

# Sharenting = Good Parenting?

## *Four Parental Approaches to Sharenting on Facebook*

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### Abstract

This chapter discusses the contested practice of sharing pictures and information of one's children on social media, newly coined as "sharenting". Based on a multi-case study of eight Danish first-time parent couples' uses and experiences of digital media in relation to their new role as parents, the chapter identifies four types of communicative orientation that characterise parents' approach to Facebook as a social network site (SNS). The four types are expressed through differences in aesthetics, values and attitudes toward sharenting and consist of 1) family-oriented, 2) peer-oriented, 3) oppositional and 4) non-use. On this basis, the chapter discusses the ways in which sharenting poses new challenges and demands for "good parenting".

**Keywords:** parenting, social network sites (SNS), Facebook, sharenting, transition to parenthood

### Introduction

While parents have almost exclusively been seen as the protectors of their children against the potential harm of media exposure and engagement, they are now increasingly being regarded as (potential) violators of their children's rights and well-being. The reason is the popular practice of "sharenting" – "the habitual use of social media to share news, images, etc. of one's children" (Sharenting, 2017).

Today, many children acquire a digital identity before they can speak, or even have left the womb, as parents' share the joys and challenges of parenting with family, friends and peers on e.g. Facebook, Instagram or blogs. Consequently, sharenting has attracted attention from the general public and from researchers, often focusing on the risk of

misuse or abuse of information shared about children online, particularly photos (Kirkey, 2017). Other interests concern the dilemmas associated with balancing the privacy rights of children against parents' right to self-expression and free speech, which constitutes a legislative challenge (Steinberg, 2017) and an evident ambivalence among "sharents" (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017).

Even so, little is known about the significance and lived experience of sharenting. This chapter explores how parents approach and attribute meaning to sharenting. It is based on a multi-case study of eight Danish first-time parents' use and experience of digital media during their transition to parenthood (2013-2016); specifically, how they approach, navigate and negotiate the use of social network sites (SNSs), mainly Facebook, in their new role as parents. The chapter argues that to grasp the growing significance of sharenting, we must acknowledge that parents' approaches to communication technologies do not spring from rational, intentional decision making, but rather from the competing demands of social, work and family life, self-realisation and the desire to be good parents (Clark, 2011: 330). What it means to be good parents, also in relation to sharenting, is deeply imbued with norms, negotiations, values, beliefs and emotions.

Concretely, the chapter contributes an identification of four types of communicative orientation that characterise parents' approaches to Facebook, and which are expressed through differences in aesthetics, values and attitudes toward sharenting. The four types of communicative orientation are 1) family-oriented, 2) peer-oriented, 3) oppositional and 4) non-use. Since today's parents must deal with sharenting and the specific consequences of opting in or out, the chapter discusses the ways in which sharenting poses new challenges and demands for doing "good parenting".

## Theoretical framework

The study's theoretical framework consists of mediatisation research and audience studies. "Mediatisation" refers to long-term transformation processes where media, enhanced by their increasing entanglement in culture, society and everyday life, become indispensable (Jansson, 2015) and mould social and cultural activities (Hepp, 2013). Mediatisation research explores the complex relationship between media-communicative and sociocultural change by focusing on the role of the media while insisting that research must spring from the relevant cultural fields and communicative contexts, not the media (*ibid.*). The study also employs salient concepts and insights from audience research. Audience research engages with differences and similarities in how people make sense of media (as texts, genres or technologies) and negotiate and (re)produce meanings and social relations (Livingstone, 2012). Audience research has shown that media technologies constitute important communicative and social resources for families' everyday life, but also that families converge and diverge in their approaches to media according to the communicative patterns, ethics or values that characterise their lives (Clark, 2013; Lull, 1980).

The transition to parenthood is considered to begin during pregnancy and end sometime between the child's first and second year. This is an interesting phase for studying 'digital parenting,' since it highlights the initial overlap between media-communicative practices and parenting practices. Becoming a parent entails major practical, emotional, social and relational changes (Cowan & Cowan 1992) and implies a need for information and guidance, building and maintaining social relations and developing a parental identity. These three themes have directed the present case study.

