

DIGITAL VULNERABILITY AND INTRA-FAMILIAL PRIVACY GOVERNANCE: EXPLORING PARENTAL ETHICAL DILEMMAS AND PRIVACY NEGOTIATIONS IN PAKISTANI SHARENTING

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Abstract

The practice of sharing children's photos and private information online is known as "sharenting," and this study investigates how Pakistani parents view and handle these ethical and privacy issues. Twelve in-depth interviews with socially engaged Pakistani parents of young children were subjected to a thematic analysis in NVivo 15 using an interpretive qualitative method. The results demonstrate that parents use sharenting primarily to celebrate milestones, preserve memories, uphold family ties, and obtain social validation; however, privacy and child safety concerns influence their choices. Image abuse, AI-based manipulation, identity theft, digital kidnapping, regular tracking, unfavorable online interactions, and long-term digital footprint risks were all noted by participants. What parents share and with whom is also influenced by cultural and religious values, such as modesty (haya), fear of the evil eye (Nazar), and family honor (izzat). In response, parents use private WhatsApp groups, audience restrictions, face masking, location avoidance, privacy settings, and increasing their children's participation in consent as they get older. However, families are primarily dependent on self-regulation due to a lack of knowledge about children's digital rights and perceived weaknesses in Pakistan's institutional and legal framework.

INTRODUCTION

In the past 100 years, the way people have created and shared identity, through media, has changed from the broadcast mode of communication to the interactive mode of participation. Mass media at the beginning of the 20th century focused primarily on the "one-way" method of sending out messages via radio, print, and television. People who listened or watched were passively positioned to receive the message sent. When both private and commercial media emerged

toward the latter part of the 20th century, they began to segment audiences and produce consumer-based content. The process of creating and distributing content was done by those at the top of large organizations. (Livingstone, 2004) The creation and rise of the Internet in the 1990s and Web 2.0 technology in the middle 2000s changed the role of the average person from being a passive consumer to also becoming a creator, distributor, and commentator. Social

media sites, including Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok, have allowed for two-way communication among users and have produced a new generation of user-created-content (UGC). Ordinary daily experiences can now become valid artifacts of media (Jenkins, 2006).

Social currency is created when you engage with others' posts by liking them, sharing them, or commenting on them. Algorithms hide boundaries between your personal and public lives because social networks provide a means to develop relationships with others through what is called networked intimacy (Marwick & boyd, 2011; Baym, 2015).

As a form of digital self-expression and as a means of documenting family history, many parents today post about their children's events and accomplishments online. These posts will eventually represent a digital history of their children before they reach an age where they are able to understand and make decisions regarding their own privacy rights. Sharenting – combining the words "share" and "parenting," has been shown to be extremely popular across the globe.

However, this trend has brought up serious ethical, legal, and psychological questions. Internationally collected data shows a significant gap between the desire of parents to celebrate their children's achievements versus protecting their right to privacy. As an example of this difference, Conti et al., (2024) conducted research in Italy and found that 75 percent of parents reported posting pictures or updates about their children on-line. Approximately ninety-three percent of these same parents had no idea that there could be risks associated with posting their children's photos online including identity theft, photo manipulation or exploitation.

Mostly all of this writing takes place in countries located in the Global North; however, this is true in the Global South especially in culturally similar countries such as Pakistan. Over 124 million people use the Internet in Pakistan (PTA, 2023); therefore, it is safe to say that Internet usage in Pakistan is growing quickly. However, most parents post pictures or write updates about their children in order to honor their family

name (izzat) but are also mindful of maintaining haya, which is modesty and discretion.

Pakistan's laws regarding computer crimes are contained within the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA, 2016). PECA is a law that generally addresses cybercrime without specifically addressing issues related to minors giving permission for their images or video recordings to be posted on-line. Therefore, parents in Pakistan must navigate complex emotional benefits vs. cultural obligations as well as the unknown risk of exposing themselves and their families to digital privacy threats.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

To identify the distinct ethical problems and privacy issues that (for example: a child is unable to give their permission for use of his/her information, fear of misuse of data, digital kidnapping, use of an artificial intelligence (AI) program against him/her), which are perceived or encountered by Pakistani parents.

Investigate how Pakistani parents create protective measures and boundary management strategies in order to lower the risk of privacy violations as they negotiate with other individuals' social expectations.

