

IS IT OKAY TO POST MY CHILD ON SOCIAL MEDIA?: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY ON PARENTS' POSTING CHILDREN ON SOCIAL MEDIA AND PRESCHOOLERS' SOCIAL ANXIETY

Michael Langlais^{1*}, Erika Elias²

¹Department of Human Sciences and Design, Baylor University, Waco, Texas, USA

²College of Doctoral Studies, Grand Canyon University, Phoenix, Arizona, USA

Abstract

The phenomenon of “sharenting”, where parents post content about their underage children on social media, has increased significantly. While often seen as benign, sharenting poses potential risks alongside its benefits, particularly as children are not consulted regarding their online representation. Concurrently, rates of social anxiety in young children have risen by 9% over two decades, potentially coinciding with the advent of social media. This study aims to explore parents' motivations for posting about children aged 3 to 5 on social media and to investigate how these behaviors relate to children's social anxiety. Data were collected from 19 parent-child dyads; parents completed semi-structured interviews and their preschool-aged child was observed for socially anxious behaviors. Thematic analysis of qualitative data revealed two main themes regarding parents' motivations to post: those who are motivated to share and those who are not. Motivations to share included keeping in touch with family and friends and showcasing children. Conversely, concerns included privacy issues and the belief that posting is unnecessary. Correlations and regression analyses showed that sharing to maintain social connections was negatively linked to performance anxiety, while children's requests to post aligned positively with perfectionism. Implications for parents' digital literacy and child development are discussed.

Keywords

Posting behaviors, social media, preschoolers, social anxiety.

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1. Introduction

The practice of parents sharing information about their underage children, such as videos, photos and personal stories on social media, commonly known as sharenting, has seen a significant rise (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017; Doğan Keskin *et al.*, 2023). While often perceived as harmless, sharenting can yield both positive and negative outcomes for children, with the risk of adverse effects heightened by the absence of their input in decisions regarding these online postings. Sharenting often starts in utero with parents posting pregnancy announcements and sonogram images, contributing to 90% of American children having a digital footprint by the age of two (Peimanpak *et al.*, 2023; Williams-Ceci *et al.*, 2021). Social media platforms like Facebook, have been described

*Corresponding Author: Michael Langlais, e-mail: mickey_langlais@baylor.edu

as being a modern-day baby book, capturing intimate family moments, most frequently of children being too young to give their consent (Iskül & Joamets, 2021; Peimanpak *et al.*, 2023; Williams-Ceci *et al.*, 2021). At the same time, preschoolers' (children ages 3 to 5) social skills have declined over the last decade, resulting in increased social anxiety, more depressive symptoms and weaker relationships (Lau *et al.*, 2023; Spence & Rapee, 2016).

Given these trends, the goal of this exploratory study is to understand parents' motivations for posting or not posting their children on social media and understand how these motivations relate to preschoolers' social anxiety. This study has some advantages, notably involving mixed-methods, where parents are interviewed and preschool children are observed in a natural environment. Additionally, this study focuses specifically on social anxiety, an underexplored area of social development in the context of parental social media use. The implications for this study are important for child development and parent-child relationships. Identifying how and why parents post their children and how this may relate to their child's social development can warrant potential policy implications that can support preschooler and family development.

2. Theoretical Foundations

Understanding the developmental needs of children and the effects that their parents' social media postings can have on them is an important factor in the parent-child relationship. Erikson's (1963) psychosocial development theory focusses on human development through the entire lifespan, by outlining eight distinct stages, each of which individuals must navigate successfully to cultivate a meaningful life. People's identity is impacted by how well they navigate each stage of development. Unfortunately, not every stage is navigated successfully and unresolved developmental challenges often reemerge as issues in later stages of life (Maree, 2021).

Many parents disclose that their need to be validated as a good parent and feel connected to others drives their social media activity (Aydoğdu *et al.*, 2023; Cino *et al.*, 2020; Holiday *et al.*, 2020). This aligns with Erikson's (1963) fifth and sixth stage of development, which emphasize gaining support and encouragement from significant individuals to build a sense of self and cultivating vulnerability and meaningful connections. Sharenting can negatively impact children, especially when parents post private and embarrassing information about them. For example, parents posting naked or semi-naked pictures of their children, homelife behaviors, friendships and showcasing children's attire, shares intimate aspects of their lives they may be uncomfortable revealing (Brosch, 2016; Moser *et al.*, 2017).

