



Sexting from Adolescents' Point of View: An Explorative Focus Group Study

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Abstract

Currently, sexting has gathered increasing interest from scholars due to its multifaceted nature. In literature, only few studies investigated sexting directly with adolescent samples using a qualitative methodology and some aspects (i.e., adolescents' perceptions about parents and school) are still understudied. The aim of the study was to explore Italian adolescents' perceptions and attitudes towards sexting. Seven focus groups online were conducted with 42 Italian adolescents (18 males; 24 females) aged 16–19 years. Data were analyzed using the Reflexive Thematic Analysis and three themes emerged. The first “My idea of sexting” concerning the motivations for sexting related to personal needs and relational matters as well as the perception of risk and consequences. The second “Males vs Females” describing differences and similarities between males and females. The third theme was “Me and the significant others” concerning adolescents' perceptions about parents and school in relation to sexting. The study was the first one in Italy directly investigating the opinions of adolescents on sexting. It emerged that adolescents are ambivalent towards sexting. This is perceived as a way to fulfill personal and romantic needs in specific situations. At the same time, adolescents underlined the potential negative consequences, which were perceived to be more severe for female's reputation due to the presence of a sexual double standard in the current society. Finally, adolescents reported to feel a distance with their parents, who were not always considered as reliable interlocutors, and expressed the need for effective education in the school context.

Keywords Sexting · Italian adolescents · Focus group · Education

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Introduction

The advent of new technologies and socializing tools, such as Social Networks Sites (SNSs), has entailed important implications for the interpersonal field, providing a new context for interaction and communication (Rus & Tiemensma, 2017; Van Ouytsel, Van Gool, Walrave, Ponnet, & Peeters). The online context has, indeed, broadly changed the way in which adolescents' relationships are created and maintained (e.g., SNSs may provide an additional context to make new acquaintances, facilitate communication, allow to gather more information about a potential partner) (VanOuytsel et al., 2016; Vaterlaus et al., 2018). Moreover, the spread of SNSs has contributed to the physiognomy and to the evolution of certain phenomena, including that of sexting which consists in the exchange (i.e., receiving, sending, forwarding and posting) of sexually explicit contents (i.e., texts messages, photos or videos) through technological devices (e.g., Cucci et al., 2017; Mori et al., 2022).

Over the past few years the phenomenon of sexting has gathered increasing interest from scholars due to its rapid diffusion and its multifaceted and controversial nature. With this regard, two main perspectives may be distinguished: the developmental perspective and the clinical perspective. The first one considers sexting as a mean through which adolescents may fulfil their developmental needs related to sexual identity exploration, thus depicting it as a normative sexual activity taking place online through new technologies (e.g., Bianchi et al., 2017; Levine, 2013; Murphy & Spencer, 2021). Conversely, the clinical perspective highlights the potential harmfulness of this behavior (e.g. unconsensual spreading, cyberbullying, harassment...), viewing sexting as a deviant behavior with severe consequences for psychological well-being and adjustment (e.g., Delevi & Weisskirch, 2013; Van Oosten & Vandembosch, 2020; Wolak & Finkelhor, 2011).

Nowadays, sexting appears to be a widespread phenomenon among adolescents. As a matter of fact, a recent meta-analysis of 39 studies (Mori et al., 2022) highlighted that sexting is increasing over time. More specifically, receiving sexts (34.8%) represents the main reported behavior, followed by that of sending (19.3%) and that of forwarding of sexts to a third person without consent (14.5%). With specific regard to the Italian context, evidence from a recent survey conducted on a sample of 3500 adolescents and emerging adults aged 11–24 years by the National Observatory for Childhood and Adolescence of the Italian Federation on Scientific Sexology (2022) showed that 2 youths out of 3 is involved in sexting, suggesting it to be a widely rooted practice also in Italy.

Particularly noteworthy regarding sexting are the gender dynamics. As concerns engagement in sexting, according to some authors (e.g., Morelli et al., 2016; York et al., 2021) boys tended to practice it more than girls, while other scholars (e.g., Burén et al., 2022; Van Ouytsel et al., 2020) suggested that males and females equally engage in sexting. Although these variability on sexting prevalence considering gender, it emerged quite unanimously that sexting has a gendered nature and that girls are frequently victims of objectification (e.g., Alonso-Ruido et al., 2018; Walker et al., 2013; York et al., 2021). Indeed, while females who engage in sexting may face denigration for deviating from gendered societal standards, males may increase their sense of masculinity by being praised for their sexting behaviors. Consistently, sex-

ting may boost males' social status and serve as a mean through which gaining popularity among peers (e.g., Ricciardelli & Adorjan, 2019; Ringrose et al., 2013). This gendered interpretation about sexting supports cultural beliefs about gender sexual inequality and about the presence of a sexual double standard, which refers to the fact that females' sexuality is usually stigmatized while males are socially rewarded for engaging in sexual activities (e.g., Alonso-Ruido et al., 2018; Burén et al., 2022; Walker et al., 2013; York et al., 2021).

