



Digital Media and Contemporary Family Life: A Critical Review of Sharenting and Phubbing

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Abstract

Digital media has become part of everyday family life. Parents use smartphones and social media to communicate with relatives, document family experiences and share information about their children. At the same time, phones can also interrupt face-to-face interaction when family members give more attention to their devices than to the people around them. Two practices that reflect these changes are **sharenting** and **phubbing**. Sharenting refers to parents sharing information, photographs or videos of their children online. Phubbing refers to ignoring or giving less attention to someone who is physically present because of phone use.

Although both practices have received growing academic attention, they are usually studied separately. Research on sharenting has mainly focused on children's privacy, safety, digital identity and parental motivations. Research on phubbing has focused more on relationship satisfaction, loneliness, psychological well-being and smartphone use. The family as a whole has received less attention, particularly in relation to how these two practices may exist together.

This paper reviews existing literature on sharenting, phubbing and digital family life and brings the two areas together from a sociological perspective. It also considers the Indian family context, where digital media is increasingly part of family communication but where intergenerational relationships and collective family practices continue to be important. The paper argues that sharenting and phubbing are different behaviours, but both raise questions about privacy, attention, presence and family boundaries. Understanding these practices together can help explain how families are adjusting to the growing role of digital media in everyday life. The paper concludes by identifying areas where further research is needed, especially research that considers the experiences of parents, children and other family members together.

Keywords: digital media, family life, family communication, phubbing, sharenting

1. Introduction

Digital media is now closely connected to everyday family life. Smartphones, social media platforms and messaging applications are used for communication, entertainment, work, education and maintaining relationships. For many families, these technologies have become part of ordinary routines rather than something separate from family life.

This change has both positive and difficult sides. A parent working in another city can stay connected with a child through video calls. Grandparents can see photographs of children growing up even when they live far away. Family members can remain in touch through messaging groups. At the same time, the same devices can interrupt conversations and reduce attention during face-to-face interaction.

Two practices help us understand these changes: **sharenting** and **phubbing**.

Sharenting refers to parents sharing information, photographs, videos or other content about their children on social media. Parents may share a child's birthday, school achievement, holiday, daily activities or simply a photograph they like. Such sharing can be a way of maintaining family connections, recording memories and expressing pride in one's child. However, it also raises questions about children's privacy and their right to have some control over their own digital identity.

Phubbing is different. It refers to situations where a person gives attention to their phone instead of the person they are physically with. It can happen during conversations, meals or other family activities. The person using the phone may not always intend to ignore others. They may be checking a message, responding to work or simply following a habit. However, the person on the receiving end may still feel that they are not being given attention.

At first, sharenting and phubbing may seem unrelated. One involves sharing family life online, while the other involves a lack of attention during offline interaction. However, both raise questions about how digital media is changing family relationships. Sharenting changes who can see aspects of family life. Phubbing changes where attention is directed during family interaction.

The issue is therefore not simply whether digital media is good or bad for families. A more useful question is how families are adjusting to these new forms of communication and interaction.

This paper reviews existing research on sharenting and phubbing and examines their relevance to contemporary family life. It also considers the Indian context, where family relationships often involve close intergenerational ties and where digital media is increasingly used to maintain these relationships. The paper brings together ideas from sociology, family studies and communication research to understand how privacy, attention and family boundaries are changing.

2. Research Gap and Purpose

Research on sharenting has grown considerably in recent years. Much of this work focuses on children's privacy, safety, digital footprints and parents' reasons for sharing. Research has also started to consider how children and adolescents feel about their parents posting information about them.

Phubbing has also received considerable attention. Studies have examined its relationship with relationship satisfaction, loneliness, psychological distress and smartphone use. However, much of this research focuses on romantic relationships, young adults or individual psychological outcomes.

There is therefore an important gap.

Sharenting research often begins with the question: **What happens when parents share information about their children?**

Phubbing research often asks: **What happens when someone gives more attention to their phone than to another person?**

Less attention has been given to what these behaviours mean when they are considered together within the family.

The family is important because digital behaviour does not happen in isolation. A parent's social media use, a child's response to being photographed, and a family's rules around phone use can influence one another. The meaning of a particular behaviour may also depend on the relationship between family members.

There is another gap in the literature. Much of the existing research comes from Western countries. Research from India is still comparatively limited, especially research that looks at digital practices from the perspective of the family as a whole.

