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**Title:**

Sharing as displaying: Parents’ sharenting practices within conflictual separations

**Introduction**

The term sharenting – i.e., the practice of sharing contents online (pictures, videos, or written texts) by children’s parents or guardians – has been used increasingly over recent years, raising the interest of scholars from different fields such as law, media and cultural studies, psychology, childhood studies, criminology, educational sciences, and computers science (e.g., Lavorgna, Tartari & Ugwudike, 2023).

Research has explored sharenting in general as an expression of a new digital culture of parenting enabled by new media affordances (Tartari, Lavorgna & Ugwudike, 2023; Ugwudike et al. 2024), and as a topic of concern about children’s and parents’ privacy (Kumar & Schoenebeck, 2015; Chalklen & Anderson, 2017). As it affects children’s current and future digital identities, sharenting deserves particular attention given the potential risks and harms that it can generate. In fact, the often-sensitive information shared online by parents or guardians can make children identifiable and overexposed (Tartari, Lavorgna & Ugwudike, 2023). The paradox between risky sharenting enacted by adults and children’s privacy and security needs or, in other words, the tension between openness and privacy (Chalklen & Anderson,2017) has been studied only partially, but it needs to be further investigated.

Media studies have stressed the dynamics of parents’ online communities (e.g., Johnson, 2015; Haslam et al., 2017) without focusing on sharenting practices. As such, an in-depth analysis of sharenting and the practice of ‘making and displaying family,’ is lacking (e.g., Finch, 2007; Morgan, 2011) along with parenting cultures and their influence (Faircloth, 2014). The authors (Tartari, Lavorgna & Ugwudike, 2023), with their analysis of online Facebook communities addressing children’s wellbeing and health, have provided an initial exploration of the linkages between parenting cultures, sharenting practices and risk perceptions.

This paper offers an additional empirical contribution to the study of sharenting as a social practice by focusing on the existing literature on parenting cultures and the contemporary cultural shifts concerning the meaning of sharing on social media (e.g, Meikle, 2016; John, 2017), incorporating Finch (2007) and Morgan’s (2011) seminal work in these reflections. Methodologically, the paper relies on data from a passive virtual ethnography on Facebook communities focused on judicial litigations (separation/divorce) where children are incidentally involved. By analyzing the everyday sharenting practices of parents involved in judicial litigations and asking for different types of help and support through Facebook pages and groups – from legal information to emotional support – this paper points out (1) how online and offline parenting cultures affect sharenting practices in these communities; (2) how sharenting practices are addressed in these online communities by administrators and other users; and (3) how the privacy vs openness paradox about sharing information and contents concerning children’s involvement in judicial litigations is negotiated by parents and administrators in terms of digital security and satisfaction of their own and children needs. As such, this paper aims to contribute to the debates on how technologies and digitalisation affect personal relationships and transform how we ‘do’ family with a critical and interdisciplinary perspective that bridges sociology and criminology.

**Literature review**

As a domestic media practice (Couldry, 2012), sharenting can be unpacked into a range of different manifestations. These range from sharing routine information on children’s sleep and health problems on social media communities (Tartari, Lavorgna & Ugwudike, 2023) to sharing children’s data on pregnancy apps (e.g., Leaver, 2017). It also includes sharing children’s sensitive information on dedicated personal blogs (Scheibling & Milkie, 2023), and children’s pictures on generalist social media (e.g., Ranzini et al., 2020). Overall, sharenting is part of the wider practices of sharing in the contemporary digital era that point out the development of cultures of online self-disclosure and their normalization (e.g., John, 2017).

Different disciplines have analyzed sharenting, including sociology (e.g., Mascheroni et al., 2023), media and communication studies (e.g., Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017), anthropology (Abidin, 2017), marketing (e.g., Fox et al., 2023), psychology (e.g., Walrave et al., 2023), cultural studies (Jorge et al. 2022), and criminology (Lavorgna, Tartari & Ugwudike 2023). However, many of these studies appear fragmented possibly because of the novelty of the phenomenon. Furthermore, many of the studies highlight critical aspects of sharenting such as its effects on children’s digital identities. But these analyses often lack consideration of the bi-frontal nature of sharenting. On one hand, the practice includes risks and danger for the minors, but on the other hand, for parents it represents access to information, emotional support, connection with other parents, and an income (e.g., Tartari, Lavorgna & Ugwudike, 2023). Commercial sharenting by influencers (e.g., Abidin, 2017) is different from the everyday sharenting of ‘ordinary’ mums and dads or other relatives who may be motivated by pride, or the need to connect with others (e.g., Leaver & Nansen, 2017). We focus on these latter forms of sharenting in this paper.

