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The capillary phenomenon of sharenting

Abstract

Research objectives (aims) and problem(s): This paper explores the phenomenon of sharenting—the widespread practice of parents sharing images and information about their children on social media—as an emerging area of interest in the educational sciences. The aim of the study is to critically analyze this practice from pedagogical, ethical, and socio-philosophical perspectives, with particular attention to its implications for child protection, identity formation, and educational responsibility in digital environments.

Research methods: The study employs a theoretical and argumentative methodology, using an interdisciplinary qualitative approach based on a review of academic, philosophical, and legal literature. The analysis draws on philosophical (Sartre, Foucault), pedagogical (Mortari, Rousseau), sociological (Bauman, Giddens), and media theory (Watzlawick, Barile) frameworks, as well as relevant legal and institutional sources.

Process of argumentation: The argument proceeds by first defining sharenting, then examining parental responsibility in the digital era, and finally presenting a pedagogical proposal rooted in an ethics of care, critical awareness, and the cultivation of digital citizenship.

Research findings and their impact on the development of educational sciences: The contribution of the study is the formulation of an educational vision that acknowledges the need to support digital parenting through reflective, dialogic, and child-centered practices. Implications for the educational sciences include the urgent need to develop training models and pedagogical tools that equip teachers, educators, and parents to address the challenges of online communication. Such efforts should incorporate media literacy and relational ethics into curricula and educational practice.

Conclusions and/or recommendations: Sharenting is not simply a communication trend but a crucial arena for rethinking educational practice in contemporary society. It raises fundamental questions about visibility, identity, and responsibility that demand pedagogical and ethical consideration.

Introduction

In today's social fabric, profoundly shaped by digital interconnectedness, we are witnessing the spread of practices that, while appearing to be ordinary and private, have significant cultural and pedagogical implications. Among these, the phenomenon of *sharenting*, understood as the practice of parents sharing online content about their children, stands out as a pervasive trend. It embeds itself in everyday gestures, family dynamics, educational processes, and identity formation, affecting both the sphere of intimacy and that of public representation.

In a society where identity is increasingly constructed through the gaze of others and mediated by images, sharenting exposes tensions that can be interpreted through the concepts of existentialist philosophy. Sartre's notion that human beings are "condemned to be free" (1946), and therefore must take responsibility for their choices even in the absence of absolute foundations, resonates today in the educational anxieties of parents who subject their children to constant public visibility. Posting a photo is not merely an affectionate gesture; it is also a form of identity storytelling involving subjects who are still developing, and it does so in a digital realm that often escapes intentional control.

From a pedagogical standpoint, this phenomenon raises fundamental questions about the construction of childhood identity, the protection of privacy, and the role of adults as mediators between the real and virtual worlds. The educational sciences, long engaged in reflecting on the meaning of the educational relationship in contemporary society (Batini, 2017; Mortari, 2006), prompt us to consider not only the present effects of sharenting but also its long-term implications. What space is left for a child's self-determination if their image has already been narrated by others before they can define themselves?

Sharenting, then, is not only a common habit but an emblematic manifestation of an era in which existence is exposed, observed, narrated, and often shaped by a public image constructed from birth. It is a phenomenon that raises philosophical, pedagogical, and ethical questions and merits thoughtful reflection—free of moral judgment, but attentive to its far-reaching consequences. The concept of *capillarity* is used here to convey a phenomenon that silently yet powerfully permeates the very structure of emotional relationships and family roles, revealing the fragility of a society that has made exposure a new form of existence.

This article is structured as a theoretical reflection seeking to outline both practical and reflective strategies that are capable, on the one hand, of responding coherently to contemporary sociotechnological transformations and, on the other, of preserving the foundational value of educational relationships and identity-building processes. This is achieved through a critical reconsideration of the use of digital technologies in family and social contexts. The present study adopts a methodology based on the critical reconstruction of major theoretical paradigms and available empirical evidence, with the goal of reinterpreting a phenomenon that—while not new—remains insufficiently recognized despite being deeply embedded in today's social fabric.

Sharenting: General overview and statistical data

The 1990s marked the beginning of the digital revolution. Over time, driven by globalization and the desire to bridge distances, individuals increasingly felt compelled to adapt to relentless, transformative changes in personal, social, historical, and cultural domains. This is a hallmark of a cosmopolitan society, which requires us to rethink concepts such as globalization, identity, and relationships: "Globalization is not an accident in our lives. It is a change in the very conditions of our existence" (Giddens, 1999, p. 76).

In continuity with this digitalization, the advent of social media in the 2000s gradually brought attention to a phenomenon that, in recent

years, has shown increasingly alarming patterns due to its widespread diffusion across generations, especially among adults and children: sharenting.

What is sharenting?