This paper therefore has two main purposes. First, it reviews existing research on sharenting and phubbing. Second, it brings the two areas together to consider how digital media is changing family interaction, privacy and attention, with particular attention to the Indian context.

3. Methodological Approach

This paper is based on a **secondary-source literature review**. It does not present primary survey or interview findings. The aim is to bring together existing research and identify common themes and gaps.

The literature considered includes research on sharenting, phubbing, digital parenting, family communication, children's online privacy and smartphone use. The review also draws on relevant sociological and communication theories.

The literature search used terms such as "sharenting," "phubbing," "technoference," "family communication," "digital parenting" and combinations of these terms. Sources published between 2015 and 2025 were given particular attention, along with earlier theoretical works that remain relevant to the discussion.

The paper is best understood as a **critical narrative review** rather than a systematic review. It does not claim to include every study published on these subjects. Instead, it focuses on literature that helps explain the social and family dimensions of sharenting and phubbing.

This approach also has limitations. The literature is spread across different disciplines and uses different definitions and measures. Research on children and families in India is also limited compared with research from Western contexts. These limitations are considered later in the paper.

4. Sharenting and Family Life

The term sharenting combines "sharing" and "parenting." It describes the practice of parents sharing information about their children online.

For many parents, sharing is a normal part of family life. A photograph may be shared to celebrate a birthday or achievement. Parents may also use social media to keep relatives updated, especially when family members live in different places. In this sense, sharenting can help families remain connected.

Research shows that parents have several reasons for sharing. These include maintaining relationships, documenting childhood, receiving social support and expressing pride in their children. Social media can also become a place where parents present their experiences of family life.

Blum-Ross and Livingstone describe this as part of the way parents construct and share stories about their children and their experiences of parenting. From this perspective, sharenting is not simply about posting photographs. It can also be a way of presenting a particular image of family life.

This connects with Goffman's idea of **self-presentation**. People often choose how they want to appear to others. Social media gives parents another space in which they can present themselves and their families. A child's achievement or family celebration may therefore become part of how parents present themselves as caregivers.

However, this also raises a difficult question: **who owns the story being shared?**

Parents may have good intentions, but the content is about another person—the child. Young children may not understand what it means for their photograph or personal information to be available online. Older children may later disagree with what their parents have posted.

This creates a tension between parental choice and children's privacy.

4.1 Children's privacy

Privacy is one of the most important concerns in research on sharenting. A photograph that seems harmless at the time may remain online for years. It may also be copied, shared or viewed by people outside the parent's intended audience.

The problem is not that every photograph is harmful. The larger issue is that children may have little control over their digital identity when parents begin sharing information about them at a young age.

Research on children's perspectives shows that their views are not always the same as those of their parents. Some children may enjoy or accept certain posts. Others may find photographs embarrassing or feel that their parents have shared too much.

This difference becomes more important as children grow older. A parent may see a photograph as a childhood memory, while a teenager may see it as something that should never have been posted.

The question of consent is therefore important. Parents make many decisions for young children, but digital sharing can have consequences that continue into later childhood and adulthood.

5. Phubbing and Family Interaction

Phubbing refers to using a phone instead of giving attention to a person who is physically present.

The term has become common in research on interpersonal relationships. Studies have linked perceived phubbing with lower relationship satisfaction, loneliness, conflict and psychological distress. However, it is important to remember that phone use does not automatically mean phubbing. A person may have a genuine reason to use their phone during an interaction.

The concern arises when phone use repeatedly interrupts interaction or makes another person feel ignored.

In families, this can be particularly important. Family relationships depend heavily on everyday interaction. Conversations during meals, discussions after school, shared activities and small moments of attention all contribute to family relationships.

When phones regularly interrupt these moments, family members may feel that they are not receiving enough attention.

Research on parental phone use has increasingly examined this issue in relation to children. When parents frequently look at their phones during interactions, children may interpret this as a lack of interest or availability.

This does not mean that every instance of parental phone use damages the parent-child relationship. Parents also use phones for work, household responsibilities, communication and practical matters. The context and frequency of use matter.

The Indian research on phubbing is particularly relevant here. Davey and colleagues studied phubbing among adolescents and young people in North India and found links between phubbing, problematic internet use and perceived deterioration in relationships, including family relationships.

However, much of the Indian research still focuses on young people and student populations. There is less research that examines phone use from the perspective of parents and families as a whole.

6. Understanding Sharenting and Phubbing Together

Although sharenting and phubbing are different, they have one important feature in common: both involve **attention**.