Sharenting appears to be prevalent among mothers (Kang, 2012; Fox & Hoy, 2019). Various factors such as their child's age or health condition and the heavy domestic workload on some mothers make them less connected and more isolated in everyday offline life. They may as such engage in online communities for social capital, emotional support, feelings of inclusion, but some do seek to maintain their anonymity and privacy (Chalklen & Anderson, 2017; Das, 2017).

Sharenting can therefore be conceptualised as a constitutive practice underlying these networks. The communities can inadvertently reinforce gender stereotypes related to parenting (Douglas and Michaels, 2005). But this gendered dimension is essential in understanding the practices of negotiation and resistance related to sharenting (Leaver, 2017) and how parents, (mostly mothers) negotiate the so-called ‘privacy paradox’. This paradox is characterized by the users’ tension between disclosing personal information online and considering privacy issues (e.g., boyd & Hargittai, 2010; Young & Quan-Haase, 2013; Masur & Scharkow, 2016). For instance, Chalklen and Anderson (2017) show the effects of Facebook’s affordances on sharenting practices and highlights how mothers develop strategies to protect their children but at the same time, share information on them to obtain, in exchange, information or advice, social and emotional support, and connection with other parents (see also Locatelli, 2017). The lack of offline networks and support is at the basis of this search for online support. Different studies confirm these findings. For instance, parents search for these online connections to avoid accusations of poor parenting from their offline circles (Haslam et al., 2017), and this reduces their insecurity and sense of inexperience (Sullivan-Bolyai & Lee, 2011; Ammari et al., 2014).

Overall, the privacy vs openness paradox masks a granular approach to privacy management enacted by parents (Litt & Hargittai, 2016) that can be influenced by different factors. Situational or overall privacy concerns do not have any impact on parents’ sharenting practices (Ranzini et al., 2020). However, the likelihood of frequent sharenting is primarily influenced by factors like a parent’s supportive social network and their habitual sharing tendencies. The culture of intensive parenting is one of the factors that affect privacy management. Intensive parenting (e.g., Hays, 1998; Faircloth, 2014) establishes rigid guidelines for raising children, making them the primary focus of their parents. In the broader societal context, parents are viewed as the exclusive caretakers of child rearing, which reinforces the idea that ‘bad parenting’ is the root of all social issues (e.g., Gillies, 2008; Edwards & Ugwudike, 2023). Thus, the intensive parenting culture seems to push mothers towards sharing in online communities to perform – offline – a good parenting. Studies also indicate that social media platforms serve as arenas where discussions and portrayals of both positive and negative aspects of parenthood and parenting practices circulate and, thus, are socially constructed (e.g., Gray, 2013).

Recent literature emphasizes the ambivalence parents experience when it comes to the idea of being ‘good parents.’ While they excel in connecting with others to seek help, support, advice, and utilize the advantages of social networking sites for their parenting, they can be seen as ‘bad parents’. This perception arises due to their disclosure of their children’s private information and the unintentional creation of a digital footprint for their children that remains largely beyond their control (e.g., Garmendia et al., 2021). This bi-frontal nature of sharenting and the strategies that parents utilize in specific online contexts while they navigate the balance between digital risks and the requirements of their support networks, are explored only fragmentarily. Moreover, while online exposure and spectacularization have been associated with online sharing (e.g., Cino, 2021), a more consistent sociological analysis of the connections between sharenting as a social practice, and Finch (2007) and Morgan’s (2011) contributions on ‘making and displaying family’ is lacking.

**Our approach and methodology**

This paper draws on some of the data collected as part of the interdisciplinary ESRC-funded research project *ProTechThem* that focuses on sharenting by parents based in Italy and UK. The paper aims to fill gaps in sharenting research. It hypothesizes that sharenting can be considered a way of doing and displaying family and is influenced by different parenting cultures and institutional factors. The paper discusses how parents’ negotiations of risks and benefits of sharenting constitutes part of doing and displaying their families, and how these negotiations are shaped by the interactions with other users and administrators, in the context of social network sites policies.