Sharenting, a neologism formed from *share* and *parenting*, refers to the habitual posting and sharing of information, photos, videos, and other materials by parents who wish to "tell the story" of their children's lives on social media. The tendency to share private information is often linked to a need for approval, validation, and self-esteem. This is consistent with the notion of a "culture of narcissism" (or "parental narcissism"), in which individualism is tightly intertwined with hedonism (Lasch, 1979). For such individuals, the internet—and social media in particular—functions as a mirror, reinforcing a growing inclination to turn one's life into a kind of display window, blurring the boundaries between public and private spheres.

Although still limited, existing studies demonstrate the growing seriousness of this phenomenon, particularly in the United States. A study by the University of Michigan found that 92% of two-year-olds already have some form of online presence, and in about 45% of cases, their first names are disclosed. The research shows that parents use social media to share their daily lives and to seek advice, and that many children appear online even before birth through the posting of ultrasound images. A recent European study adds that parents share an average of 300 photos and pieces of sensitive information about their children online annually. The main platforms used are Facebook (54%), Instagram (16%), and Twitter (12%).

Moreover, research conducted by the University of Bologna in collaboration with the Children's Digital Media Center at the University of California introduces the concepts of "city-agency" and "spectacularization." For instance, children in Los Angeles are often exposed from cradle to stage, confronting unpleasant or even criminal realities because of the roles into which they are pushed, which starkly contrast with the innocence of childhood (Ferrara et al., 2023).

This phenomenon is closely linked to the generation of digital natives, children born and raised in a highly technological world. Another key group involved in sharenting are millennials, born between the mid-1980s and the 1990s. As parents, millennials tend to prioritize digital life, documenting every stage of their children's development online.

Sharenting is not limited to spectacularization; it has also been associated with religious motivations. Sharing photos or videos of one's children may be seen as a way of highlighting the value of the gift of offspring. According to one interpretation within Islamic thought, however, displaying such gifts online may provoke envy or discomfort in others.

This phenomenon typically involves several distinct steps:

1. Collecting material on one's devices.
2. Selecting the photos and videos to be uploaded.
3. Editing the content using various tools (e.g., filters, stickers to obscure sensitive areas).
4. Adding captions to make the content more appealing.
5. Uploading, often motivated by the perception of social networks as archival spaces.
6. Waiting for feedback from followers.

Given the increasingly dense interconnectivity of today's world, there is a pressing need to exercise greater discernment and to cultivate critical judgment and deep reflection on the concepts of identity and education.

The necessary redefinition of identity and education

In light of the issues discussed above, it is essential to rethink the concepts of identity and education. These concepts must be considered alongside media education, which advocates for the sustainable and responsible use of digital technologies. It is crucial to emphasize the authenticity and reciprocity inherent in the educational relationship, as well as its ethical dimension. This ethical component speaks to the human need to relate to others, to welcome others, and, in turn, to feel welcomed and recognized. It also calls for a strong sense of responsibility from everyone

involved in the relational or communicative process. This is referred to as co-responsibility aimed at achieving shared goals.

These elements are fundamental to communication, particularly as highlighted in the first axiom of communication, which serves as a universal reminder:

> There is no such thing as non-behavior, or, to put it more simply, it is impossible not to behave. Now, if one accepts that the entire behavior in an interactive situation has the value of a message, meaning it is communication, it follows that no matter how hard one tries, it is impossible not to communicate. (Watzlawick et al., 1967, pp. 48-49)

What emerges from this is that despite the pervasive presence of technology in our lives, which sometimes seems to suppress communication, it is impossible not to communicate.

Communication occurs between two or more identities. With the digital revolution, media have played—and continue to play—a central role in shaping individual identities. In this regard, Foucault's concept of "technologies of the self" becomes relevant: the idea that certain technologies act on one's body, mind, thoughts, and behaviors in everyday life. Sharenting becomes one of the most conspicuous expressions of these processes.

However, it is not only identity that is at stake; the notion of education is equally implicated. Statistical data make this clear: a significant proportion of parents are willing to share nearly every aspect of their children's lives on social media. This tendency reflects the fragile and fragmented nature of contemporary relationships, aligning closely with Bauman's concepts of "liquid modernity" and the "adiaphoric society." These terms describe the fluidity of identity resulting from the progressive dissolution of stable, value-oriented reference points: "The world around us is fragmented into poorly coordinated pieces, while our individual lives are fragmented into a series of loosely connected episodes" (Bauman, 2003). In today's technological and globalized society, individuals are increasingly distancing themselves from traditional forms

of belonging—whether emotional, familial, or cultural. This shift contributes to a weakening of loyalty-based obligations toward others and a corresponding decline in parental authority. The resulting communicative void is evident in the primary relational context of the family.