Beside gender differences, research on sexting among adolescents has also focused on related risk and protective factors, especially from a quantitative point of view. Recently, indeed, there has been an increase in quantitative studies (e.g., Casas et al., 2019; Confalonieri et al., 2020; Cucci et al., 2024; Howard et al., 2023; Mori et al., 2019; Yépez-Tito et al., 2021) on sexting, suggesting the existence of a variety of intrapersonal factors (e.g., substance use, depressive symptoms, sensation seeking), and interpersonal factors (e.g., lower family cohesion, perception of substance availability within the community) which may increase adolescents' likelihood to engage in sexting.

Conversely, sexting was less investigated using qualitative methodology in samples of adolescents. With this regard, there are few qualitative studies conducted in Europe (i.e., Spain, Sweden, Flanders) and extra-European countries (i.e., USA) which have mainly explored adolescents' perceptions of gender differences, confirming what previously mentioned about the presence of a sexual double standard (e.g., Alonso-Ruido et al., 2018; Walker et al., 2013; York et al., 2021).

Moreover, qualitative studies (e.g., Alonso-Ruido et al., 2018; Burén et al., 2022; Lippman & Campbell, 2014; Van Ouytsel et al., 2017) investigated adolescents' views on the motivations behind the involvement in sexting. Adolescents referred that sexting may constitute a mean for fun and entertainment, a way to gain attention and social validation, and a booster for one's self-esteem. Moreover, for girls the engagement in sexting could be related to the perceived pressure from others or from the partner, while for boys sexting represented a way for asserting masculinity. Furthermore, adolescents considered sexting as an added value for those who are already in a romantic relationship. Sexting may, indeed, be used to enhance mutual trust and consolidate commitment or with the purpose to maintain a relationship, increasing intimacy between the partners. Finally, sexting may represent a further venue to explore one's sexuality and familiarize with courtship rituals (Van Ouytsel et al., 2017).

Beside motivations, several qualitative studies (e.g., Alonso-Ruido et al., 2018; Lippman & Campbell, 2014; Van Ouytsel et al., 2017) investigated the perceived consequences linked to sexting from adolescents' point of view. More specifically, adolescents reported as potential consequences the dissemination of sensitive contents which may entail reputational damages or the risk to be blackmailed or coerced to produce and send intimate contents.

Finally, to our knowledge, only one qualitative study (Woodley et al., 2024) investigated Australian adolescents' perceptions of education around sexting. Findings revealed that adolescents tended to avoid discussing about sex and sexting with their parents and that, in their opinion, fear-based school education about sexting is not efficient in preventing the engagement in sexting.

To our knowledge, qualitative studies directly investigating adolescents' perceptions on sexting have not been conducted in Italy yet. Moreover, cultural characteristics may influence sexting beliefs and behaviors (e.g., Baumgartner et al., 2014), thus the aim of this study was to explore Italian adolescents' perceptions and attitudes towards the phenomenon of sexting in order to better understand Italian adolescents' experiences and deepen the knowledge about the phenomenon of sexting in the Italian context. Moreover, that qualitative evidence may also contribute to enrich the understanding of existing quantitative studies particularly regarding gender differences, sexting motivations and adolescent perceptions regarding parents' knowledge and beliefs about sexting.

Method

Participants

Participants were 42 Italian adolescents (18 males; 24 females) aged between 16 and 19 years, that voluntarily decided to participate in the study. Participants were divided into 7 groups on the base of their availabilities. Therefore, 7 focus groups online were conducted, separately for males and females. Groups were mixed ages.

Procedure

For the present study, focus groups were conducted. Focus groups are a qualitative data collection tool that involves a small group of people in a discussion on a specific topic, with the aim of facilitating the emergence of ideas, perceptions, opinions and thoughts, promoting discussion among the group members, facilitated by the supervision of one or more moderators (Wilkinson, 2004).