This paper utilizes a sociological interactionist perspective and applies the Grounded Theory approach (Charmaz, 2014). Methods consist of an innovative triangulation of passive digital ethnography with analysis of textual and visual posts in a sample of social media groups in the UK and Italy. The study takes into consideration three public open Facebook groups concerning legal issues and advice in the field of separation and divorce that were selected due to their publicness, number of users, and coherence with regard to the topic. One, which we will call ‘Group 1’, in the UK (with 1.600 users) and two in Italy (respectively ‘Group 2’ with 1.900 and ‘Group 3’ with 2.200 users). We focused our attention on the posts involving children (e.g., disputes about child custody, maintenance, residency, etc.). In Italy, we chose two groups because their posts were not as frequent as those of the UK-based group. In Group 1, the number of posts observed were between 5 and 10 a day, with a frequency of 150 posts monthly; while in Group 2 we observed about 20 posts monthly, and in Group 3 about 50 posts monthly.

From January to April 2022, we observed the interactive dynamics between posters, and analysed textual and audiovisual material in their posts thanks to an observation grid that was developed after a preliminary observation of these groups. The grid allowed us to collect data about the following: group rules; sharers’ and their children socio-cultural characteristics; content shared (texts, pictures, videos); reactions of other users; the content shared by other users in reply to the first post; administrators’ rulings and interactions; sharers’ reactions to other users’ comments; interactions between users (*on* and *off* line); sharers’ perceived motivations; discourses on sharenting; and specific jargon used by users and administrators about sharenting. Among the posts shared in these groups we selected exemplary cases of sharenting posted by different parents or relatives, giving a total amount of 51posts shared by the same sharenters in Group 1, 10 in Group 2, 20 in Group 3, during the period of observation (January to April 2022). Posts could have from 0 to 20 or more comments in reply from other users, usually added within a few hours or days. Using the specific Fakebook’s search tool (the *lens*), we also searched for posts related to sharenting since 2015 to understand sharenting frequency and trends among these groups. Further, we conducted five in-depth interviews with administrators from the Groups 2 and 3 (the Italian groups), with questions concerning sharenting motivations and corrective actions from administrators and platforms. For data coding and analysis, we followed Saldaña’s (2009) indications. We extracted thematic segments pertinent with our research objectives and also considered codes and categories emerged spontaneously.

The study received ethical approval from the University of Southampton. In compliance with ethical recommendations concerning online passive ethnography and digital research (e.g., Social Data Lab, 2019) and recent best practices in dealing with sensitive research online (Lavorgna and Holt, 2021; Lavorgna and Sugiura, 2022), we did not interact with users, profile research participants, collect sensitive information, or use personal identifiers. Data were anonymized and the posts’ wordings were changed slightly to make users untraceable through a browser search. We stored data in the UK Data Service open repository.

**Results**

In the Facebook groups investigated, sharers were both mothers and fathers of underage children (from babies to adolescents), apart from three cases where the sharers were the friends or relatives of the parents. Most of the sharers were experiencing conflictual separation/divorce from different family forms.

Groups 1 and 2 mainly posted about their conflictual separation/divorce, the impact on their children, and requests for legal help and advice concerning their conflictual separations, which involved their children. Group 3 was more focused on narratives, with claims and complaints, concerning the unfairness of the judicial procedure they had experienced. While Groups 1 and 2 were administered by legal counselors or attorneys, Group 3 was administered by volunteers with previous experience as separated/divorced parents and organized in an offline charity to support other parents.

In Groups 2 and 3, the posts usually elicited only a few interactions with other users, while in Group 1 users were more active. This difference in the frequency of interactions between UK and Italy based groups have been noted also in other Facebook groups (Tartari, Lavorgna & Ugwudike, 2023).

While in Groups 1 and 3 users mainly posted textual questions or information; in Group 2, users frequently shared videos or pictures of themselves while debating separation issues.

Even if the posts were mainly not accompanied by children’s pictures or videos, the Facebook pages of the posters were often openly accessible and populated with their and their children’s pictures and potentially sensitive information (e.g., date of birth, place of work, etc.), with no difference between mothers and fathers concerning sharing personal information and visual contents on their own profiles. This makes them and their children easily identifiable in an offline context.

Posts about children were mainly about requests for urgent legal help and legal advice for setting a strategy, and involved sharing distressful experiences due to the separation/divorce process, requesting other users’ suggestions about how to manage ex partners or children’s behaviors, and making a complaint about a court decision, social services intervention, current legislation/procedure flaws. Some of the posts involved externalizing (e.g., ‘I need to rant’) or expressed the poster’s disappointment about a specific situation of their conflictual separation. The topic of sharenting was never explicitly discussed in all these groups.