Determine if there is awareness among parents about the permanent digital footprint created by children on the Internet and evaluate whether there is a gap in legislation from the standpoint of law in Pakistan's current regulatory framework.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

RQ1. Which are the specific ethical and privacy risks that exist for the Pakistani parents in terms of child exploitation on-line, image misuse on-line and violation of consent to share content about their children online?

RQ2. In what way do parents have a sense of control over how they regulate the boundaries within the family and protect the privacy of their children from risk outside of the home.

RQ3. To what extent do parents understand the potential long-term digital footprint left by their children, children's digital rights and existing legislation to provide protection for families under national regulation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Children's Right to Privacy and the Consent Paradox

The central issue surrounding the ethics of sharing photos of children online "sharenting" is the privacy of the child. Privacy for children is a fundamental concept in many international frameworks including but not limited to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child ("UNCRC") which contains provisions related to the protection of children's rights to privacy (Articles 16 and 17). As such, scholars have argued that sharenting creates an immutable digital footprint prior to children developing sufficient developmental capacity to make informed decisions regarding how they want their private information shared. Empirically speaking, Conti et al. (2024) report that approximately 93% of parents who share photographs or videos of their children do so without obtaining permission from the child being photographed or videotaped. This disparity in decision-making authority among family members (parents typically having sole control over deciding whether and when photographs/video of their children will be posted) has been described by Steinberg (2017) as a form of "digital colonization" of a child's identity. Since children generally do not possess the cognitive ability to understand the long-term implications of exposing themselves digitally, parents bear full responsibility for protecting children from harm associated with parental decisions about children's participation in social media (Amon et al., 2022).

Privacy Risks, Data Exploitation, and AI Threats

Children shared on social media are exposed to serious security and data exploitation risks beyond consent. Parents share photos of their children which include geolocation details and personal metadata that can be captured by third parties. Brosch (2025) points out that innocent photos posted on the internet can also be scraped into facial-recognition databases. Lendvai (2024), for example, describes how these images could lead to identity-theft or "digital kidnapping"

where a stranger takes over a minor's visual identity to create fake profiles. Furthermore, corporations track algorithmically childhood memories to commercialize them as digital data streams. Developing nations like Pakistan have low digital literacy rates that will enhance these technical vulnerabilities. Rizwan et al. (2025) observe while parents say they are safety concerned about what they post, fewer than half know how easily they can be scraped or duplicated from platforms such as Facebook or WhatsApp.

Ethical Dilemmas in Parental Autonomy vs. Child Protection

Parents may have conflicting views on sharenting, given a parent's right to share about themselves is at odds with a child's right to privacy. As a means for parents to tell their own story, some see sharenting as another way to do so. However, other experts in law, ethics, and social studies say that if posting about your children violates their privacy or otherwise infringes on their rights as minors, then you are violating those rights and limiting your freedoms as a parent (Lendvai, 2024; Steinberg, 2017). In fact, Damkjaer (2018) frames the above as the result of a conflict of moral limits—parents' natural inclination to care for their children conflicts with the need to protect their children's boundaries of privacy. Moreover, as noted by Gotwald et al. (2024), most often parents fall victim to "ethical fading" — a state of mind where the momentary need for emotional validation leads them to ignore the future potential harm associated with exposing their children's data.

Regulatory and Policy Gaps in Pakistan

While organizations in Pakistan such as the National Commission on the Rights of the Child (NCRC) and Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) promote overall internet safety for all people in Pakistan, the country does not have an overall national strategy specifically focused on protecting children's digital rights. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that children are left vulnerable to violation of their digital privacy by both commercial entities and

family members. In addition, there are no legal requirements placed upon parents with respect to the protection of their children's online information (Privacy Laws & Business International Media Centre, 2018).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The research will use **Communication Privacy Management (CPM) theory**, which was established by Sandra Petronio (2002). According to this theory, individuals regard the privacy of their information as their property. As a result, they develop "privacy boundary" mechanisms to decide when to share what type of information with whom. Privacy boundaries depend upon individual privacy rules. Individual privacy rules can be affected by many variables. For example; culture, social norms, perceived risk vs. Benefit. When an individual shares some of his/her private information, he/she assigns to the recipient of that information the status of co-owners. The recipient of the information then agrees to abide by the previously agreed-upon privacy rule(s). If the recipient does not abide by those privacy rules, turbulence at the privacy boundary develops. Turbulence at the privacy boundary leads to various consequences such as; conflict related to privacy, lack of trust, etc., or unintentional disclosure of private information. CPM has been extensively applied to describe privacy management and information sharing in both interpersonal and digital communications.