Alternatively, when people have successfully navigated through their developmental stages, social media posts can have positive effects on the parent-child relationship. For example, children seem more receptive to their parents posting about them when the content portrays them in a positive light, reflects parental pride in their achievements and is shared with their consent or thoughtful consideration (Aydoğdu *et al.*, 2023; Walrave *et al.*, 2023). This dynamic interplay between parental motivations for social media use and its impact on children underscores the importance of understanding the broader social and environmental contexts that shape these behaviors.

Additionally, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) socioecological theory offers a valuable framework for examining how various ecological systems, ranging from immediate family interactions to societal norms, influence parents' online activities and their subsequent effects on children and the parent-child relationship. The socioecological

theory is comprised of five systems: the microsystem, encompassing immediate environments like family and school with direct face-to-face interactions; the mesosystem, highlighting interactions between microsystem elements, such as home and school relationships; the exosystem, including indirect influences like a parent's workplace or social networks; the macrosystem, which involves broader cultural, societal and economic factors shaping development and the chronosystem, addressing the impact of time and environmental changes on an individual's growth (Bronfenbrenner, 1981).

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theory highlights the various layers of environmental influence on an individual's development which can yield both positive and negative outcomes. Many parents choose to share on social media as a way to engage with their environment, often believing it will not negatively impact their children; however, this practice can lead to unintended consequences such as negative comments harming children's self-esteem or parents prioritizing their followers' preferences over their children's needs (Doğan Keskin *et al.*, 2023; Kopuz *et al.*, 2021). Conversely, when parents practice mindful sharenting and protect their children's privacy, it allows them to choose in the future if they want a digital identity (Aydoğdu *et al.*, 2023; Iskül & Joamets, 2021; Walrave *et al.*, 2023), thus helping to reduce some of the social anxiety that is noticeable in preschool age children.

3. Children's Social Anxiety

It is not uncommon for children to be reluctant to speak or engage with unfamiliar people. However, social anxiety disorder, which affects approximately 9% of preschool-age children, is one of the most persistent forms of anxiety, often leading to long-term emotional challenges, including depression, social adversity and weaker social functioning (Kertz *et al.*, 2017; Mian, 2013; Rapee, 2014). Anxiety disorders in preschool-aged children can negatively impact peer relationships and social interactions (Danzig *et al.*, 2013; Dyson *et al.*, 2011), like attending school, birthday parties or other types of interactive events due to fear or embarrassment (Beidel & Turner, 2007). According to Beidel and Turner (2007), children with social anxiety may experience physical symptoms like headaches, trembling, nausea or stomachaches, along with fears of inadequacy. They might cry, exhibit selective mutism or avoid social situations. Risk factors include behavioral inhibition in early childhood, overprotective parenting that limits social skill development, genetic predisposition to anxiety, negative experiences such as bullying or rejection and developmental challenges like early peer neglect or social withdrawal.

Parents' emotional struggles can sometimes lead them to share about their children on social media as a way to seek social acceptance or fulfill personal needs for validation, even though oversharing may carry social stigma and lead to perceptions of them as less desirable acquaintances (Klucarova & Hasford, 2021; Ocakoğlu *et al.*, 2023). These challenges are often compounded by problematic use of digital technology, which is frequently linked to underlying parental anxiety and can strain the parent-child relationship. Additionally, anxious and overly involved parenting styles intensify these dynamics. Children's emotional challenges can shape parents' motivations to showcase their child's achievements online, fueled by a desire for social approval and validation (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017; Briazu *et al.*, 2021; McDaniel & Radesky, 2017; Ocakoğlu *et al.*, 2023).

Sharenting is increasingly common and influenced by various social, emotional and psychological factors. While parents may view this behavior as a way to connect with

others or validate their parenting, the potential consequences for children's development and the parent-child relationship remain unclear. Theories such as Erikson's psychosocial development model and Bronfenbrenner's socioecological framework provide valuable insights into the motivations behind sharenting and its possible impacts. However, there is still limited understanding of how these online behaviors influence children's psychological well-being, privacy and social development, as well as the overall quality of parent-child relationships. This study contributes to the exploration of these dynamics and emphasizes the need to understand the impact of parents' posting content of their children online on their child's physical and social development and the parent-child relationship.