## Case study and method

Given the increasing democratisation of gender roles and parenting responsibilities, particularly in Nordic countries (Viala, 2011), this study chose co-living, first-time parent couples as its case unit. Drawing on both mediatisation theory and audience research, this enabled an examination of how different media types are adopted into everyday parenting practices and woven into the construction of parental identities. The study's eight cases were selected consecutively from an online questionnaire survey in a municipality in Western Jutland, a rural area, and in the fast-growing region of Aarhus, Denmark's second largest city with a population of approx. 320,000 (Aarhus Kommune, 2016). Survey invitations were distributed by local health visitors. Case selection used a combined maximum variation and intensity sampling approach (Patton, 1990) to yield information-rich cases. Criteria for case selection were variation in media use patterns, education level and proximity of social network.

Results from the survey ( $n = 56$ ) showed that the majority of respondents had shared photos of or stories about their children online, primarily on Facebook as this was the most popular SNS among the respondents (only two respondents were not on Facebook). The open commentary fields revealed that parents diverged in their views on sharenting, so the parents' experiences with and attitudes toward sharenting, mainly related to Facebook, became a key focus in the case study. The multi-case study was based on three types of empirical material: 1) qualitative interviews with the eight parents (individually and as couples) integrated with 2) observations of their domestic media environment and 3) an archive of recorded activity and posts from each of their Facebook profiles (all participants except one woman had a Facebook profile) during the pregnancy period and in the first four months as a new family (13 months in total). The archive's data were harvested using Digital Footprints, a research tool for retrieving closed Facebook data with user consent. The study's dataset was analysed using triangulation focusing on recurring topics and categories across the material and individual cases. This included data from questionnaires, field notes and condensation and coding of interviews (using NVivo) and a qualitative content analysis of the participants' Facebook feeds (using Excel and Websnapper), involving coding of more than 5,000 unique posts.

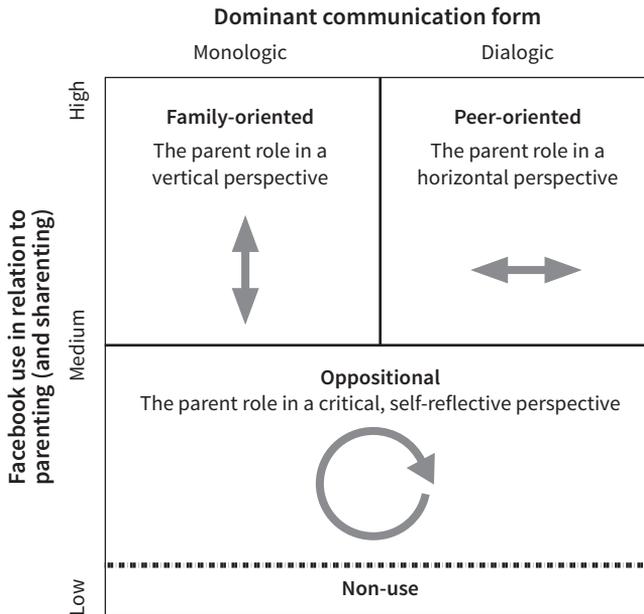
### Analysis: Four types of communicative orientation

The analysis revealed that in terms of use of Facebook as an SNS, *sharenting* was an important focal point for negotiation of cultural norms and ideals for the participants in their new role as parents. This complex intertwining of parenting practices and communicative practices – and the values, norms and aesthetics behind – can in sum be conceptualised as specific *communicative orientations* as a proposed new theoretical denotation. This concept covers a continuum of dispositions and patterns of communication and media usage ranging from behaviour patterns that are internalised, unarticulated and taken for granted at one end, to self-reflective strategies for conduct at the other.

Building on the concept of communicative orientation, the analysis included four analytical perspectives: 1) what meanings the parents would attach to the use of Facebook in relation to parenthood; 2) what and how much they would post in relation to parenthood; 3) who constituted their imagined (or possibly targeted) audience for sharenting; and 4) how they would relate to and construct their parental identity in relation to sharenting. The strategy for summarising the analysis of the extensive material was based on Weber’s (1904/1988) concept of ideal types, which has been developed as a method of comparing and interpreting empirical data within qualitative research (Eneroht, 1984: 163-169). On this basis, four types of communicative orientation that characterise parents’ approach to sharenting on Facebook were identified.