Data analysis shows that, in those online communities, parents searched for and experienced different forms of connections (Mackenzie 2023: 2-3) capable of supporting the transformation of their family ties and identities. First, posting or simply reading or replying to other users’ posts seem to respond to parents’ need of *collective connections* which concern sharing and foregrounding common experiences and circumstances. Sentences that mostly exemplified this include: “I can relate”, “You can see from my previous post this is what I am going through too”. The need of *collective connections* was also exemplified by behaviors such as sharing long videos with claims against the current judicial system and by the observed assumption that all the group members share the same experience or can acknowledge that experience as true and frequent (e.g., ‘This court is insane’). Second, parents searched for *epistemic connections*. So, often, they posted their stories and asked questions that were related to the construction and exchange of information and knowledge. Examples include: “How is it likely to be viewed [by the court]?”, “Can I do anything legally to remain in the home? Any advice would be much appreciated”, “Hi, is there anyone who can help and guide me through [specific tools in the procedure]?”. Finally, parents searched for *affective connections* which involve the development of new social ties by sharing emotions, feelings, gratitude. For instance, a mother replied to another mother who was experiencing troubles with a contact order, by telling her story and supporting her emotionally: “So, hang on in there. I’m truly sorry for what you’re going through and it is heartbreaking, but the court will not look favorably are your ex’s behavior.” In other situations, parents expressed these affective connections, often enacted by interactions in comments, by showing their gratitude and appreciation for advice and for the exchange of experience. Further, we identified the following categories which point out ways of displaying family through sharenting.

*Displaying good parenting and family relationships*

Most of the parents, while sharing their and their children’s family situations, tried to display good family relationships and demonstrate that they were ‘good’ as parents trying to maintain good relationships with their children or ex-partners. By posting detailed information about how they and their children try to navigate separation and divorce, they displayed how the relationships work and how much they are present, attentive, and protective towards their children and the other parent. This post offers a good example.

My ex-husband continues to take me to court. He had a non-molestation order against him in [year]. He broke the order holding my [children] hostage then contacted social services saying he had concerns. I was investigated. All proven to be false without any doubt. Case closed. New order put in place in [year]. Same again. […] All found to be false without any doubt. Case closed. Again now. […] Now I can prove again he is lying. I have references. Schools have no concerns. But he won't stop making false allegations. He's destroying mine and my children's lives. How can I stop him doing this again?

While practicing this type of risky sharing, parents find connections, display their family connections and affects, and reproduce instances of a parenting culture which suggest proactive and intense forms of parenting. For instance, this mother, by expressing concern about how best to prepare her children to meet her ex-husband’s new partner, and by describing her ex-partner personality, shows attention towards attentive parenting. The extract below further illustrates the effort to demonstrate good parenting:

I have been separated for about 3 years and I have two boys aged [under 10]. My ex-husband lives [specific km] away. With the new year he will come for the holidays in [month] with his new partner and he will take the boys for [number of days] around [specific holiday place]. I'm okay with that, the thing that doesn't sit well with me, [..] is the fact that boys don't know about the existence of this person and finding this out of the blue may be unpleasant for them. So, I wanted to talk to him to maybe start making some video calls when he's with her so that the boys start to see the new presence and not be unprepared when they're all together. I don't know if I'm right to tell him because he lacks emotion and doesn't understand the damage he can cause, especially to my first son who suffers, in addition to epilepsy, from an early childhood psychosis. What would you do in this situation?

Sharing details of children’s health allows this mother to display the emotional and relational situation of her children and how much she wants to protect them.

*Displaying relationships’ legitimacy*

A different kind of displaying concerns cases in which parents have a contact order or some limitation of parental authority. While asking for advice, sharing their experience, and claiming their rights, parents also display the legitimacy of their relationship with their children. They try to demonstrate their effort to be ‘good’ parents and do family despite its adverse transformation. In the post below, a mother with a contact order demonstrates this:

She’s [age /toddler], ex-husband won’t let me see her. He’s punishing me, wants me out of her life. It’s ordered to be daily video calls but he’s doing it every 3 or 4 days. When I see her it’s in her highchair and eating lunch. So, he’s never stuck to the order. He says I do not interact, but she is eating. I can’t do better if she’s eating. He’s also blocked face to face and refuses to use the contact centre, says he’ll only let the social worker supervise. Hopefully the judge will see what I’m dealing with. […] She’s very much suffering, he’s already got her life mapped out: she has to travel in the best car, live in the best house, go to the best school, take over his [sector] company and his properties. I’ve been legally threatened since [number] weeks gestation. For these people it is all about winning, and if they destroy the other parent in the process, then that’s a bonus.

