University of
**Southampton**

# How to prevent harmful sharenting:

## Mitigating digital risks and systemic vulnerabilities

—

ProTechThem - Building Awareness
for Safer and Technology-Savvy Sharenting

# SHARENTING AND DIGITAL RISKS

Given the increasing impact of social media platform and other digital technologies on our lives, 'sharenting' – the potentially harmful practice of sharing of identifying and sensitive information of minors online by parents or other legal guardians – has become a phenomenon of social importance. The practice has direct implications for cyber safety, being at the basis of a range of digital risks. Beyond risks due to the negative psychological repercussions of ignoring children's view about whether or not they wish to have an online identity, there are concerns regarding the potential for grooming and child abuse, and the potential for identity crimes (such as identity fraud and identity theft). These issues warrant attention, particularly because today's children, in a few years, will be the ones employing digital identities in many aspects of their lives, and will need a clean and curated digital identity to be fully part of many aspects of society.

In many cases, harmful sharenting is done with the best intentions, or at worst without consideration of parental duty of care. Yet, even when sharenting is well-intended, the sharers (who are responsible for the information they give and share) become those enabling digital risks to occur. As such, harm prevention and mitigation measures should distinguish between harmful vs non-harmful sharenting practices. The measures should also aim to debunk sharenting myths and raise awareness.

# ABOUT PROTECHTHEM

This policy brief is based on the first part of the ESCR-funded project ProTechThem - Building Awareness for Safer and Technology-Savvy Sharenting, led by the University of Southampton (Department of Sociology, Social Policy and Criminology). The project contributes to evidence of criminogenic factors that lead to serious (cyber) crimes and harms while offering solutions in the form of practical guidance on how best to prevent and mitigate them and promote cyber security behaviours amongst the public. ProTechThem employs a multidisciplinary method design including analyses from criminological, sociological, legal, and computational perspectives.

In the first part of the project, we focused on the social aspects of sharenting, particularly how the media portray the sharenters and risks, and the technical contexts relating to the digital technologies that enable the practice. To these ends, we analysed media-reported cases where sharenting led to the victimisation of minors, identifying existing vulnerabilities while demystifying media reported risks. We also analysed the potentially criminogenic and harming features of a range of social media platforms to examine whether the platforms have regulatory loopholes that can render sharenting risky for affected children.
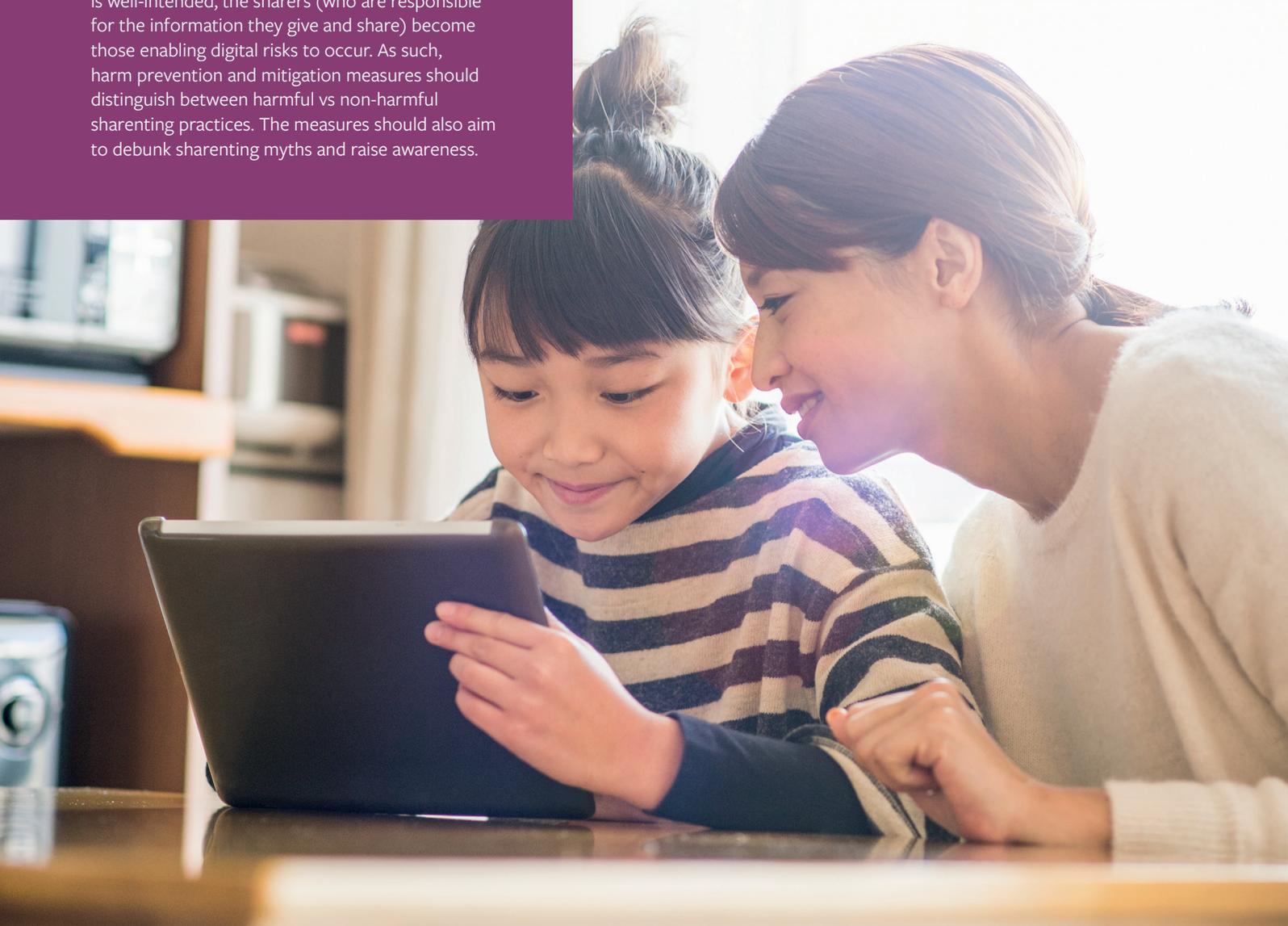
# HIGHLIGHTS