As the traditional, monolithic, and stable family model has evolved (for example, the 2014 reform of Family Law in Italy, which replaced the notion of parental authority with parental responsibility and redefined roles within the so-called "2.0 family"[1]), our conceptualization of relationships has changed as well. Relationships are no longer seen as the ability to embrace diversity and coexist; increasingly, they are pursued as a means of self-fulfillment and personal happiness. "From a dual event, relationships have become personal events, situated between the private and public spheres" (Romano, 2017, p. 5).

The following quotations aptly capture the emergence of what might be called a new era of "showcased existence":

"Showcasing oneself implies an ideology of absolute transparency, that is, the obligation to make everything available for display" (Codeluppi, 2007, p. 21).

"The contemporary subject becomes a communicator of themselves in a way never experienced before, as they can, through digital means, produce a self-brand […] using the web as an optimal tool for 'staging oneself'" (Barile, 2008, pp. 2–12).

In this context, the term *showcased parenthood* is fitting. Many adults seem unaware of the risks associated with excessive technology use.

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[1] In 2014, Legislative Decree No. 154/2013—effective as of February 7—replaced the term "*parental authority*" with "*parental responsibility*" in the Italian Civil Code, reflecting a shift toward a more shared and collaborative understanding of parental roles. Article 316 of the Civil Code, as amended by this decree, regulates the joint exercise of parental responsibility.

These changes reflect the evolution toward a "family 2.0," characterized by a more open nuclear structure and a model of shared parental responsibility and collaboration between partners. For the full text of the decree, see the Official Journal or other reliable legal sources reporting Legislative Decree No. 154/2013 https://www.filodiritto.com/diritto-di-famiglia-la-potesta-genitoriale-cede-il-posto-alla-responsabilita-genitoriale

At the same time, they overlook the foundational pillars of relationships as envisioned by Buber—particularly the emphasis on the *We*, which gives value to the interpersonal space and recognizes individuality within plurality.

The concept of education must therefore be rethought in connection with the sustainable use of technology. While digital tools offer numerous innovative learning opportunities and support children and adolescents with diverse needs, they must be used judiciously. As Rousseau suggests in *Emile, or On Education*, effective educational relationships require the educator's strategic "absence" to foster autonomy, as well as the ability to initiate a developmental path that takes into account broader temporal and spatial dimensions. This illustrates how technology, when used thoughtfully, can support innovative and original teaching.

The challenge, however, is substantial: many parents, overwhelmed by rapid technological advances and the constant emergence of new apps, become caught in the web and inevitably lose their sense of direction. As a result, the authoritative parental role weakens, unable to maintain a clear boundary between the public and private spheres. The concept of education must therefore be redefined in close relation to the concept of formation. To educate is to form. Parents, as authoritative agents of change, are the architects of a child's "first form." It is in this early context that the first stages of identity development occur and where personal uniqueness begins to crystallize. This process is dynamic, evolving and taking on new nuances over time.

Dialogue, established from the earliest interactions, is of great educational and pedagogical value. It allows individuals to move beyond their individuality and to embrace otherness within the diverse contexts of social life. It is therefore crucial to make relationships *generative*: relationships that are fertile, nurturing, and oriented toward caring for the other as a person with a distinct identity. Such relationships require daily dedication and perseverance. This aligns with Don Lorenzo Milani's foundational principle: *I care.*

Addressing sharenting: Reflections and new perspectives

As noted earlier, addressing sharenting requires beginning at its roots. The first significant challenge lies in educating adults—especially parents. This involves fostering a greater sense of responsibility and critical thinking. Responsibility here entails being aware of one's actions and their potential impact on vulnerable individuals who must be protected from harmful or inappropriate uses of the internet.

While schools, through initiatives such as the National Digital School Plan[2] and European Social Fund programs for *Digital Citizenship and Creativity*, strive to create educational pathways that instill the principles of digital citizenship in students, similar efforts must also be directed toward parents. Parents need education and training to help cultivate a more conscientious *civitas*—a community in the original, etymological sense of the term.

How can this be achieved?
- Awareness campaigns on social media that promote constructive and responsible use of digital platforms.
- In-person training sessions that draw on participants' experiences, which can then serve as bridges for building common ground.

The idea of a "school of relationships" is especially relevant here. Such a framework could help bridge the gap between truth and appearance—a gap often widened by digital technologies. Digital tools should not replace relational bonds, but should instead enhance them by providing new stimuli and opportunities for dialogue. These opportunities can be strengthened through direct, in-person interactions, allowing for a renewed appreciation of the *gratuitousness* of relationships: the ability to give without expecting anything in return.