In addition to providing a theoretical framework to understand the privacy/ ethics-related problems associated with sharing photos of children (sharenting), CPM offers additional explanatory power to analyze the role of parents in managing their children's personal information. In most cases, children do not have enough maturity/cognitive development to give an informed consent to share their personal data. Hence, it is mostly up to the parent to define the private boundaries for the child, while weighing the pros of posting pictures/video about their family on-line against their responsibility to keep their child's private life safe from potential harm. Additionally, CPM helps us see how parents' decisions regarding sharing photos/videos of

their children might affect the children's long term digital footprint. Moreover, parents' decisions might expose their children to significant risks such as identity theft, cyber bullying, unauthorized distribution of images/videos of children, misusing of children's personal data, etc. All these problems represent major ethical dilemmas related to sharing photos/videos of children.

Finally, due to strong influences from cultural/religious values like; family reputation, modesty, and parental obligations CPM provides a good fit to analyze how parents in Pakistan would manage their children's digital privacy, navigate their responsibilities, and make decisions regarding the sharing of their children's personal information on social media.

METHODOLOGY

This research was undertaken using the interpretivist paradigm which is based upon a qualitative exploratory research strategy in order to investigate how Pakistani parents perceive privacy and ethical issues concerning sharenting. Using a qualitative method provided insight into participants' perspectives and experiences as well as feelings about posting information (about) children on social media platforms.

Parents of children who are under eighteen years of age who utilize social media, and live in Pakistan were selected by purposive sampling. The researcher collected data until they reached saturation of data, which occurred when twelve semi-structured in-depth interviews had been completed. Each participant was interviewed either face-to-face or remotely via online video conferencing; depending on what option best suited each participant's availability. The interview questions were developed in relation to the purpose of this research. Questions asked during the interviews concerned parents' privacy concerns related to posting children's information on social media, ethical dilemmas related to posting children's information on social media, and methods that parents utilized in order to protect their children's digital privacy. All interviews were recorded by audio and participants gave informed consent prior to being

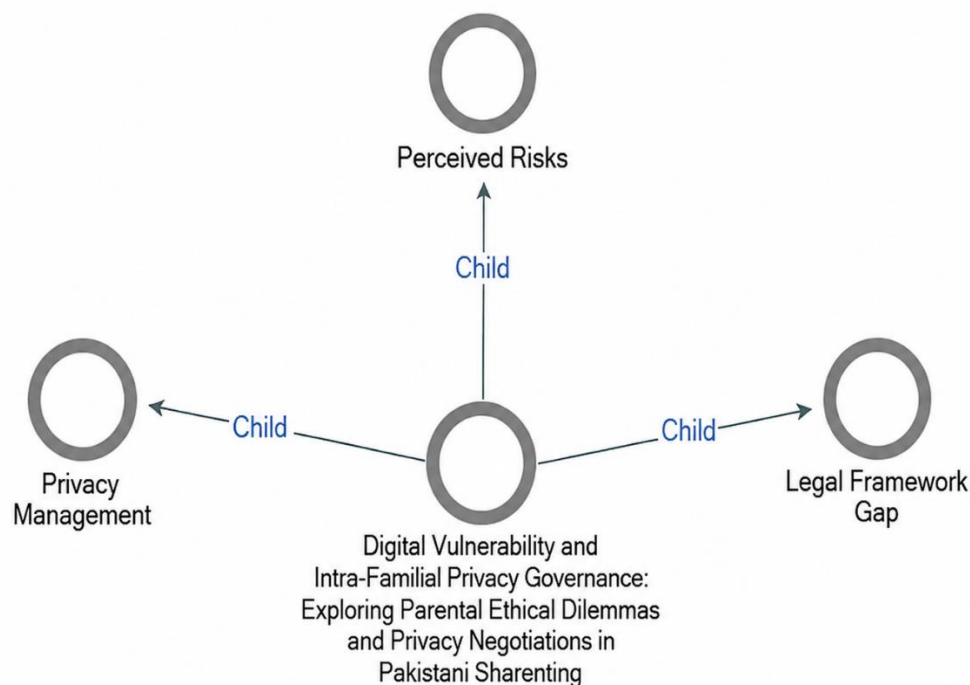
interviewed. Transcripts from all interviews were created word-for-word.