4. The Present Study

Approximately 75% of parents post pictures or videos of their children on social media, such as Instagram and Facebook and only 25% of their parents ask their child's permission before posting (Ahmed, 2021). Some children and teenagers report feeling upset when their parent doesn't ask permission before posting on social media (Moser *et al.*, 2017) and this may be because approximately 25% of posts of children are not private, meaning the general public can view this content (Auxier *et al.*, 2020). Lay literature has recommended that parents be cautious about posting information about their children on social media, but these sources are not backed by empirical evidence. What is not clear is how parents' posting about their children impacts the child. Additionally, the rates of social anxiety for children and teenagers have increased 9% over the last two decades, seemingly corresponding with the inception of social media (Kertz *et al.*, 2017; Langlais *et al.*, 2020). Given that the average parent posts approximately 1,500 pictures and videos of their child online before they turn five (Bennett, 2016), it is imperative to identify the motivations for posting (or not posting) content of children on social media and how this relates to preschoolers' social anxiety. Therefore, we seek to answer the following research questions through an exploratory study:

Research question 1: Why do parents post or not post content of their children on social media?

Research question 2: How do the motivations to post or not post children on social media relate to preschoolers' social anxiety?

5. Methods

Procedures

All aspects of this study were approved by the institutional review board at Baylor University. Data for this study comes from two sources: parents' semi-structured interviews and observations of children during recreational free time at a child development center in the Southern Central United States. First, families with at least one child who was between the ages of 3 to 5 were emailed information about the study from the Director of the child development center. These emails stated the goal of the study, which was to understand how parents' posting children on social media was associated with children's behavior, what was involved, contact information for the Principal Investigator and a link to provide consent for them and their preschool-aged child. Parents were also told the inclusion criteria (be at least 18 years or older, be active on at least one social media account, have at least one child between the ages of 3 and 5 enrolled at the child development center recruitment site). The email was sent out to 23 parents who had

a preschool-aged child and 20 agreed to participate and provided consent for them and their child. When parents provided their consent, they also provided the name of their child, whose class they were in and their emails to be contacted by the research team to complete one-on-one interviews via Zoom. Of the 20 that agreed to participate, all but one was scheduled for an interview; the one participant dropped out due to time constraints. The interviews took an average of 25.4 minutes to complete ($SD = 5.33$). Once participants logged in for the interview, they were asked if they had any questions regarding the study; once those questions were answered, parents provided their verbal consent. Next, the interviewer started the recording and asked the parent to restate their consent so that it can be documented. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for analyses.

Simultaneously while conducting interviews, children were observed during outdoor time at the child development center. Undergraduate research assistants who were trained in observational techniques and who all had completed a research methods course in human development and family studies, were the observers for this study. Each child was observed by two students on two separate occasions during free time in the afternoon to increase reliability of children's behaviors. This decision was to ensure consistency and reliability in the observational data. Each child was observed for 10 minutes; at the end of 10 minutes, observers rated children using the observational tools of the study. Observers only observed one child at a time. Observational data and qualitative data from parents were collected from February 2024 to April 2024. Participants were not compensated for their participation in this study. It is important to note that during January 2024, the observers watched videos of young children in order to establish a baseline interrater reliability before observing children in the child development center. It took two weeks to establish a minimum of 80% inter-rater reliability for the observational tool used in this study.

Participants

Participants for this study were 19 parent-child dyads ($N = 38$). The majority of participant parents were mothers (78.9%); approximately 11 children were boys and 8 were girls. The average age of parents was 32.10 ($SD = 3.13$) and the average age of children was 3.98 ($SD = 1.11$). The majority of parent participants identified as white (78.9%); two parent participants identified as Black/African American, one parent participant identified as Asian and one parent participant identified as Hispanic. The parent participants spent an average of 47.98 minutes on social media ($SD = 34.87$) each day. Of the participating parents, 10 reported that they posted their children on social media and 9 reported that they did not. There were no significant demographic differences between parents who did or did not post their children online.