Sharenting directs attention towards the digital representation of family life. A child's photograph or achievement becomes visible to an online audience.

Phubbing directs attention away from the immediate family interaction towards the phone and whatever is happening on the screen.

This can be represented simply:

Sharenting:

Family experience → online sharing → wider audience

Phubbing:

Family interaction → phone use → digital activity

The two behaviours should not be treated as opposite versions of the same problem. They are different practices with different meanings and possible consequences.

However, both raise questions about family boundaries.

With sharenting, the question is:

Who has the right to decide what part of family life becomes public?

With phubbing, the question is:

Who deserves attention during a family interaction?

Both questions are connected to how family members understand their responsibilities towards one another.

7. A Sociological Understanding

Several sociological perspectives can help explain these practices.

Goffman and self-presentation

Goffman's work on self-presentation is useful for understanding sharenting. Parents do not simply share information. They make choices about what to show and what not to show. These choices can communicate ideas about parenting, family happiness and children's achievements.

Social media therefore gives family life a public dimension that was less visible in the past.

Giddens and everyday routines

Giddens' theory of structuration helps us understand how digital behaviour becomes part of everyday life.

People use technology because it is available and useful. But repeated use also creates new routines. Checking a phone during a conversation can become normal. Posting a child's photograph after an event can also become routine.

Over time, people may stop questioning these behaviours because they have become part of ordinary family life.

Simmel and digital distraction

Simmel's ideas about modern life also offer a useful perspective. Modern life involves a constant flow of information and stimulation. Smartphones have intensified this by allowing several social worlds to exist on the same device.

A parent can be talking to a child while receiving a work message, reading a family-group message or checking social media.

The result is not necessarily a complete loss of attention. Instead, attention becomes divided.

Communication Privacy Management

Communication Privacy Management theory is particularly useful for understanding sharenting. It focuses on how people manage private information and decide who should have access to it.

A parent's decision to post a child's photograph is therefore also a decision about the child's information boundary.

As children grow older, these boundaries may need to be renegotiated. A child who was too young to object to a photograph may later want more control over what is shared.

8. The Indian Family Context

The Indian context deserves particular attention.

Indian families are diverse, and it would be misleading to speak of one single Indian family structure. However, family relationships often involve strong intergenerational connections. Relatives may remain closely involved even when they live in different cities or countries.

Digital media can support these relationships.

A parent can share a child's school performance with grandparents. Relatives can participate in birthdays through photographs and videos. Family WhatsApp groups can help maintain regular contact.

In this sense, sharenting can become part of maintaining family relationships.

At the same time, the collective nature of family life can make questions about individual privacy more complicated. Parents may feel that sharing a child's photograph is a family matter rather than an individual decision. Children may not always have the same understanding of privacy.

Phubbing creates another tension.

In a family where spending time together is considered important, looking at a phone during a conversation may be interpreted as disrespectful or as a sign that the person is not interested. At the same time, smartphones have become necessary for work, education, communication and daily responsibilities.

This means that families have to negotiate what counts as acceptable phone use.

These negotiations may also differ across generations. Younger family members may see checking a phone as normal. Older family members may interpret the same behaviour differently.

The important point is that digital media does not simply replace existing family values. Families use digital media within existing relationships, expectations and responsibilities. At the same time, repeated digital practices can slowly change those expectations.

9. Family Boundaries in the Digital Age

The discussion above suggests that sharenting and phubbing can both be understood as forms of **family boundary management**.

Sharenting affects the boundary between private and public family life.

Phubbing affects the boundary between digital and face-to-face interaction.

These boundaries are not fixed. They are negotiated.

For example, a parent may consider a child's birthday photograph suitable for sharing with close relatives but not with the public. A teenager may accept photographs being shared within a family group but object to them being posted publicly.

Similarly, a family may consider checking a phone acceptable when someone is waiting for an important work message but unacceptable during a family meal.

The problem is that these rules are often not clearly discussed.

Families may have assumptions about what is acceptable without ever talking about them. This can create conflict when members have different expectations.

Children may think:

"My parents should ask me before posting my photograph."

Parents may think:

"I am sharing it because I am proud of you."

One person may see care while another sees a loss of privacy.

The same difference can occur with phubbing. A parent may think:

"I am just replying to an important message."

The child may experience it as:

"My parents are not listening to me."

Understanding these differences is important because the meaning of digital behaviour is not determined only by the person using the device. It also depends on how other family members experience it.