Other examples of displaying the legitimacy of relationships with children come from Group 3 where many posters – mostly fathers – made negative claims against the judicial system and other institutions. This made sharenting as a powerful weapon for subverting how the institutions and professionals involved in court proceedings operate. Their posts were not anonymous. They organized live meetings on the Facebook group and discussed their stories, revealing their faces and providing the audience with their names and surnames. They also offered detailed information about their pending lawsuits, shared newspaper articles about their cases and videos of themselves protesting in front of a court or a social worker office, as well as documents about their litigations. Sharing the full stories of affected children litigations is a form of sharenting even if only the initials of the child are used because children can be easily recognized through their parents (currently or in the future), with adverse implications for the children’s digital identity.

*Displaying care through (digital) bricolage*

A last category of displaying was observed in the actions of sharers who tried to be virtuous *bricoleurs*. This bricolage refers to the ability to manage the privacy-openness tension by protecting their digital footprint and that of their children. While some parents chose to post anonymously and so maximize the benefit of obtaining information without losing privacy protection, other parents chose to post overtly and keep open the possibilities for any kind of ‘connection’. In these last cases, parents can choose to keep their Facebook personal profiles without any information or to reduce the level of detail of information shared in posts about them and their children, as the following example shows:

Court order for child maintenance a year ago. Child arrangements order has been made since increasing my time. My income has also dropped since the financial order. CMS payments are now too high. What my next move on the anniversary of the financial order?

In the following case, the poster does not share particular information about her children, but other details make the family identifiable, particularly if the details are linked to the poster’s Facebook profile.

Please advise me. We are not married. We have been together for [number of years], we have [number] children aged [age of each child under 12]. We are living in his flat by private arrangement this means that he leaves me living here without rent if I do not ask for children maintenance. Now he wants to evict us from his home and he says that if I become homeless he can have full custody of the children. He is threatening me. May I remain in the home with some legal help? [poster adds specific information on property, mortgage, expenses, etc.] Our relationship was characterized by financial and emotional abuse.

Multiple examples of this type of post were available in the dataset and the information shared concerned not only posters or children victimization, but also health issues or special needs. For instance:

[…] My son has been victimized by school staff; he has been having an awful time at school for over a year. Police is involved again. I have mental health issues and a physical disability. […]

Furthermore, results show how privacy and openness are negotiated by parents and administrators for the digital security and satisfaction of their own and children needs. For instance, while some administrators chose to protect their users from legal action by the other parent, by prohibiting or limiting pictures posting, other administrators (including experts of the legal field) tolerated the practice as administrators. This was the case even where, at a personal level, they did not agree with sharing pictures of minors on Facebook. Moreover, most administrators were unfamiliar with Facebook policy on sharenting.

Some administrators referred to a change of ‘culture’ concerning sharing pictures over the last four-five years, with a decreasing number of posts containing pictures. However, sharing children’s information is perceived as a completely different practice from sharing pictures or videos. The former is not only tolerated, but also considered useful to gain legal information and help from experts and other users, and to gain emotional support from other users within the group. Therefore, sharing detailed information on children and their parents’ behaviors, stories, health and relational issues, school issues etc. remains completely unquestioned by both parents and administrators and perceived as something necessary to do as a parent. Hence, administrators normalize this specific type of sharenting.

This normalization seems to stem from the administrators’ need to pursue the aim of the group and support parents, while parents exchange information for emotional support and advice. Since these parents are no longer able or willing to wait for the private space of the attorney’s office, they seek shortcuts and solutions from peers or more accessible experts. In other words, they often display the need to exercise a form of *bricolage* between their own capabilities, online and offline social capital, material resources and boundaries. But as *bricoleur*, they sometimes lose control on their privacy in exchange for support without considering the risks and potential harms of sharing information about their legal, personal, and familial journey. An extreme example of this *bricolage* comes from a father who posted multiple videos about his situation and mentioned: the names of professionals appointed by the court; information about his family; and separation proceedings. He added pictures with personal medical records and asked:

[…] everyone, especially those who live in this area, to listen to and share my protest of [date] with video complaint before the [address of a specific psychiatric service] against their work and false records. Now I will return to [address of a different service] to protest against the work of the [name of the service in charge to evaluate my family situation]. Thank you all for the time, I hope to change things for everyone, especially in this area [he mentions the specific social service and the town].

