Researcher studies the effects of online 'sharenting' and the risks facing kids

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New findings from a researcher at West Virginia University may have parents thinking twice before they post photos of their children on social media. Not only does it raise questions about consent and privacy, but it also leaves kids vulnerable to online predators, the researcher determined. Credit: (WVU Photo/Jennifer Shephard)

With back-to-school season in full swing, parents might want to think twice about posting "first day of class" photos of their youngsters on social media, based on West Virginia University research.

While the posting of children's photos—also known as "sharenting"—may seem like a fun and easy way to share, studies by Laurel Cook, a social marketing and public policy researcher, show that sharing such information poses significant risks.

Cook, associate marketing professor at the John Chambers College of Business and Economics, has been studying these risks with her colleagues, and her research, published in *The Journal of Consumer Affairs*, reveals that sharenting is a far more pervasive problem than most caregivers realize. Not only does it raise questions about consent and privacy, but it also leaves kids vulnerable to online predators.

Why we share

The desire to share comes naturally.

"It's kind of like having bragging rights," Cook said. "But it's sharing to much bigger audiences."

There's a chemical component, too. Positive social interactions, a comment or a "like" on a post, may trigger the release of dopamine in the brain. Dopamine causes a feeling of reward which, in turn, reinforces the behavior. The more "likes" a user receives, the more likely they are to post again.

The pandemic, too, changed the way Americans use social media. Virtual interactions replaced face-to-face ones for both adults and children. These, in turn, have led to increased vulnerability. Cook said many parents didn't grow up with the internet and aren't aware of the

risks, the greatest of which is predatory behavior.

"Much of the fodder for pedophiles is not manufactured," she said. "It comes from parents, from these public posts."

She presents a simple and unsettling analogy: "If we saw some random guy peering into our child's window, what would our reaction be? Think of that situation online. The only difference is the physical versus the virtual realm."

Parents and caregivers often assume that strict privacy settings will limit the post's audience, but once a photo is online, anyone who views the image can save and/or share it. Likewise, schools and camps frequently post photos of students as part of promotional materials, and they, too, may be unaware of the risks.

In addition to a child's safety, sharenting raises questions about consent. In contrast to parents who are concerned about privacy, many social media influencers include their children in their content for profit.

"It's very obvious that there's no real consent going on with many of these children," Cook said. "The opinion my colleagues and I have is that if the child is not able to understand and give consent—whatever age that might be for that child—then all that information should probably be kept private."

She suggests not posting anything too personal; events like birthday parties can be shared after the fact, and caregivers should take care not to disclose dates, times or locations of such events.

Gathering data

Both social media platforms and third-party websites collect data about

users. This data may come from sharented content and is used to track personally identifiable information. Collection may begin before a child is even born and creates a digital footprint that follows them through their lives.

"A lot more people have access to information about a minor than I think the world knows," Cook said.

Personal identifiable information can include name, Social Security number and birthdate, but not all collected data is demographic. Some is psychographic, describing people in terms of their psychological attributes. This might include a user's personality, the kind of sites they frequent or their buying behaviors.

Nevertheless, it's not a child's future search engine results that worry researchers the most.

"It's the fact that No. 1, there's zero consent," Cook said. "No. 2, sharenting information may be used for vile purposes in some cases, and there's a commerce component to that. So, there is money exchanging hands for these sorts of images and videos. And then No. 3, now it has become even more socially accepted to be commodified. Through sponsorships, parent influencers are now profiting from using images of their children online."

Dark design

In conjunction with her research on sharenting, Cook has been looking at dark design, an intentionally deceptive user interface designed to manipulate users into giving consent to data collection, among other things. This manipulation may be as simple as color choices. A user may visit a site like Instagram and be presented with two buttons. Button A, which asks for permission to personalize ads, is bright blue and sounds

tailored to the user. Button B, which frames a choice as less personalized, is dark and easy to overlook.

Alternatively, dark design may trick the user, who may be a child, into sharing their personal information, which in turn can be used to encourage them to sign up for emails and services or make online purchases. Cook said a child's digital footprint may include harvested nuggets of information like their Little League team, their love of certain foods and their favorite apps.

Shaping policy

Regulators and policymakers are just beginning to understand how much data exists for each user.

"That's why I'm working with a variety of legal experts on this project, because this idea of consent is still legally debated," Cook said. "Policymakers in the U.K. and the U.S. need to have a shared understanding of what it means to consent."

Such laws in the European Union are stricter than those in the U.S., where data collection is largely underregulated. However, she's encouraged to see U.S. lawmakers actively relying on empirical research and applying it to policymaking.

Cook's team also reached out to psychology and sociology experts for collaboration, though some were wary of working with a marketer.

"A lot of people think of marketing as bad, like you're trying to push a product."

Once she explained the purpose behind her inquiry, however, collaborators joined the discussion. The team now works with

international advocacy groups to gain a better understanding of the issues and disseminate information.

Ultimately, Cook's goal is to help parents and caregivers navigate through the challenges of sharenting.

"That's what makes me wake up excited every day, to know that my work isn't just theory," she said. "It's something that might move the dial a little bit, to help things change or at least bring awareness to the situation and come up with solutions. I want this environment for children and teens to be addressed. I'm very passionate about it."

More information: L. Lin Ong et al, Sharenting in an evolving digital world: Increasing online connection and consumer vulnerability, *Journal of Consumer Affairs* (2022). DOI: 10.1111/joca.12462

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