Data from the interviews was analyzed utilizing thematic analysis in NVivo 15. Analysis included becoming familiarized with the data, performing open-coding on the data, developing categories of like-coded themes, and continually comparing the themes against each other while reviewing the transcripts from each participant. Ensuring that the quality of this research was upheld included maintaining credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability throughout the research process. Ethically, the researcher

protected participants rights including providing them with informed consent, permitting them to participate voluntarily, protecting their confidentiality, and safely storing their interview recording and transcripts.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

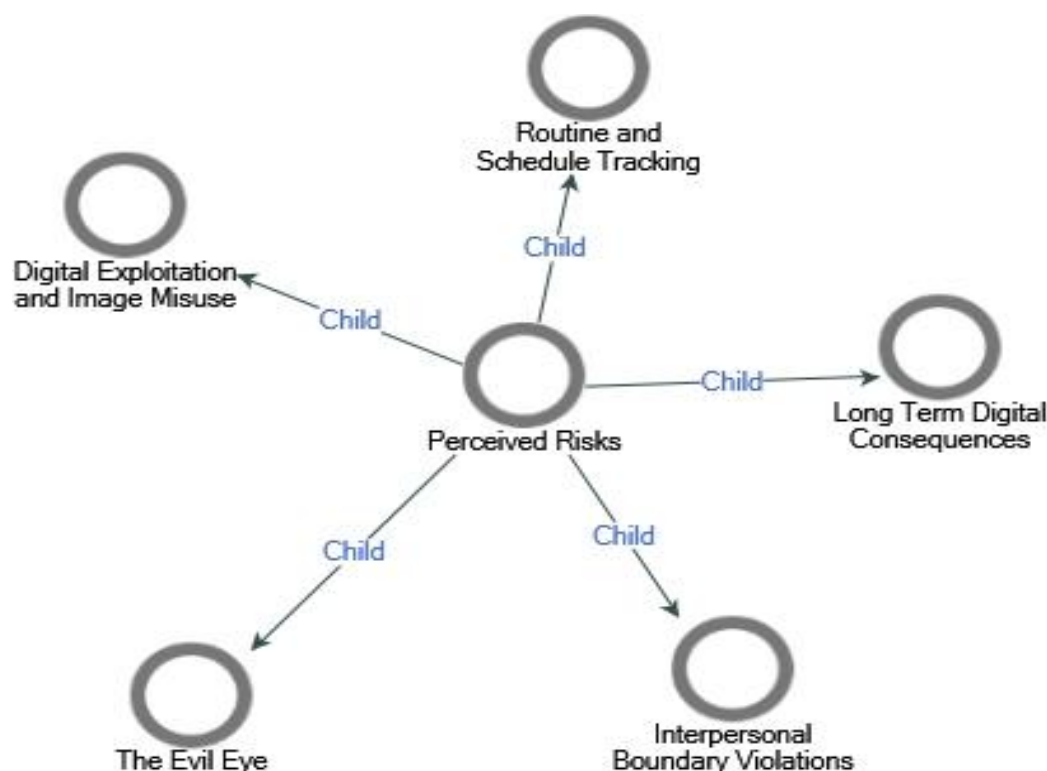
The results from the qualitative analysis related to the privacy and ethical aspects of sharenting were organized into three major themes related to parents' perceptions about privacy: Perceived Risks, Privacy Management, and the Legal Framework Gap.



Theme: Perceived Risks:

The research showed that parents view sharenting as putting their children in danger in terms of a variety of digital, psycho-social and cultural dangers. Participants believed there are some social benefits to sharing photos and videos on social media of children at important milestones.

However, the same participants identified privacy and safety as two major factors that would influence how much information is shared. From the findings four main aspects of parents' perceptions of the risks associated with sharenting emerged.



Digital Exploitation and Image Misuse was the primary concern. A number of the participants worried that once a photo or video had been put online it would be possible for others to download them, manipulate them or use them in ways the parent did not want. Also, several participants noted concerns related to artificial intelligence (AI) and worried that pictures of children could be used by AI in ways that could potentially harm children. As Informant 1 said: "In other ways, AI techniques may be used by an opponent to deshape my child's photos in a bad manner to malign, blackmail, or insult me." Parents also highlighted the Long-Term Digital Consequences expressing concern that online posts could affect their children's future education, employment, and reputation. Informant 2 explained: "Even innocent posts can shape a digital footprint that follows them into adulthood. Like classmates or potential employers might see images or content that could affect the perception of the child."