10. Discussion

The literature shows that both sharenting and phubbing have positive and negative dimensions.

Sharenting can help families stay connected and preserve memories. It can also create concerns about children's privacy and control over their digital identity.

Phone use can help parents manage work and family responsibilities. It can also interrupt conversations and reduce feelings of connection when it becomes excessive.

It would therefore be too simple to describe either practice as inherently harmful.

A more useful approach is to examine **when, why and how** the behaviour takes place.

Three issues stand out.

First, attention is becoming more divided.

Family members can now be involved in several interactions at the same time. Being physically present does not always mean being fully attentive.

Second, the boundary between private and public family life is changing.

Family experiences can be shared with large audiences almost instantly. This is particularly important for children, who may not have chosen to create a digital identity.

Third, digital behaviour is becoming part of family norms.

What initially seems unusual can become routine. Families may gradually develop new ideas about when phones should be used, what can be posted and who should be consulted.

These changes require more than individual advice about "using phones less." They require conversations within families about privacy, attention and expectations.

11. Research Gaps and Future Directions

There are several areas where future research can contribute.

First, more studies need to examine **families rather than individuals**. Parents, children and other family members may experience the same digital behaviour differently. Studying only one member can therefore provide an incomplete picture.

Second, children's perspectives need greater attention. Existing research increasingly recognises children's concerns about sharenting, but younger children remain underrepresented. More research is needed on how ideas about privacy and consent change as children grow.

Third, more Indian research is needed. Existing Indian studies provide useful evidence, but much of the research focuses on young people or urban populations. Research should include different regions, socioeconomic groups and family structures.

Fourth, future studies should consider both sharenting and phubbing together. This does not mean assuming that one causes the other. Rather, it means asking whether they are shaped by common family routines and attitudes towards digital media.

Fifth, longitudinal research would be useful. Digital habits and family relationships change over time. A single survey cannot fully capture these changes.

Finally, future research should avoid treating digital media only as a problem. For many families, smartphones and social media are important tools for maintaining relationships, especially when relatives live far apart.

12. Implications

The findings from the existing literature have implications for families, researchers and policymakers.

For families, the focus should be on communication rather than strict rules alone. Parents and children can discuss what kinds of information can be shared, who can see it and when phones should be kept aside during family interactions.

Children should also have opportunities to express their preferences as they become old enough to understand the implications of online sharing.

For researchers, there is a need to study digital practices in their everyday context. Instead of asking only how often someone uses a phone, research should also ask what the phone is being used for, who is present and how other family members experience that use.

For policymakers, children's digital privacy needs continued attention. The Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023 provides an important legal framework concerning children's personal data. However, legal protection alone cannot resolve all questions around family sharing. Parents also need digital literacy and awareness about children's developing rights and privacy.

13. Limitations

This paper has some limitations.

It is a narrative review rather than a systematic review. It therefore does not claim to include every study on sharenting and phubbing.

The existing literature is also uneven. Research on phubbing is more developed in some areas, while research on children's experiences of sharenting is still growing.

The Indian literature is particularly limited. Therefore, the discussion of Indian families is mainly based on available research and sociological interpretation rather than on evidence that can represent all Indian families.

Finally, the connection proposed between sharenting and phubbing is conceptual. It needs to be examined through future empirical research.

14. Conclusion

Digital media has become part of family life. It has changed how families communicate, share memories and remain connected across distance. It has also introduced new questions about privacy and attention.

Sharenting and phubbing show two different sides of this change.

Sharenting allows parents to share children's lives with others. It can strengthen family connections and preserve memories, but it can also raise questions about children's privacy and control over their digital identity.

Phubbing shows what happens when digital attention competes with face-to-face interaction. Phone use can be useful and necessary, but repeated distraction can affect how family members experience one another.

The two practices should not be treated as simple evidence that technology is damaging families. Nor should their positive uses be ignored. Their significance lies in the new negotiations they create within family life.

Families now have to decide what should remain private, what can be shared, when phones should be used and when attention should remain with the people who are physically present.

These questions are especially important in India, where close intergenerational relationships continue to be an important part of family life while digital media is becoming increasingly common.

The future of family life is therefore unlikely to be either completely digital or completely disconnected from technology. Instead, families will continue to negotiate how digital tools fit into their relationships.

Understanding this process requires research that listens to different members of the family and looks at digital practices as part of everyday life rather than as isolated behaviours. Sharenting and phubbing provide two useful starting points for understanding this larger change.

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