Measures

Qualitative data. The qualitative data collection involved a descriptive design, as the goal of this design is to describe phenomena that are not well understood by focusing on the "how" instead of the "why" (Braun & Clark, 2022; Nassaji, 2015). This design provides the research team the ability to develop a comprehensive summary of a specific phenomenon - what are parents' motivations for posting (or not posting) their children on social media. This summary involves collecting rich, thick descriptions of participants' straightforward answers to semi-structured interview questions (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Lambert & Lambert, 2012). This qualitative design was selected for its ability to describe how and why parents' post or not post content of their children on social media. Parents

provided answers regarding the frequency of how much they posted their children on social media and their motivations for why they posted their children on social media, by answering semi-structured interview questions. Examples of these questions included, “Please describe how frequently you post your child on social media”, “Why do you post your child on social media?” and “Why don’t you post your child on social media?” (if they said they that they didn’t post their child on social media). Probing questions were asked to get as much information as possible regarding these questions. Undergraduate research assistants conducted the interviews. The undergraduate research assistants were students who held junior or senior standing and completed a research methods course in their degree program. All research assistants also completed a training in qualitative research prior to conducting the interviews.

Observational data. Children were observed using the anxiety dimensional observation scale (ANX-DOS; Mian *et al.*, 2013). This tool includes multiple aspects of social anxiety; the current study applied seven different elements of young children’s social anxiety: hypervigilance, separation, self-soothing (reverse-coded), perfectionism, dramatic play (reverse-coded) and performance anxiety. The other subscales were meant for parents to complete and were not included in the current study (Mian *et al.*, 2013). Scores on the ANX-DOS ranged from 0 (*not present*) to 3 (*very present*). Reliability for this scale has been established (Mian *et al.*, 2013) and this scale has been used by other researchers studying anxiety with young children (Carpenter *et al.*, 2019; Whalen *et al.*, 2017). Children were observed on two different days within a two-week span, around the same time of the day (between 2:30-5:30 pm) while children were engaged in indoor free play. All rooms in the childcare facility came with an observation room, which allows observers to monitor children and the children are unaware of being observed. Additionally, observers wear headsets to capture all verbal interactions with children, teachers and their peers. This decision was based on ensuring that observers captured natural preschool behavior.

Data Analysis

Qualitative Data Analysis

Data from the semi-structured interviews was analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis following the steps described by Braun and Clarke (2022): familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, reviewing codes and searching for initial themes, reviewing the themes, finalizing and defining the themes and producing the report. The individuals involved with coding the data were the Principal Investigator and three undergraduate research assistants, who were all trained in reflexive thematic analysis and completed a research methods course. To familiarize themselves with the data, the research team read and re-read five transcripts, marking initial ideas for codes. The research team met to provide descriptions for each code to ensure they aligned with the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The research team then reviewed five new transcripts, marking codes; the research team would meet and adjust any existing codes and creating new ones. This process continued until all transcripts were analyzed, a codebook was created and saturation was reached. More precisely, we ensured that saturation was reached for participants who posted their children online ($n = 10$) and those who do not post their children online ($n = 9$). From there, the research team identified initial themes, reviewed the themes and then finalized the themes. Through this process, 76 codes were identified, which led to the creation of two themes for the first research question.

Quantitative Data Analysis

Once the themes were identified from the qualitative analyses, the undergraduate research assistants reviewed each transcript to identify which themes were prevalent for each interview. This data was then transposed into SPSS as dichotomized variables, with the theme being present (1) to the theme not being present (0). Next, correlations were conducted to examine relationships between parent motivations for posting (or not posting) their children on social media. Subsequently, regressions were conducted to determine if any of the motivations predicted social anxiety for children. Each subscale was examined in addition to the mean score of social anxiety. Because some parents described motivations to post and not to post their children on social media, all motivations were included in a singular regression analysis. Given the small sample size, Bonferroni corrections were applied ($p < .001$).

6. Results

Qualitative Results

The first research question of this study was to identify the motivations for parents posting behaviors regarding their children on social media. There were two broad themes: Parents are motivated to post children on social media and parents are not motivated to post their children on social media. These themes and corresponding subthemes are discussed below.