## 1. Avoiding moral panics, while fighting underreporting

Despite the existence of many publications amplifying the risks of sharenting by associating this practice with various forms of victimisation, potentially fuelling a moral panic[1] , only few of them actually report real-life victimisation cases. Most publications refer solely to risks.

Nonetheless, the scarce reporting of actual cases where sharenting led to the victimisation of minors does not imply that far more crimes or otherwise harmful activities linked to sharenting do not occur. Since sharenting generally happens in domestic settings and it is essentially a digital activity, it is likely that significant underreporting occurs.

## 2. Improving our knowledge of harmful sharenting

By analysing media reported cases of harmful sharenting, we identified some trends pertaining to (among other things) the gender distribution of sharenters and victims which highlights mothers and female minors respectively. The role of financial and social benefits in driving sharenting practice was also evident. We also identified the lack of a coordinated strategy for addressing sharenting-adjacent crimes.

## 3. Unravelling systemic vulnerabilities

By identifying contextual social issues pertaining to the actual reported crimes and harmful events linked to sharenting, our study unravelled technical aspects, specifically systemic vulnerabilities given the lack of effective measures instituted by platform companies to prevent or address manifestations of harmful sharenting practices.

## 4. Recognising the harms

The media reports we analysed discuss to a certain extent the existence of emotional harms. But the potential for other types of social or (future and potential) financial harms suffered by the minors, or risks to their current and future digital inclusion and citizenship, are not addressed. This suggests that these elements are not yet sufficiently part of the public debate, leaving the public including sharenters poorly informed. The sharenters appear unprepared in their new role as both gatekeepers and gate-openers of exposed identities.

## 5. The role of social media platforms

The sharenters engaged in forms of harmful sharenting are enabled by social media platforms with business models that emphasise monetisation and profit over ethical considerations such as effective content moderation for the protection of affected minors. In our work, we identified a series of regulatory risks, based on several indicators. One is limited accessible information. Another is inconsistency across platforms and gaps in the regulations and implementation mechanisms targeted at harmful sharenting. We also assessed sharenting vulnerabilities by considering the following indicators: attractiveness, which in our case, depends on desirability and ease of sharing potentially sensitive information in a specific social media context; shareability and availability (respectively, how easy is to share potentially sensitive information, and the capacity to access shared material by a third party); and lack of guardianship (moderation practices at different levels).

---

[1] Moral panics are identifiable objects onto which social anxieties can be projected, Since this notion was introduced by British sociologist Stanley Cohen in 1972, it became part of the jargon of sociologists and criminologists to describe strategies and rhetoric in the media coverage of crime and deviancy.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## 1. Raising awareness on sharenting and its risks

Policy makers and relevant services should consider promoting campaigns of sensitization and prevention focusing on sharenting and its potential harms, moving beyond the existing media-driven myths on the matter, to highlight for instance how certain forms of sharenting pose potential financial risks to minors and can undermine their current and future digital inclusion and citizenship. Some awareness campaigns should specifically target social media administrators and moderators.

## 2. Broadening the remit of state agencies to mitigate harmful sharenting

Potentially harmful forms of sharenting should be brought within the remit of the state agencies responsible for children's welfare (such as the Children's Commissioner for England, and the Italian Authority for Children and Adolescents [Autorità Garante per l'Infanzia e l'Adolescenza]. In this context, an ombudsman office should provide legal advice and support to affected minors and parents.

## 3. Better regulatory mechanisms and accountability for social media platforms

Harmful sharenting practices are enabled and even facilitated by the currently defective self-regulatory framework used by social media platforms. Regulating the power of platforms is not an easy task, and we recognise the importance of self-regulation and their implementation through moderation systems. Yet, social media platforms should institute more robust content moderation measures, as the mere presence of platform regulations does not guarantee efficient and effective practices, especially when it comes to non-criminalised cyber harms. Additionally, existing provisions regulating traditional mass media to protect minors' privacy could serve as a basis for better social media regulation.

## 4. Developing sociotechnical approaches to identify cases of harmful sharenting.

AI tools and qualitative analysis of social media content can be effectively combined to improve our current capacity to monitor and detect online risks. This involves social and computer scientists working together to explore the possibilities and the limitations of using automated approaches to gather and analyse digital data to identify cases of potentially harmful sharenting and alert both sharenters and social media administrators or moderators. The ProTechThem project will further this path of inquiry in its next phase.

## Find out more:

**Dr Anita Lavorgna (PI)**
Associate Professor in Criminology
Sociology, Social Policy and Criminology
University of Southampton

**a.lavorgna@soton.ac.uk**
**@anitalavorgna**

**Dr Morena Tartari**
Research Fellow
Sociology, Social Policy and Criminology
University of Southampton

**m.tartari@soton.ac.uk**

**Dr Pamela Ugwudike (Co-I)**
Associate Professor in Criminology
Sociology, Social Policy and Criminology
University of Southampton

**p.ugwudike@soton.ac.uk**
**@PamelaUgwudike**