Their basic characteristics and internal relationships are presented in Figure 1.

**Figure 1.** Four types of communicative orientation that characterise parents’ approach to sharenting on Facebook



The model identifies the guiding principles behind the communicative relevance and value that the parents ascribe to Facebook, and how this platform is used in relation to parenting and sharenting. The four types of communicative orientation are classified in the model based on two criteria: The degree of Facebook use in relation to the parenthood (vertical axis), and the dominant communication form (monologic or dialogic, horizontal axis).

In the upper left corner is the *family-oriented* approach characterised by an inter-generational, vertical perspective on parenting in the form of either metaphorical or concrete orientation toward family and family relationships. This results in a predominantly monologic communication form on Facebook where the family is the primary implicit recipient of sharenting. In the upper right corner is the *peer-oriented* approach with parenting at the fore. Here, sharenting becomes a fulcrum for sociality and the exchange of experiences, viewpoints and knowledge with other parents. This horizontal orientation is marked by a mainly dialogic communication form where peers constitute the targeted or primary implicit recipient of sharenting. Both the family- and peer-oriented approach typically imply a medium or high Facebook usage in relation to sharenting compared to the participants' overall activity level.

At the bottom of the model, however, are two types of communicative orientation characterised by not having parenting at the heart of Facebook involvement: *oppositional* and *non-use*. The oppositional orientation is marked by a negotiating, critically self-conscious attitude toward parenting, which involves reluctance or resistance toward sharenting on Facebook. This opposition can arise from a desire to maintain self-identity, interests and relationships that are beyond parenting, but can also be rooted in experiences of context collapse (Marwick & boyd, 2011), lack of control of the shared content or concerns about children's privacy rights. These characteristics imply that the oppositional approach borders on the lower category of the model, non-use. Non-use refers to a communicative orientation where Facebook is not used to communicate about parenting, either on the basis of an opt-out or passive use in relation to self-expression.

## Discussion: How the four types of communicative orientation are manifested

Based on the analysis, the core features and internal variation of the four types of communicative orientation will be exemplified and discussed below.

### *Family-oriented*

Parents who rely on family orientation use sharenting on Facebook to create and perform a family narrative and identity, to mark and celebrate intergenerational ties and to confirm family values such as tradition, the cyclic nature of everyday life and being part of a lineage. Big and small events are displayed on Facebook and visible to all Fa-

cebook friends, e.g. the breaking of the news about pregnancy, the presentation of the baby, developmental milestones including numerous “firsts” (first smile, first stroller ride, etc.). One couple who embraced this approach is Maggie (31) and Joe (31) (all participants were pseudonymised to comply with research ethics). They both have a short vocational education and live in close proximity to their extended family. They enjoy using Facebook to share their new family life, especially photos of their baby girl. Here, sharenting also cultivates affinity and connectedness between the couple, e.g. when they like and comment on each other’s posts. One example is when Joe comments on Maggie’s ultrasound scan: “It looks like you, sweetie.”

Extended family also emphasise family bonds by commenting on these posts, but these exchanges rarely evolve into actual dialog on Facebook, as they seldom exceed more than two speech units (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 2008). The family-oriented approach is therefore mainly monologic. Sharenting serves a relational and a ritual function, e.g. with family portraits often used as cover or profile photos to capture, confirm and display family intimacy. This helps strengthen social ties, norms and bonding social capital (Putnam, 2000: 22-23).