Another important finding was the influence of the evil eye (Nazar), a culturally rooted belief that

public exposure of children's images may invite jealousy or harm. As Informant 2 noted: "The main risk of sharenting in Pakistan is, in my point of view, is misuse of images, a lot of evil eyes..."

Parents were concerned with Routine and Schedule Tracking of the kids' daily routines. In addition to identifying and/or tracking their children through the use of real-time location-sharing, posting pictures of the kids in their school uniform, naming the schools the kids attend, or other regularly-visited places, parents felt this would provide an opportunity for strangers to monitor their kid's activities. Informant 1 stated: "If they want to share these, they should only post content which doesn't mention a designated place, school, or permanent activity, so as to keep things unpredictable for the people who might embark on harming the child..."

Finally, parents described Interpersonal Boundary Violations where negative comments and criticism on children's photographs caused emotional distress. One participant shared: "A girl

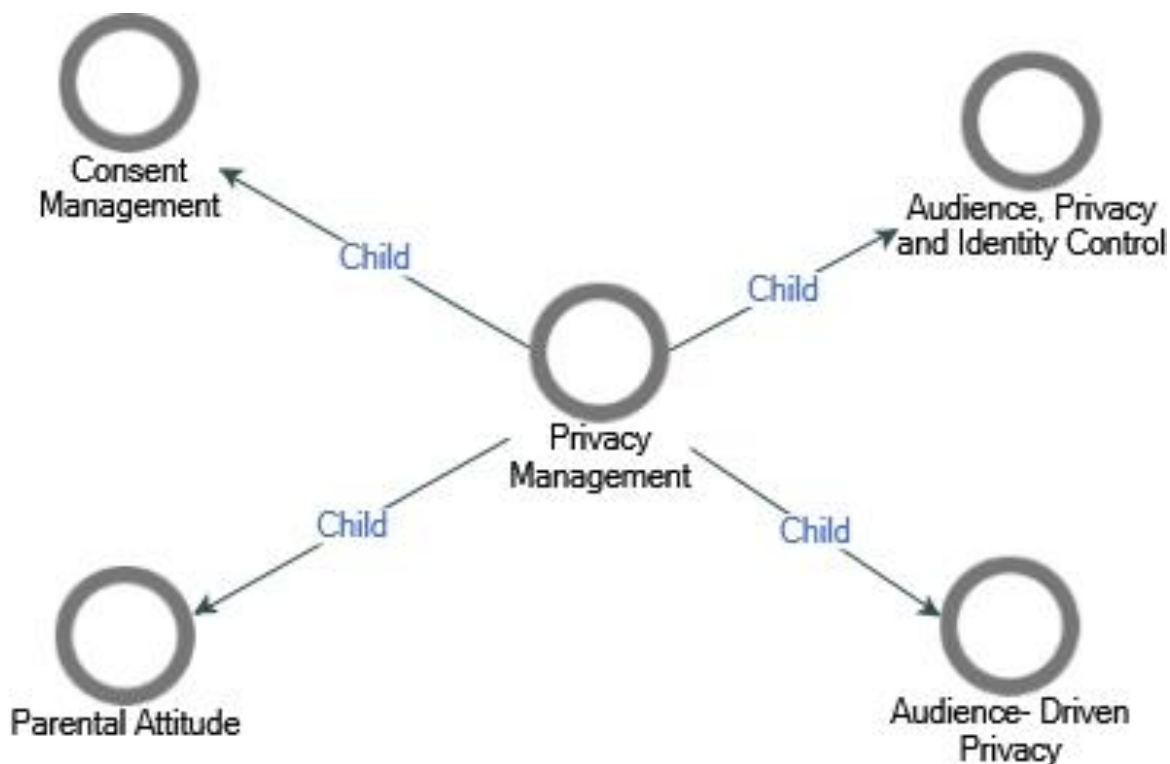
who was in my contacts made a very bad comment. She laughed and said, 'At first glance, it looked like what the people in India do... candles are set up on their death?'... And this thing... it disturbed me so much..."

Overall, our research has found that parents believe that there are many privacy and ethical concerns to sharenting, including the use of images, the creation of permanent digital records, cultural implications, and the potential for negative interactions in cyberspace. Parents' perceptions of these issues directly impact what

they choose to share about their child on social media.

