention Sons More Often than Daughters on Social Media." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, vol. 116, no. 6, 22 Jan. 2019, pp. 2039–2041, 10.1073/pnas.1804996116. Accessed 12 Oct. 2020.

Song, Felicia Wu. "The Serious Business of Mommy Bloggers." *Contexts*, vol. 15, no. 3, Aug.

2016, pp. 42–49, 10.1177/1536504216662234. Accessed 5 Oct. 2019.

The New York Times. “Why Kids Are Confronting Their Parents About ‘Sharenting’ | NYT Opinion.” *YouTube*, 7 Aug. 2019, www.youtube.com/watch?v=YRPUZ3pufAg&list=PLAmAGzZj6isPePg0ZxlDKtIPb6SYQLNtO&index=10&t=0s. Accessed 29 Sept. 2020.

Verswijvel, Karen, et al. “Sharenting, Is It a Good or a Bad Thing? Understanding How Adolescents Think and Feel about Sharenting on Social Network Sites.” *Children and Youth Services Review*, vol. 104, Sept. 2019, p. 104401, 10.1016/j.childyouth.2019.104401. Accessed 25 Oct. 2019.

Wang, Jessica. “Blogger Shares Controversial Response to Her 9-Year-Old’s Request to Stop Writing about Her.” *Mamamia*, Mamamia, 6 Jan. 2019, www.mamamia.com.au/christie-tate-blog/. Accessed 7 Dec. 2020.