### *Peer-oriented*

This approach focuses on building and participating in heterogeneous social networks of peers whose common interest is the (coming or new) parental role, thereby bridging social capital (Putnam, 2000: 22-23). An important communicative act is to join and participate in one or several large (mostly closed or secret) due-date and parenting groups on Facebook anchored and initiated online. For peer-oriented parents, sharenting posts constitute a very large proportion of all their posts on Facebook. This is the case for Anne (24) and Louise (27). Anne lives in Aarhus together with Michael (26). She’s studying for a professional bachelor’s degree, and he holds one. Louise (27) is studying at a short-cycle higher education and lives with Kenny (29) in the same house as his parents in the countryside. Both women started out as members of “getting pregnant” groups and are still very active in parenting groups on Facebook (ranging from 10 to 500 members) and in sales and DIY-groups centred on parenting. The vast majority of these groups consists of women, but there are groups for men and both sexes, e.g. Michael takes part in a due-date-group for fathers. The peer-oriented approach is mainly dialogic. Most of the posts are centred on exchanging experiences, knowledge and views on the ups and downs of pregnancy and parenting. Consulting questions are very important and address “what one can expect” and “what is normal”, but can also have a mere socialising and validating purpose, e.g. when Louise requests advice on choosing the outfit of the day for her baby girl.

In the peer-oriented approach, sharenting is also used to express dedication to parenting by presenting appealing, fun and often highly aestheticized photos of the child. Posts are often met with responsiveness from other group members, since offering support and intimate interaction characterise the groups, e.g. when Louise goes into labour and

one of the other mothers stays up all night and virtually “holds her hand” by offering her comfort and encouragement. This approach is generally marked by continuous projection, reporting, self-monitoring, information retrieval and, not least, self-identity production through sharenting, often in close interaction with peers.

### *Oppositional*

Unlike the family- and peer-oriented communicative orientations, the oppositional is marked by reluctance or resistance specifically toward the practice of sharenting. This is shown in the extremely low frequency of posts pertaining to parenting on Facebook, often accompanied by the parents’ ongoing discussions and negotiation of sharenting and expressions of dissociation with it both off- and online. Also, this is typically tied to different disconnecting practices (Light, 2014). The motivation behind this orientation may be opposition toward either Facebook as an SNS including its norms and affordances, particular parenting ideals and family norms or certain parts of the network on Facebook. A common feature, though, is reluctance specifically toward sharing child photos.

This is the case for Iris (28) and Anthony (27) who live close to Aarhus, and Kirsten (32) and Matthew (34) who live in a provincial town in Western Jutland. They all hold or study for a Master’s degree. Anthony and Iris rarely share personal stuff on their timelines, but mainly use Facebook for managing leisure, work and study activities through Facebook groups. The context collapse on Facebook (Davis & Jurgenson, 2014; Marwick & boyd, 2011) is the basis for Iris’ reflective opposition toward disclosing personal information. She appreciates the context collusion (Davis & Jurgenson, 2014), i.e. having one place to access all parts of her social network, but rarely has anything she wants to share with all her Facebook friends due to a perceived context collision (*ibid.*). For Iris and Anthony, the same logic applies to sharenting. Their concern revolves around the key properties of SNS, i.e. persistence, scalability, searchability and invisible audiences (boyd, 2011), since they don’t know “who’s watching” or “where the information will end up”. They worry that their son eventually might feel embarrassed about sharenting posts, and they think that children should shape their own digital identity when they come of age. This mirrors Light’s (2014) notion of an “ethics of disconnection”, e.g. not posting photos of others out of perceived duty or care. However, for Iris and Anthony, sharenting is also an expression of “bad taste.”

Kirsten and Matthew agree, but their opposition toward sharenting primarily stems from a desire to preserve a dynamic identity and interests that lie beyond parenting, e.g. news and art. As Matthew explains: “I don’t like it, when the child takes over the whole profile and identity,” and Kirsten adds: “I can’t stand photos of the predictable, boring nuclear family life.” Still, they don’t totally refrain from sharenting, mostly because family members request it, but they limit it to a minimum and deliberately share unconventional and ironic stories and motives, e.g. a photo of their son’s foot (instead of his face).

The oppositional orientation is marked by a critical, self-reflective attitude toward sharenting, but also negotiation of the norms and expectations of sharenting. Iris and

Anthony had initially opted out of sharenting, but when Anthony's father posted a photo of his new-born grandson without Iris and Anthony's consent, the new parents were forced to engage in communicative mending and decided to let their own voices be heard by posting a birth update on Facebook.