Theme: Privacy Management

Parents have developed a variety of methods for managing children's on-line privacy in an effort to protect them from risk while still allowing them to take advantage of the potential positive effects of sharenting. The four privacy management techniques identified through this study include the use of controls related to audience, privacy, and identity.



Parents report reducing the possibility of identifying their child's face through the use of side angle photos, blurred faces, or even using emojis to cover a child's face as well as removing other identifiable characteristics. This allows parents to continue to post about their families without increasing the exposure of children. As Informant 4 explained:

"I don't post pictures that clearly show their faces. I prefer candid shots or pictures from the side or

back... I also make sure to blur out any school logos or identifiable landmarks."

Similarly, Informant 5 stated: "Sometimes I cover her face with an emoji if I really want to share the outfit or the moment but don't want her face out there."

Some other ways parents manage the privacy of their children include managing consent (the ability to have a say in how much information is released) and audience-based privacy management. Managing consent is a significant

strategy; some informants acknowledged that even though younger children do not possess the capacity to give informed consent regarding online sharing, it is essential to allow them increasing participation in the decisions surrounding online sharing as they grow older. All of the informants interviewed perceive parental decision making at this stage in their children's lives to be a responsibility. At the same time, all of the informants expressed respect for children's increasing autonomy as they become older. Informant 3 noted: "Right now, he is a toddler, so he doesn't understand what the internet is. As his parent, I make the decision for him based on what I feel is safe."

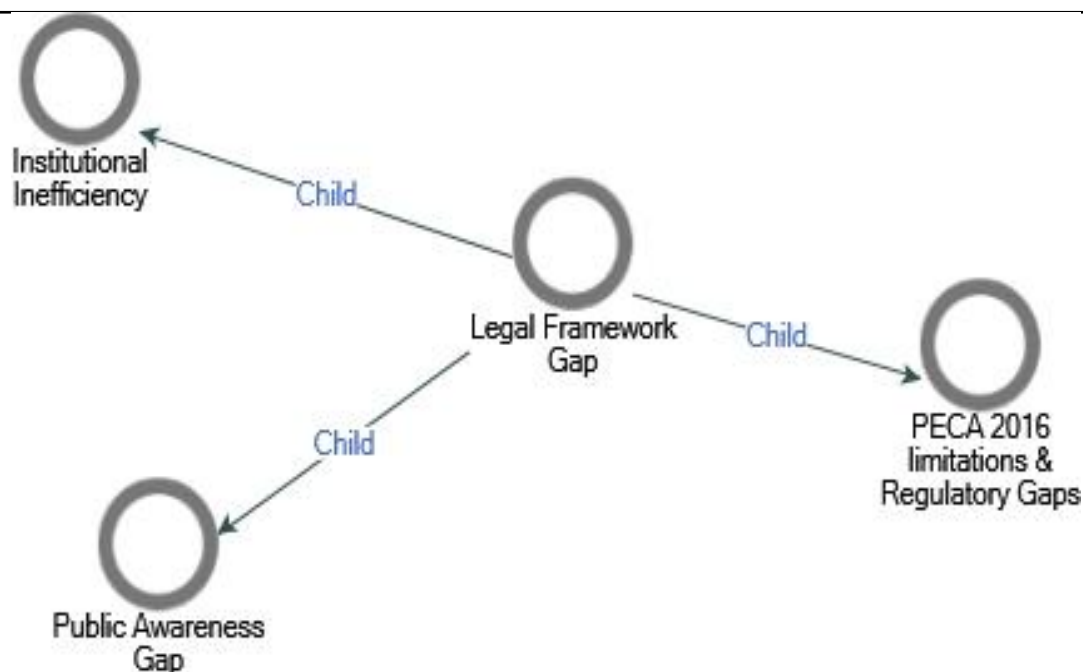
At the opposite end of the spectrum Informant 6 explained: "Once he reaches an age where he understands, probably around 8 or 10, I will stop posting him unless he gives me the green light." Another way in which parents demonstrate privacy management skills relative to their children's online activity includes practicing audience-based privacy management. By limiting access to their children's pictures, many of the parents interviewed limit the number of people who can view the pictures. Rather than posting pictures publicly on social media platforms like Facebook, many of these parents opt instead to share pictures privately with family members via family-specific WhatsApp chat groups or limited friend lists. This limits exposure to potential

strangers and allows for better control over what is being shared. As Informant 4 stated: "I stopped posting my kids on Facebook entirely. Now, I only send photos in a close family WhatsApp group where only grandparents and immediate aunts/uncles are present."