The focus group outline was developed by the researchers based on an accurate analysis of the literature concerning sexting in adolescence (see Appendix). The questions were semi-structured and were the same for boys and girls. Questions were formulated using expressions such as "people of your age" or "in your opinion" or "what is your idea about". This was made to encourage participants to talk openly without having to share personal information, unless adolescents wanted to, or feeling judged. No questions, indeed, were asked about personal behaviors and experiences in order to protect the privacy of the participants and due to sensitivity concerns.

Each focus group started with a brainstorming, participants were then asked to say the things that came to their mind or that associated to the word "sexting". After the brainstorming a definition of sexting was provided. Then the questions explored participants' perceptions and opinions about sexting engagement, motivations, risks and consequences among adolescents. Successively, to facilitate the reflection and discussion about attitudes and emotions, a hypothetical "sexting-situation" with a male/female main character matching the sex of the participants involved in the focus group was proposed. After the discussion on the scenario, to explore potential sexual differences, the researcher asked participants what would have happened if the pro-

tagonist had been of the opposite sex. The last questions of the focus group concerned the perception about the role of parents and school regarding the phenomenon.

Approval for the study was obtained from the Ethical Commission of Psychology Department of the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart of Milan.

Adolescents aged 18 years or older autonomously provided their written consent to participate to the research. When adolescents were younger than 18 years old, parents were asked to sign a written consent to allow their children participation in the research. Only adolescents who had the consent of both parents were included in the study.

Synchronous focus groups were conducted online by a researcher expert both on this technique and the topic of sexting. The focus groups also included a non-participant observer who recorded the sessions, whose presence the participants were informed of. Focus groups were conducted online at a time that was convenient for adolescents (i.e., outside school hours). Online focus groups were used to reach a larger number of participants and because the adolescents were from different areas. Online focus groups, both before and after the pandemic covid, resulted to be a valuable tool for data collection (e.g., Doornwaard et al., 2017, Willemsen et al., 2023).

Each focus group lasted approximately two hours. Participants were first briefed about the aim of the research. Each participant was required to connect from a place that was private and quiet and to always keep the camera on. At the beginning of each focus group, the facilitator provided some practical guidance to the participants for the good conduct of the focus groups (e.g., look into the camera, keep the microphone off when one was not talking to avoid background noise, raise your hand physically or with a button). Maintenance of confidentiality was assured by researchers and participants were asked to maintain confidentiality. Focus groups were conducted in a calm and participatory climate. After an initial moment where the adolescents struggled to expose themselves, thanks to the initial brainstorming that functioned as icebreaker, adolescents began to discuss and confront each other, facilitated by the researcher's questions. All adolescents were given a chance to talk, and dysfunctional discussions never occurred, even when there was a disagreement of opinion among the participants.

The sessions were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim maintaining anonymity. All the participants provided the written consent, as previously described, for audio-recording. The recruitment of participants continued until saturation was reached and no new topics emerged in the focus groups. In particular, the analyses relied on the general notion of data saturation "as the point in data collection and analysis when new information produces little or no change to the codebook" (Guest et al., 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2021b). More precisely, we proceeded with data collection until no new information has emerged or has become recurrent in the focus groups.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021a), "a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data". This method is open and organic, with no use of any a priori coding framework

Table 1 Themes and subthemes

THEMES	SUB-THEMES
My idea of sexting	It boosts me up My ally in relational matters The dark side of sexting
Males vs. Females	We both do it The double standard
Me and the significant others	Whom (not) to talk to? Generational Gap School must be the place

or matrix. The themes are the final ‘outcome’ of data coding that derive from the work of data analysis and group discussion of the research team. It comprised a 5-steps process. In particular, firstly, a team of three researchers started familiarizing individually with the data, transcribing and reading the focus groups, highlighting keywords and phrases and taking notes of initial ideas. In the second step each member of the research team started the coding process, organizing data into meaningful groups and generating the initial codes. Then, researchers confronted about the codes and the interpretation of the data. Successively, the researchers jointly started the process of theme generation, grouping the codes into potential themes and subthemes. This represented a crucial step in the process of data analysis, that required researchers to continuously check quotations and discuss them, as well as making decisions about the most relevant information. The fourth step entailed the revision of themes and the relative subthemes, checking the coherency and consistency of the created “map of themes”. Consistently with the previous step, the research team kept the continuous process of revision of the data, focusing more on their interpretation and refining the set of themes and subthemes. This process was done over time on several occasions, bending back researchers on themselves. Finally, in the last step, the themes and their underlying subthemes were defined and labeled. More specifically, labels were formulated in order to maintain the perspective on adolescents’ point of view.