With his sharenting, this father creates a bridge between online and offline social capitals, while displaying an extreme and questionable form of care for his relationship with his children.

When administrators were questioned about these practices, they minimized the risks for children. Their representation of sharenting as a dangerous practice seemed to focus mainly on the sharing of particular pictures of children concerning for instance abuse or neglect. They did not address the multiple forms and risks of this practice.

**Discussion**

Sharenting can be considered a parenting practice in line with Morgan’s definition:

Practices are often little fragments of daily life which are part of the normal taken-for-granted existence of practitioners. Their significance derives from their location in wider systems of meaning. (Morgan, 1996: 190)

The presence of this practice in the daily life of parents forms part of ‘doing family’. Sharenting seems to have a more concise meaning as a practice of doing family when it happens within online contexts more focused on children’s health and routines (Tartari, Lavorgna & Ugwudike, 2023), more “embedded in daily life, or in regular cycles of activity” (Finch 2007, 79), while it seems more challenging to be categorized as such when it takes place in online communities like those analysed in this paper.

Therefore, sharenting is not only part of what we can consider as ‘doing family things’ but also a way of displaying family relationships since:

Display is the process by which individuals, and groups of individuals, convey to each other and to relevant audiences that certain of their actions do constitute ‘doing family things’ and thereby confirm that these relationships are ‘family’ relationships (Finch 2007, 67)

It is exactly the challenging aspects of these groups’ topic – separation, divorce and children’s arrangements – that makes sharenting even more a way ‘to display family’ while family relationships are weaker, compromised, and need to be reorganized and re-signified. Therefore, the desperate request for legal help sent by parents through a post – filled with personal and family details – in one of these groups can be seen as a way of displaying family while the texture of the family relationships is transforming. Their efforts to access advice that is useful for them and their children reflects the protective instincts socially associated with good parenting and can be displayed as such (ib., 68-69).

Therefore, in these specific contexts, sharenting is functional to displaying good parenting, family relationships and their legitimacy, and care for their children through a sort of (digital) bricolage. Sharenting as displaying is thus supporting the reconstruction of family and parents’ identities and relationships maintenance (ib., 70).

This helps us understand why, in these online contexts, parents and administrators are less inclined to frame sharenting as a risky or dangerous practice. They are instead more inclined to tolerate it or view it as an essential part of the parents’ attempts to redefine their identities and improve their relationships. Through such attempts connections established via Facebook communities support parents in that difficult transformation from an old to a new family form. Parents, who concentrate on negotiating these transitions and their meanings, give priority to the urgent need of obtaining support and information. They see this as useful for continuing their parenting journey and relationships with their children in a way that closely reflects their previous identities as parents. A useful analogy is the way that parents are expected to give priority to putting on oxygen masks before their children’s in a flight emergency, to ensure that they are best equipped to help the children. In the same vein, parents as sharenters in these groups neglect children’s privacy to provide a safer experience as family in the long term. Administrators are aware of how parents’ priorities work in that period of transition. In Groups 1 and 2 for example, they try to negotiate parents’ needs and the legal framework concerning sharing children’s images, but they also accommodate parents’ requests to share children’s information in exchange for support and help.

Therefore, the online communities play an important role in redefining parents’ identities during the phase of separation/divorce.Parents seek legitimacy for their new identity and obtain it through sharing their stories in these communities. Finch (2007: 72) suggests that in ‘certain circumstances’ the ‘need for display’ in relation to family relationships becomes more intense. This is due to the reconfiguration of relationships, like in divorce/separation, in which ‘the family-like qualities of relationships will need to be redefined, renegotiated and actively demonstrated’.

Moreover, conflicting interpretations of sharenting emerging from the results should be considered.

First, parents’ experience of litigation makes them more used than others to disclosing family relationships to attorneys, judges, mental health professionals, social workers, and court-appointed experts. These forms of ‘exteriorization’ of personal information, feelings, difficulties, meanings, and so on, are thus normalized. They are learnt by parents who reproduce that self-disclosure and need to display in online contexts. This becomes particularly impacting for those parents who engage with claims-making activities and whose family litigations permeate their entire online and offline lives.