The final privacy management skill demonstrated by the informants included maintaining ethical boundaries when sharing information about their children on social media. The majority of the parents interviewed did accept occasional posts about their families, however they vehemently disagreed with using children's online presence to generate income or enhance their own social media popularity. As Informant 1 explained: "There is a huge difference between sharing a birthday picture and exploiting your child for views and brand sponsorships. Monetizing your child's childhood on public vlogs is completely wrong."

Theme: Legal Framework Gap

The results showed serious problems in terms of the legal and institutional safeguards of children's online privacy in Pakistan. Most participants felt that current laws and regulations do not adequately meet the privacy needs of children caused by sharenting. From the data three major areas of concern can be identified: legal inadequacies; institutional incompetence; lack of parental knowledge.



Participants first indicated a problem in terms of legal inadequacies. Some participants stated that although the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA, 2016) has provisions for many types of cybercrime, none of them cover the issue of sharenting or provide adequate protection for children's online privacy. Participant 12 noted: "Under this, quite strict action is taken regarding all the crimes committed on social media... Within that, we can say there is cyber harassment, or there is identity theft... As far as the matter of sharenting is concerned, because we parents share our children's data of our own will, voluntarily, so in this regard, I don't think that perhaps any law exists within our judicial system at this time. Here, I see a gap."

Another area of concern was institutional incompetence. Participants felt that most government agencies dealing with cybercrime responded after some form of harm had been done to the child instead of taking proactive steps to prevent harm. Additionally, participants questioned the effectiveness of the country's cybercrime laws because of poor enforcement. Participant 10 said: "I have heard about the laws that Pakistan has for posting the content about kids... but I don't feel like that is being implemented properly... I don't think that our

cyber security is that active, I feel like. People are doing everything out there, and I don't think they're taking it very seriously... There should be laws, and there should be—their accounts should be restricted and blocked. And as long as these laws are not being implemented, nothing's going to change, and our kids... would always be on stake."

Finally, participant responses suggested a large public education deficit about children's digital privacy rights. While most of the parents reported having little or no understanding of what legal protections exist to protect children from invasion of their privacy on social media. Participant 11 admitted: "I am not aware of this, whether there is any such law in Pakistan for the protection of children, that if their online privacy is being disturbed... I don't have any knowledge about it at the moment."

Overall, participant responses suggest that parents believe there are substantial deficits in both the legislative and institutional frameworks used to protect children's digital privacy in Pakistan. The lack of specific legislation addressing the practice of sharenting; inadequate enforcement of existing cyberlaws; and low levels of public knowledge about these issues together create a situation where most parents are worried

about keeping their children's personally identifiable information safe in an online environment.

DISCUSSION

The Consensus of Digital Colonization: Pakistan present a distinct context when it comes to how decisions are made regarding use of digital technology. Much like many other countries around the world, for example 93 percent of parents will post images of their children online without first asking if they can. As such, most parents have no qualms about engaging in what amounts to "digital colonization" of their children's identity. Some parents do start to get involved in "progressive consent" as their children grow older. However, younger children have not developed the level of cognition that would allow them to provide consent. Therefore, young children are at risk of being tracked by algorithms and having their data commercially exploited.

Failure on Part of Institutions/Regulations: These issues have been exacerbated by a lack of institutional support at a national and local level. While the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) was passed into law in 2016 and does address the general issue of cybercrime; it does not specifically deal with "sharenting" or "child image consent." This failure on part of institutions and regulatory bodies is further complicated by the fact that there is poor law enforcement and that few parents are aware of the digital rights that currently exist. As a result, all responsibility for protecting their own personal data falls onto individual families who are ill equipped to counteract large-scale cyber threats.

CONCLUSION

The study found that intra-familial digital privacy in Pakistan is generally regulated informally by family members' own moral codes and values of culture and families, and by family members' own discretionary decision-making. Although many Pakistani parents have developed private level strategies for protecting their children's privacy (for example, audience control and hiding from view), the Pakistani parents lack an adequate level

of understanding of technology and regulation to protect themselves or their children from a large number of systemic technological dangers because of their limited legal knowledge and a lack of national regulations.

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