Parents are motivated to post their children on social media

This theme was comprised of five subthemes: *keep in touch with friends and family*, *provide information to social network*, *showcase children*, *document family media* and *child requested to be posted*. The first subtheme, *keep in touch with friends and family*, is defined as parents who wanted to share information about their children to those that they are close too, but may not be able to see or visit with regularly. Many parents said they were connected with friends and family online and it was an easy way to keep track of all the activities of friends' families and family members. One parent said, "I post to keep family updated on what is going on". Another participant said, "I personally only post to keep in touch with family far away, but I don't post all the time". Another said, "I like to let other family members see pictures of things we have done when we are on vacation, kind of like what my parents did when they were kids by having us sit and look at photo albums". The second subtheme, *provide information to social network*, was broader than the first subtheme. This subtheme reflects when parents simply want to share information to others they are connected with, regardless the level of interdependence. In these cases, participants mentioned their social media network or those that they are connected to, rather than directly referencing family and friends; this could include work colleagues and other acquaintances that could be weaker relationships compared to family members and close friends. One participant said, "I just like to share the amazing things that my kid does on social media for others to see". Another said, "My child gets posted infrequently, but when [she] is posted, I get a lot of likes from people in my social network." Essentially, participants often share information of their children to connect with others.

The third subtheme, *showcase children*, refers to when parents posted their children on social media to highlight their achievements. Many parents mentioned that they shared their children's successes on social media. One said, "I mostly post momentous occasions, like the first day of school or when she masters a difficult gymnastics move". Another said, "For me, it's a way to show others when my child

achieves a specific milestone”. Participants felt comfortable posting their child as a result of important moments or accomplishments. The fourth subtheme, *document family media*, references when parents post their child on social media as a means to maintain family pictures and videos. One participant said, “I only use Facebook to post about my kid because I can save pictures and videos on there for me to look at later...it’s like my own digital photo album”. Another participant said, “I pretty much post because I need a place to store pictures of kid and it’s free to post to social media”. Parents felt comfortable posting their child as a means to document family media. The last subtheme was *child requested to be posted*, meaning that some children wanted their parents to post them. One participant said, “My kid sees other kids on YouTube and stuff and then they want me to post them online”. Another parent said, “[Child’s name] wants me to post them to show them to their friend’s parents or their teacher”. Some children requested that their parent post them online, which motivated parents to follow through with this request.

Parents are not motivated to post their children on social media

The second theme resulted in three subthemes: *Posting children is unnecessary*, *posting poses privacy and safety concerns* and *overly sharing adds to a toxic social media landscape*. For the first subtheme, some parents felt that it was unnecessary to post their children online. They felt that posting was something that others did that took away from other tasks or were just others trying to show off. One parent said, “Some of my friends post their children online as a way to brag about what their children is doing and some just post their children all the time, no matter what they are doing...it’s ridiculous”. This participant felt that posting involved boasting or simply not sharing anything of importance. Another parent said, “I have friends who post their children three or four times a day and it’s really nothing - just their kid being a kid...I don’t see the point in posting someone that much”. Some parents felt that posting their children online simply wasn’t necessary.

The second subtheme, *posting poses privacy and safety concerns*, involved parents who felt that sharing information about their child online posed a safety risk. One parent said, “I do not post [my child] on social media for their protection” and later said, “I posted them once, but [their] face was not in the picture”. One participant said something similar: “I don’t know what sort of creeps are out there, but I know they are, so I just don’t post my kid on social media for their protection”. Some parents were concerned about privacy and how the post could impact their child in the future. One parent said, “I don’t want to post something that may be sweet and funny not, but private or later, embarrassing to [my child]”. Some parents were conscientious regarding their child’s feelings about posting and minimized posting behavior to maintain some sense of privacy and protection.

The last subtheme was, *overly sharing adds to a toxic social media landscape*. Some parents mentioned that posting children online can lead to bullying, negative comments or add to a culture that thrives on only showing the best of someone’s life. For example, one participant said, “I don’t want to welcome mean or cruel comments from others...I know that not everyone is mean, but there are trolls out there who seem to thrive on making fun of others”. Another participant said, “Social media seems to be a place where people post to show off and brag and I just don’t want to buy into that sort of culture”. Some participants felt that posting children meant showing off and believed that this would add to a culture where people only highlight the best attributes of their lives.

Quantitative Results

Next, the subthemes identified from the qualitative analyses were correlated with the social anxiety subscales of the ANX-DOS. These results are presented in Table 1. The motivation to post children to keep up with family and friends was negatively associated with performance anxiety ($r = -.67, p < .05$). Perfectionism was positively associated with child request for their parents to post them on social media ($r = .61, p < .05$). None of the other motivations were associated with any of the other symptoms of social anxiety.

