


SHARENTING IN TOURISM, HOSPITALITY, AND LEISURE: WHEN PRIDE IN YOUR CHILDREN MIGHT PUT THEM AT RISK

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Viewpoint

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Ensuring the protection and wellbeing of children and young people is a perennial topic of concern for parents, governments and society in general. However, given the proliferation of internet and social media use in all aspects of people's lives nowadays, and the influences these have on children's physical and psychological wellbeing in particular, these media have become a new area of concern. Consequently, researching social media has become a hot research topic across a wide range of different disciplines such as health economics, psychology, and psychiatry (see e.g., McDool et al., 2020; O'Reilly et al., 2018). In responding to such concerns and the need for sound research, Emmanuel Macron, the French president, commissioned a report into the negative impacts on children's wellbeing of smartphone use, access to social media and other relevant platforms such as Tik Tok, Instagram and Snapchat. The French report was asked to produce guidelines for a wide range of groups, including parents. The report proposed a ban on the use of smartphones for those under 11 years of age and the limiting of social media for under 15-years-olds across France (Chrisafis, 2024). The aim of France's pioneering approach is not to exclude children from engaging with social media. Rather it aims to enable children to take advantage of smartphones, social media, and internet and to access these only at the right ages and with appropriate practices so as to ensure the wellbeing and healthy physical and intellectual development of children under the age of 18—the age of majority in France. The report also set out to provide clear guidelines around social media for others, including parents.

Children's usage of social media is not, however, the only site of interest for researchers. Attention has also been given to parents' use of social networking sites. As these have become a significant aspect of people's daily routines, parents are now using online channels to share updates about their children more frequently (Verswijvel et al., 2019). They do so for various reasons such as memorialising their children's special occasions for them, recording their milestones and daily lives, and seeking support from and offering advice to other parents (Bessant, 2022). While parents have always been proud of sharing news about their children and their achievements and activities with others, the phenomenon of parents' displaying information about their children on social network sites through pictures, videos, and status updates is referred to as "sharenting" (Verswijvel et al., 2019). As an emerging term in academic literature, sharenting is a combination of the two terms "parenting" and "sharing" (Marasli et al., 2016). According to Verswijvel et al. (2019), parents can choose to share their children's information using either their own profiles or their children's profiles and can disseminate this information across various social network sites such as YouTube. A brief review of YouTube confirmed that contents (i.e., videos, pictures, and status updates) involving children are widespread across different themes and categories, including education, travel, and sports. Although the concept of sharenting has been thoroughly discussed across a number of disciplines in terms of whether it is a good or a bad thing (see e.g., Verswijvel et al., 2019), the French report does, nevertheless, strike a note of caution about treating children as "merchandise", and because, as Li (2022) observed, the voices and interests of children are frequently overlooked or not given enough attention in the world of adults.

As a tourism scholar, I have noticed the exponential growth over the last decade in the use of social network sites to cover travel-related activities through such things as live-streaming tourism, travel vloggers, travel YouTubers, travel bloggers etc. (see e.g., Zhang et al., 2024). However, to date, no research has paid attention to the concept of sharenting in the tourism, hospitality, and leisure literatures. This gap in the literature is surprising, given that sharenting can be used to monetise tourism content involving children and the recent calls for urgent attention to be paid to increasing child protection (e.g., Government of Western Australia, 2024) and specific policy making to ensure children, as a vulnerable group, will not have their rights compromised through the lens of sharenting in tourism.

Tourism is conventionally perceived as involving generally positive activities. This image seems to offer a perfect match with sharenting, as it allows parents to share their exciting travelling experiences as part of their daily lives with their children. However, relevant literature that focuses on sharenting also indicates it carries a number of negatives for children. According to Kopecky et al. (2020), parents who divulge a plethora of sensitive details regarding their child on social media platforms, including information pertaining to the child's wellbeing, interests, residence, educational background etc., may inadvertently provide ammunition for potential humiliation or cyberbullying in the future. Moreover, parents may exploit their children by

leveraging them to bolster and advocate for their own political beliefs or for financial gain. The key issue here is that building their child's identity online without the child's consent not only compromises the child's privacy, but also shows parents' limited perception and awareness of the potential risks their behaviour could inadvertently pose for their child (Kopecky et al., 2020). Moreover, inappropriate sharenting behaviours can also potentially lead to opening their children up to social harms and crimes, including antagonistic online behaviours, child pornography, identity theft, unwanted digital exposure, and digital commodification (Lavorgna et al., 2023).

This viewpoint aims to highlight the worrying research gap associated with sharenting in the tourism, hospitality, and leisure domains. Given the rapid increase in research involving the intersection between tourism and social media usage, it is evident that there is an urgent need to conduct further research into the uploading of travel-related contents involving children onto social network sites. As such content can attract millions of views, it can generate considerable financial rewards for content creators. Here, it is worth reiterating the French report's concern about those who seek to monetise children as merchandise on social media.

As a vulnerable social group, it is important that children are protected from all forms of harm, including from exposure in the tourism media. I foresee the need for a wave of research that focuses on sharenting in tourism, as the sharenting phenomenon is so closely bound up with our lives nowadays. It is, however, hoped that our tourism community will conduct meaningful research that goes well beyond oversimplistic studies (e.g., those that only use social media-based user generated contents as the data source) or employ a simple research design using sectional survey or qualitative interviews with small samples. Rather, it is hoped that through collaborations with other adjacent disciplines, such as child education, psychology, and criminology, examination of the critical phenomenon of sharenting in the tourism context can facilitate relevant policy making to protect children from suffering unnecessary harms from adults.

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