Second, the ‘connection’ offered by these online communities is often the most important resource sought by these parents. In communities of parents and experts who are aware of divorce and separation issues, and are non-judgmental, parents may feel less alone and thus supported by the collective experience of a community. These feelings and needs of connection can be explained using Mackenzie (2023: 2-3) categories of collective, epistemic, and affective connections as presented in the results section. In these online communities, parents can experience these forms of connection, which support the transformation of their family ties, without judgment and with reciprocal support.

Third, the contribution of these communities is not only to provide parents with legal information or support, but to host parents attempts to display new family relationships and thus to redefine parents’ identities through various forms of legitimization of their ‘display’. Finch (2007, 72) explains that there are various degrees of intensity in the need for ‘display’. Therefore, we argue that these forms of sharenting in these online communities happen as a high degree of intensity relating to the ‘need for display’. This need arises due to reconfiguration of relationships and identities within the family. It can be easily exemplified through the different posts and videos shared by fathers in Group 3 and their *claims-making through sharenting*.

Moreover, parenting cultures undoubtedly shape sharenting practices in the groups under investigation. The demands of intensive parenting, as discussed by Faircloth (2014), lead parents to search for communities where abundant horizontal firsthand experience (collective connections), knowledge (epistemic connections) and emotional support (affective connections) are readily accessible, free from judgment or demands. Results (mainly from Groups 1 and 2) suggest that offline parenting cultures – in particular, intensive parenting culture – motivate parents to ask for help online so as to act in a timely manner. This is one of the characteristics of this culture. The price for gaining access to this knowledge and for obtaining social support involves sharing content with strangers. This is the case even if parents can envision the strangers as a cohesive community of like-minded individuals. This serves as a motivating factor for them to engage, with the additional benefit of experts that can, almost freely, give advice. Hence, when parents share content, they seem to perpetuate and affirm principles and codes, values and beliefs, upheld by both offline and online communities. At the same time, they try to preserve their uniqueness as parents by displaying their relationships and choosing what they share while negotiating between online and offline communities.

Intensive parenting culture assumes a particular declination in Group 3, in which it blends with fathers’ ideological codes concerning parenting. For instance, one of the administrators interviewed explained that much effort had been dedicated over the years to eradicating the use of the word ‘Nazi-feminist’ from one of the groups he administered, populated mainly by divorced/separated fathers. The term was used to describe mothers who fought for their rights after separation or professionals who tried to defend the mothers’ rights. These were viewed, by these users, as completely inadequate parents. The same administrator explained why sharenting within his group was not only tolerated but sometimes proposed in order to enhance the experience as a collectivity. In fact, they proposed sharenting for paternal pride (e.g., asking users to post their children picture of the first day of school accompanied by them). In the end, that reflects instances of intensive parenting culture as parents try to position themselves as ‘good parents’ while cultivating an intensive ‘fathering culture’ (for the use of the term, see Smyth & Craig, 2017; Shirani et al., 2012).

We do not aim to justify sharenting which is a risky and potentially harmful practice, but to offer a novel interpretation of parents’ practices. Such practices can be seen as affected by contemporary cultural shifts and their ‘normalization’ (see John, 2017), and by emerging digital cultures enabled by affordances provided by social media platforms. Such affordances offer new ways of ‘displaying’ family online but also pose new implications. One of these implications concerns how to managethe privacy vs openness paradox in these contexts in which the need to solve family legal issues prevails over the needs of protection and digital security for their children. The outcome is an underestimation of digital risks concerning children their children.

Our study points out less-effective strategies in comparison with those found by Chalklen and Anderson (2017), and increasing risks and potential harms.

Ranzini and colleagues (2020) contend that when parents are not directly engaged in contemplating privacy safeguards, their comprehension of privacy risks becomes limited, resulting in decreased involvement in protecting privacy. Instead, in the groups we observed, neither administrators nor Facebook policy question parents about privacy protection. Even if the law asks the other parent for their consent before the publication of contents concerning children, this aspect is frequently neglected by administrators (in particular if the content is textual). Social media platforms have thus the power to define this as a situation in which the users of these communities have an intrinsic value that is greater than the value of protecting children online and offline futures. In these dynamics of power between social media platforms, administrators and users, parents can choose different degrees of involvement while using sharenting: from the simple anonymous question to a group to the use of the group as an active instrument of claims-making.