Table 1. Means, standard deviations and correlations of study variables

| Variable | Mean | SD | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 |
|--|------|-----|-----|-----|------|------|------|------|-------|------|------|------|------|------|------|-------|
| 1. Hypervigilance | .28 | .39 | --- | .29 | .32 | -.03 | -.25 | .58* | -.27 | .09 | -.26 | -.17 | -.33 | -.22 | .18 | .34 |
| 2. Separation anxiety | .25 | .34 | | --- | -.21 | .30 | -.47 | .23 | .00 | -.15 | -.15 | .15 | .00 | -.23 | .55 | .45 |
| 3. Self-soothing | .17 | .33 | | | --- | .26 | .28 | -.16 | -.12 | .31 | -.31 | -.31 | .12 | -.17 | -.09 | .00 |
| 4. Perfectionism | .17 | .44 | | | | --- | -.24 | .24 | -.09 | -.23 | -.23 | -.23 | .61* | -.12 | -.07 | .00 |
| 5. Dramatic play | .33 | .58 | | | | | --- | -.18 | -.34 | .00 | .17 | -.35 | -.07 | .09 | .05 | .17 |
| 6. Performance anxiety | .04 | .14 | | | | | | --- | -.67* | -.17 | -.17 | -.17 | -.14 | -.09 | .05 | .17 |
| 7. Keep in touch with family and friends | .83 | .39 | | | | | | | --- | .26 | .26 | .26 | .20 | .14 | .63* | -.78* |
| 8. Provide information to social network | .25 | .45 | | | | | | | | --- | .11 | .11 | .26 | .52 | .00 | -.33 |
| 9. Showcase children | .25 | .45 | | | | | | | | | --- | .11 | -.26 | -.17 | .00 | -.33 |
| 10. Document family media | .25 | .45 | | | | | | | | | | --- | -.26 | -.17 | .00 | -.33 |
| 11. Child request | .17 | .39 | | | | | | | | | | | --- | .67* | -.32 | -.26 |
| 12. Posting is unnecessary | .17 | .38 | | | | | | | | | | | | --- | .88* | .82* |
| 13. Privacy and safety concerns | .33 | .49 | | | | | | | | | | | | | --- | .82* |
| 14. Toxicity of social media | .25 | .45 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | --- |

Note: Measures of children's social anxiety are measured on a scale of 0 to 3, with higher scores indicating higher symptoms. Motivations to post or not to post are dichotomous (0 = no; 1 = yes). Given the small sample size, Bonferroni corrections were applied, meaning only variables whose significance was $< .005$ were identified as significant (*). ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$.

Subsequently, linear regression analyses were conducted to highlight the relationships between the motivations to post or not to post children on social media with the subscales of the ANX-DOS. These results are presented in Table 2. The motivation to post to providing information to one's social network was positively associated with hypervigilance ($B = .95, p < .001$) and negatively associated with self-soothing behaviors ($B = -1.03, p < .05$). The motivation that posting on social media is unnecessary was negatively associated with perfectionism ($B = -.98, p < .05$) and positively associated with self-soothing behaviors ($B = 1.10, p < .05$). Additionally, parents' motivation to post their children as a result of the child's request to post their child was positively associated with perfectionism ($B = 1.09, p < .05$). The effect sizes for these models ranged from .39 to .82, meaning that 39-82% of the variance in symptoms of social anxiety were associated with parents' motivations to post or not post their children on social media.

Table 2. Linear regression results predicting preschoolers' social anxiety

| Variable | Hypervigilance | Separation anxiety | Self-soothing | Perfectionism | Dramatic play | Performance Anxiety |
|---------------------------------------|----------------|--------------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------------|
| Intercept | .05 (.75) | -.75 (.46) | .23 (.32) | .25 (.42) | .76 (.1.37) | .27 (.31) |
| Keep in touch with family and friends | .01 (.58) | .97 (.35) | -.30 (.25) | -.22 (.25) | -.51 (1.06) | -.67 (.25) |
| Provide information to social network | .95 (.67)* | .03 (.41) | -1.03 (.29)* | .01 (.29) | .39 (1.23) | .03 (.29) |
| Showcase children | .19 (.58) | .03 (.35) | .03 (.25) | .05 (.25) | -.59 (1.06) | -.01 (.25) |
| Document family media | .29 (.58) | .34 (.35) | .05 (.25) | .07 (.26) | .01 (1.07) | -.02 (.21) |
| Child request | .03 (.67) | .58 (.41) | .60 (.29) | 1.09 (.29)* | .05 (1.02) | .05 (.19) |
| Posting is unnecessary | -.74 (.95) | -.43 (.58) | 1.10 (.41)* | -.98 (.41)* | .10 (1.07) | .04 (.41) |
| Privacy and safety concerns | -1.07 (.89) | .37 (.76) | -.99 (.54) | .02 (.54) | -.90 (1.11) | .07 (.54) |
| Toxicity of social media | 1.18 (.99) | 1.01 (.88) | .97 (.74) | .03 (.74) | .98 (1.32) | .13 (.74) |
| R^2 | .60 | .77 | .81 | .82 | .39 | .46 |