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2   Il *Piano Nazionale Scuola Digitale* (PNSD) is a multi-year strategy promoted by the Ministry of Education and Merit to support innovation and digital transformation in the Italian education system. It forms a fundamental component of Law 107/2015, *La Buona Scuola*, and aims to integrate digital technologies into teaching practices and school organization. See: https://www.mim.gov.it/scuola-digitale

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Used thoughtfully, the internet and social media can support the weaving of personal, familial, and social connections. They can help parents and educators reclaim their educational role and foster quality both in relationships and in the broader educational process.

Best practices for parents

Research on best practices indicates that parents should:

1. Familiarize themselves with the privacy settings of the platforms on which they share content.
2. Enable notifications that alert them when their child's name appears in online searches.
3. Consider anonymizing the information they share.
4. Use caution when posting location data about their children.
5. Involve children over the age of five—when self-awareness begins to develop—by seeking their consent before sharing images or information about them.
6. Avoid sharing photos that depict their children in vulnerable situations.
7. Reflect on the potential present and future implications of posting such content.

The role of pedagogy

Pedagogy plays a vital role in this context by promoting appropriate educational strategies within individuals' primary environments of interaction—early childhood centers, schools, and community organizations. Innovative teaching methodologies, such as theatrical communication, may be particularly effective. These methods yield short-, medium-, and long-term benefits and help cultivate soft skills, including relational abilities, empathy, teamwork, leadership, initiative, creativity, and imagination.

A balanced approach to digital and in-person interactions

Activities should be tailored to the age and developmental stage of the participants, gradually introducing more complex tasks that support self-discovery and identity formation. However, the solution is not to ab-

solutize either digital or in-person interactions. Instead, the goal should be complementarity, combining digital tools and in-person experiences in ways that:

- Recognize the importance of educational professionals.
- Encourage sustainable use of technology without isolating families, parents, children, and adolescents from an increasingly globalized and interconnected world.

Such a balanced approach could transform digital citizenship into **true citizenship**. The virtuous citizen would use sharing not to display themselves but to enrich others with their perspective and knowledge. In this way, social media could become *technologies of community*, fostering interconnectedness for social and educational purposes.

Regulatory and preventive measures

Given the scope of the issue, stronger regulatory measures are needed, such as more rigorous application of the General Data Protection Regulation (EU) 2016/679.[3] Although the regulation places responsibility for protecting minors' privacy in the hands of parents, these same parents often act without full awareness of the consequences. France offers a noteworthy example: authorities advise against sharing photos of children online without their consent, and violations can result in penalties of up to one year of imprisonment and significant fines.

Preventive education for younger generations

Preventive measures should focus on younger generations, who exhibit the highest internet dependency during childhood and adolescence. The principle of educational co-responsibility, first introduced in **D.P.R. 21 November 2007** n. 235 (amending **D.P.R. 24 June 1998 n. 249**), should be reinforced to reintroduce the concepts of relational complexity

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[3] General Data Protection Regulation (EU) 2016/679 (GDPR): https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/IT/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32016R0679

and education.[4] This includes teaching young people how to build relationships, form networks, and use technology in sustainable and human-centered ways (Elia, 2017).

Educating technology and its language

The notion of "educating technology" and its related language is not far-fetched. The **Treviso Charter**,[5] drafted in 1990 by the Order of Journalists, the National Federation of the Italian Press, and Telefono Azzurro, provides relevant guidance. Inspired by the **1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child**, the Charter aims to protect minors' privacy and ensure their growth in a safe, respectful environment. Among its recommendations are:

- Avoiding the publication of details that could easily identify minors.
- Ensuring that minors are not exposed to situations or broadcasts that might compromise their psychological or physical well-being.

These considerations should inspire **practical initiatives**, including training sessions for adults to help them model and promote responsible practices.

A Gentle Revolution

Ultimately, coordinated action between theory and practice is essential. Individuals must come to recognize themselves as **agents of change**, capable of contributing to a **gentle revolution**—one that strengthens identity and upholds the enduring value of *humanitas*. This ancient yet remarkably relevant concept embodies relational solidarity and attentiveness to others and their vulnerabilities.

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[4] D.P.R. 21 November 2007, No. 235, amending the *Statuto delle studentesse e degli studenti* (D.P.R. 24 June 1998, No. 249): https://www.normattiva.it/uri-res/N2Ls?urn: nir:presidente.repubblica:decreto:2007;235~art3

[5] The *Carta di Treviso* is a protocol signed on 5 October 1990 by the *Ordine dei Giornalisti, the Federazione Nazionale della Stampa Italiana* (FNSI), and Telefono Azzurro. It aims to regulate media coverage involving children and adolescents by protecting the identity and rights of minors appearing in news content. https://www.odg.it/allegato-2-carta-di-treviso/24290.

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