Litt and Hargittai (2016) draw attention to the different ways in which users can perceive large audiences on social media. On one hand they can generalize other users into one broad imagined audience; on the other hand, they can focus on a particular subgroup of their audience and imagine it as a target audience. In Group 3, activist fathers produce content by imagining that a target audience will be supported and/or questioned to action by those shared contents. Active users presume to share common values and worldviews with their imagined audience. Furthermore, these groups can also be perceived by users as particular forms of ‘communities of fate’ in which they share a specific ‘temporary form of existence born of hardship and social emergency, which cuts across family divisions to elicit something socially consequential’ (Baehr, 2005). The perception of belonging to a community of fate decreases the opportunities of reflexivity on the phenomenon of context collapse (boyd, 2010) allowed by social media affordances and that makes sharenting more risky and potentially harmful. The only deterrent to sharing information is the suspicion that – exactly due to context collapse – other users involved in their legal suits may read their posts and compromise the achievement of their objectives. Furthermore, Group 3 shows a form of *context collusion* (Davis & Jurgenson, 2014) as users and administrators *intentionally* bring together various contexts and their related networks to empower their claims-making. This *collusion* makes sharenting even more dangerous as each case involves social media and mass media attention. Privacy protection is only apparent and not substantial (i.e., using name initials for children or making the image of their face blurry does not make them non identifiable in particular local communities).

The hybrid online and offline cultures results in an online parenting culture enriched by parents’ experience of greater autonomy and freedom. These, however, come at the cost of subtracting a secured digital identity for children. Social media platforms as digital intermediaries are constantly balancing users’ ability to post freely and preventing harms that may arise from posted content. But the platforms commodify users’ content and data to make a profit (Johnson, 2017). In this process, accountability is still scarce, and mostly relies on unsatisfying forms of self-regulation (Lavorgna, Ugwudike & Tartari, 2023.).

**Conclusion**

Our study provides an empirical examination of sharenting as a family practice (Morgan, 2011) and a way of ‘displaying’ family relationships (Finch, 2007) within specific online communities, which concern ‘legal issues’, i.e., parents’ separation or divorce with underage children involved. Our analysis concentrates on the textual posts, the audiovisual contents available, and forms of sharenting specific only to these groups established to respond to such legal issues. We describe how sharenting practices are addressed in these online communities by administrators and other users. We also describe how the privacy vs openness paradox about sharing contents concerning children’s involvement in judicial litigations is negotiated by parents and administrators in terms of digital security and satisfaction of their own and children needs. Further, we show and how online and offline parenting cultures affect sharenting practices.

We tried to unpack how parents negotiate risks and benefits of their sharenting, digital security and their and their children needs concerning the transformation of the families’ relationships due to separation/divorce. We do not stigmatize sharenting practices nor justify them; instead, we shed light on how sharenting practices are normalized in contemporary digital contexts (e.g., John, 2017), and which resources they represent for parents.

Analyzing the social dynamics and cultural implications of family displaying through sharenting can indeed provide valuable insights into the risks and vulnerabilities faced by both children and parents when they share online content related to their children concerning the particular phase of transition through judicial institutions. Examining parents’ social media posts underscores aspects of their daily lives, the anxieties they experience, and the demands stemming from a culture emphasizing intensive parenting. It also underscores their resultant susceptibilities and need for assistance during the challenging period of separation/divorce. While digital media networks and communities promote diverse forms of connectivity, their underlying principles, as defined by their rules and regulations, continue to assume that the user is an independent, responsible and capable individual. However, this capability might not be entirely mature or might falter during specific life stages or social situations of distress – like those proposed by judicial litigations. In such situations, parents have no room for additional unpaid digital immaterial work. In fact, one of the most interesting results is that sharing textual information is almost completely not identified as a form of sharenting (by both users and administrator) although pictures and videos are not the only content that make children recognizable. This simple fact shows the limited capacity of parents/users to exercise their privacy stewardship role effectively (Kumar & Schoenebeck, 2015: 9) in order to protect their children and foresee children's actual and potential future vulnerabilities.

Even if our study shows limitations concerning the generalizability of the evidence gathered given the short period of observation, our contribution opens the path to new and much needed research on how parenting practices and cultures in online and offline communities affect the risks associated with sharenting. Our results indicate that the local and global aspects of these cultures require greater scrutiny when assessing their potential influence on sharenting practices. Additional studies are needed to compare how sharenting happens and how the privacy vs openness paradox is managed, in different platforms and societies, in particular and challenging phases of parents’ life. This could guide future policy recommendations.

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**Conflict of interest**

The Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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