Note: Data is presented as standardized beta coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. Motivations to post or not to post on social media are dichotomized (0 = no; 1 = yes). Given the small sample size, Bonferroni corrections were applied, meaning only variables whose significance was $< .005$ were identified as significant (*)

7. Discussion

As technology continues to become embedded in cultures around the world, more parents will use technology to share their children on social media. The goal of this study was to understand why parents post their preschool-aged children on social media and how these motivations relate to preschoolers' social anxiety. The results of this study show that some parents post their children on social media to stay connected with others and showcase their children, whereas others choose not to share their children on social media either because social media was not part of their daily routine or because of safety and privacy concerns. These motivations had some implications for preschoolers' social anxiety, which provides some impetus for future studies and potential policies.

There are various factors that drive sharenting practices. A desire for validation of parenting skills and feelings of connection are some of the main forces behind parent's social media posts regarding their children (Aydođdu *et al.*, 2023; Cino *et al.*, 2020; Holiday *et al.*, 2020). Another factor becomes apparent when parents are trying to cope with children who suffer from social anxiety. Frequently, parents with anxious children will turn to social media as they seek acceptance or self-realization from other parents who may view their oversharing practices as tasteless (Klucarova & Hasford, 2021; Ocakođlu *et al.*, 2023).

Alternatively, some parents will not post on social media about their children due to safety concerns. The negative impact of sharenting is seen when parents post intimate moments like naked or semi-naked pictures of their children, homelife behaviors, friendships, attire and other private aspects of their lives (Brosch, 2016; Moser *et al.*, 2017). A parent's need to engage with their environment can lead to inadvertent harm to a child's self-esteem with the posting of negative comments and the prioritization of followers' needs over their children's needs (Dođan Keskin *et al.*, 2023; Kopuz *et al.*, 2021). These motivations tie into the theoretical framework of this study.

Erikson's (1963) psychosocial development theory emphasizes the lifelong process of human development, illustrating how a person's identity is shaped by successfully navigating distinct stages in which a psychosocial conflict should be resolved in order to experience healthier development in future stages. Failure to resolve these conflicts can lead to unresolved issues that may resurface at later points in life (Maree, 2021). Similarly, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) socioecological theory highlights the multiple layers of environmental influence on individual development, demonstrating how interactions within these systems can produce both positive and negative outcomes.

Both Erikson's (1963) psychosocial development theory and Bronfenbrenner's (1979) socioecological framework offer insights into the motivations and hesitations of parents regarding social media use. Erikson's (1963) theory underscores the importance of identity formation and relational connections, suggesting that parents' online behaviors may stem from their own unresolved developmental tasks or a desire to foster intimacy and generativity (Maree, 2021). Meanwhile, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) model situates these behaviors within a broader ecological context, illustrating how external systems, such as societal expectations and technological advancements, interact with immediate family dynamics. Together, these frameworks highlight the complexity of sharenting, demonstrating that parents' decisions are influenced by a dynamic interplay of personal identity, developmental history and external environmental factors.

Parental motivations for posting their children on social media appear to correlate with specific dimensions of children's social anxiety. For example, the current study revealed that posting to provide information to one's social network was positively associated with hypervigilance in children and negatively associated with self-soothing behaviors. This finding suggests that when parents frequently share information about their child with a broader audience, it may inadvertently increase the child's awareness of being observed and judged, fostering hypervigilance. Moreover, children who request to be posted tend to exhibit higher levels of perfectionism, reflecting a potential internalization of the parental focus on presenting an idealized image online. These behaviors align with Erikson's (1963) psychosocial development theory, particularly during the stage of "industry vs. inferiority", where children strive for approval and mastery. If these developmental tasks are shaped by parental sharenting, children may become overly focused on external validation, contributing to social anxiety symptoms such as perfectionism.