### *Non-use*

Non-use covers a communicative orientation in which Facebook is not used to communicate anything about parenting. This can be an expression of a conscious, active deselection of Facebook in general as an SNS, or an already passive (or dormant) Facebook use and limited involvement in family communication. Christina (29) is a Master's student and exponent of the first type. She has deliberately deselected Facebook, since she does not want Facebook to take up her time. Moreover, she does not want to socialise based on "automated friend lists" and finds it more honest and attentive when people have to "actively decide" to contact her, e.g. to invite her to a social gathering. Her experience, however, is that many people find her choice inconvenient and almost provocative, especially after the birth of her daughter, e.g. by reacting with comments such as "oh, so you don't want to share your daughter?". According to Christina, this is not the case, but she prefers to use more private communication channels, e.g. Snapchat, MMS or the online photo album she has set up to share photos of her daughter and keep in touch with her extended family. In addition, she dislikes the aesthetic that she labels "naked baby butt on a sheep skin" and stresses that she prefers to share photos of her daughter when the little girl is awake, active and dressed in normal clothes.

Kenny (29), Louise's partner, has also embraced a non-use approach. Although he has a Facebook profile, he rarely posts anything, as he prefers texting or meeting face to face. He solely uses Facebook to see what his friends are doing and play games and feels no need to post news from family life. Kenny's non-use owes to the fact that he is not very involved in mediated communication or information seeking pertaining to the new family life, since Louise "takes charge of all that." Non-use therefore constitutes a communicative orientation that can be rooted in a generally limited Facebook use or low engagement in mediated family communication; however, it can also reflect a conscious strategy where Facebook is purposely deselected for communication about parenting and family life. Although this case study cannot establish it definitively, its findings suggest that this latter strategy of purposeful "non-sharenting" – as well as the oppositional approach – is significantly more pronounced among highly educated parents.

### **Conclusion: To share or not to share?**

The case study shows that sharenting has become tightly interwoven with parenting practices and plays a key role on Facebook for the (re)production of parental self-identity and social approval, but also for building and maintaining social ties. However, the

study also reveals different motives behind and approaches to the pressing *dilemma* of whether “to share or not to share”, which is linked to the desire to be a “good parent”. While the identification of four very dissimilar communicative orientations that guide parents’ approaches to sharenting on Facebook confirms the relevance of said dilemma, other questions may also be raised.

The case study documents that sharenting – and family communication in general – has become integral to our shared so-called “onlives”, i.e. lives online, not least on Facebook. It is critical to note that parents are not the only ones to share. Several other groups of people also enjoy taking part in the new family life, not least extended family (it is debated if “grand-sharenting” merits individual scientific scrutiny). When discussing sharenting it is important to note that digital parenting is enmeshed in contexts comprised of “relational selves” (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017), as parents must navigate and negotiate the benefits and challenges associated with sharenting in terms of balancing their own needs and rights against their children’s. Indeed, parents must do so in the light of the double bind of SNSs that operate with conceptions of distinct and bounded identities, on the one hand, whilst fostering sharing and connection on the other, as this is fundamental to their business models (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017; van Dijck, 2013). Parents must also handle the communicative expectations from the social and cultural contexts they are embedded in. If parents refuse to share their family life, others might take the lead, e.g. like Anthony’s father who, out of pure joy, kidnapped the moment (and virtually the baby). Managing and controlling the flow of information related to parenting and family life constitute a new obligation for parents (Kumar & Schoenebeck, 2015). The majority of parents in this case study reported that they were met with requests to share their new family life on Facebook, especially pictures of their child; however, these tendencies might be most pronounced in Denmark and similar wealthy global North countries characterised by technology-rich homes and very high internet and Facebook penetration.

Future research should pay attention to how sharenting is also imbued with norms and expectations from the parents’ surroundings, and how family communication is embraced, negotiated and resisted across different generations and platforms. The complex interweaving of parenting and digital media inherent in sharenting comprises an instance of mediatisation that constitutes a new communicative pressure on parents today, as they are forced to deal with sharenting – and the specific consequences of opting either in or out.

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