Conversely, parents who refrain from posting their children on social media often do so out of concerns for privacy, safety and the avoidance of contributing to a toxic social media culture. These motivations were positively associated with self-soothing behaviors ($B = 1.10, p < .05$) and negatively associated with perfectionism ($B = -0.98, p < .05$). Parents who prioritize privacy and safety may model behaviors that reduce children's exposure to the pressures of online validation, allowing them to develop healthier coping mechanisms. This cautious approach aligns with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) socioecological theory, emphasizing how a protective microsystem, such as a family that avoids unnecessary exposure to social media, can buffer children from the broader societal pressures represented in the macrosystem. By limiting their children's digital presence, these parents may reduce the likelihood of their children developing hypervigilance or perfectionism, fostering a more supportive environment for healthy emotional development.

Erikson's (1963) psychosocial development theory and Bronfenbrenner's (1979) socioecological framework offer valuable perspectives on these findings. Erikson's

(1963) theory highlights the role of parental actions in shaping children's identity and coping mechanisms during critical developmental stages. For instance, parents who post frequently to showcase achievements may inadvertently pressure children to align their self-worth with external validation, exacerbating traits like perfectionism. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) model contextualizes these dynamics within overlapping environmental systems, illustrating how parental motivations are influenced by societal norms (macrosystem) and peer behaviors (mesosystem), which in turn affect the child's immediate developmental environment (microsystem). Together, these frameworks underscore the interplay between parental behavior, developmental outcomes and broader societal factors.

The findings have significant implications for understanding the psychological impact of sharenting on children. Future studies should adopt longitudinal designs to explore how parental posting behaviors influence children's social anxiety over time, particularly as children gain autonomy and awareness of their online presence. Researchers should also examine cultural differences in sharenting practices to identify context-specific interventions, as privacy perceptions and societal norms vary globally (Peimanpak *et al.*, 2023; Williams-Ceci *et al.*, 2021).

From a policy perspective, raising awareness about children's digital rights is crucial. Policies could mandate guidelines for ethical sharenting, such as obtaining consent from older children and limiting the exposure of sensitive content. Educational initiatives targeting parents could emphasize the potential long-term impacts of online behaviors on children's mental health and identity formation, promoting more mindful social media practices. In conclusion, this study sheds light on the nuanced relationship between parental motivations for sharenting and children's social anxiety. By addressing these dynamics through future research, culturally informed interventions and ethical policy changes, we can better support parents in fostering environments that prioritize children's well-being in the digital age.

8. Limitations and Conclusions

Although this study expands knowledge on parental posting and subsequent consequences, this study is not without its limitations. First, participants for this study were recruited from the same child development center and the sample was small in size; as a result these findings lack generalizability. Given that this study was exploratory in nature, the same size was sufficient, but to make stronger claims about parental motivation for posting and the consequences of this behavior, larger and more diverse samples are needed. Additionally, children were observed during free time in a childcare setting. Although this approach made the observational measure more consistent, this approach does not capture children's behavior in other contexts, which also limits generalizability in this study. Future studies are encouraged to measure social anxiety in different environments, such as inside the classroom and/or at home to increase the validity in measures of children's social anxiety. Third, social desirability bias and/or retrospective bias may have impacted participants' qualitative responses. Fourth, although observational data is useful and less biased than parental report, parents' or teachers' reports may be more accurate as they know the child more than the observer. Future studies should triangulate data, integrating parents, teachers and observers to capture children's social anxiety. Despite these limitations, this study is one of the first to connect these variables in a study to better understand sharenting and how this behavior is associated with child development.

This study sought to identify why parents may or may not post their child on social media. Results found that parents may post to help share their child with their social network or to publicize their day-to-day life and other parents did not post their child on social media, often due to safety and privacy issues. These motivations were associated with some elements of children's social anxiety, but a larger sample size and more rigid quantitative analyses are needed to understand the relationship between these motivations and behaviors. These findings were also consistent with seminal theories in human development and provide some initial insight into parental digital literacy. This exploratory should encourage future studies to focus on sharenting and the consequences of this behavior for child development and the parent-child relationship.

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