Results

Three main themes emerged from data analysis. Themes and subthemes are reported in Table 1.

An accurate description of each theme and the relative subthemes is provided below reporting the quotations from the focus groups. The quotations were translated by an interpreter from Italian into English in order to maintain the verbal expressions and the original meaning.

The first theme was labeled “My idea of sexting”, gathering adolescents’ perceptions and attitudes about sexting and the related motivations. It included three sub-themes.

The first one was named “It boosts me up” and it dealt with the perception of both males and females of sexting as a mean through which adolescents may reinforce both their self and body esteem by receiving positive feedback:

In my opinion loneliness can be a cause, maybe you feel lonely, and you want to feel appreciated and so you send nudes and he compliments you, he tells you how

beautiful you are, in my opinion it also makes you feel beautiful and appreciated (female).

This emerged also in male adolescents: "Well in the case that you do it to have an increase in self-esteem, you hope to get compliments maybe... this is a positive thing let's say" (male).

Females also reported that the online context may increase self-confidence by providing the opportunity to gain more control since people can decide what and how to show to the others: "...another frequent reason is that you know that when you send a picture you can feel safer and you choose the angle, the light, maybe you have the particular underpants that make you..." (female).

In person if you put yourself in a certain pose, you have cellulite and that stuff... instead in pictures you look perfect and you get compliments from a hypothetical guy, or person who responds to you, and so you also have that smugness in sending and receiving (female).

The second sub-theme was named "My ally in relational matters". Both males and females reported that the engagement in sexting may support a romantic relationship in all its stages. In particular, it could be helpful at the beginning, as a way of flirting: "It is like a preview or a way to tease the other person. Maybe even a method of approach the other" (male).

Moreover, both males and females reported that the online context may become "a safe-place" since it was seen as less challenging with respect to in-person interactions: "...to hide themselves always behind this barrier, this wall, because maybe people don't have the courage to face things themselves, to create this little bubble where they feel safe" (male). "Online is easier, very fast, one may feel even cooler. I send you a picture, I don't have that thing that blocks me in person, I don't have those limitations that I have in person, not knowing how to approach" (female).

Sexting appeared to be also useful to maintain the relationship and it was seen as a way to trust the partner: "It came to my mind the trust because anyway when you engage in sexting you usually trust the other person that will not spread your photos or videos" (male). "If you want to spice the relationship up, I don't find anything wrong with doing it either. However, it's a choice, if you trust him and think he's a good person it's ok" (female).

Furthermore, sexting was perceived as a glue that holds a long-distance relationship:

In my opinion it's a beautiful medium when being at a distance. It's useful and comfortable and, from my point of view, a physical, sexual aspect is needed in a couple. Sexting is so easy, at everybody's fingertips, I think if used in the right way it's a very good thing (female).

The last sub-theme was labeled "The dark side of sexting" gathering the perceived risks and consequences of sexting. In particular, one of the most reported risks was associated to dissemination and the consequent moral shame: "...you risk losing friendships, to destroy your image in case they leak the photos or something like that" (male). Consistently, a girl reported:

The biggest problem is that on the internet a photo can get everywhere, I also think about the "judgment of others" because maybe often when it comes out that a person has sent photos or private messages, the photo can get everywhere, even in school groups, and maybe often people judge this fact (female).

Adolescents also reported that sexting could turn into other risky phenomena such as revenge porn (i.e. image based sexual abuse) in case of a relationship, and catfish: “Also revenge sex, if a person leaves the partner maybe he/she in revenge will publish or make visible the photos and messages” (female). “A risk is when sexting is done with someone you don’t know in person, you find a person who says he or she is 16 but is actually older, 40, 50 and pretends to be someone else” (male).

As consequences, females also reported negative emotions associated to unconsensual sexting:

It makes you feel belittled, very embarrassed, like it’s your fault, when it’s really not. You feel almost violated, something you don’t expect, you don’t want, and you don’t even know how to respond, so I think maybe violated is the right word (female).

Males, rather, reported negative feelings associated to insecurity: “It may create insecurity because perhaps you are not appreciated by the other side, self-confidence drops” (male).

The second theme was “Males vs Females” which described adolescents’ opinions about potential similarities and differences between males and females engaging in sexting. It included two sub-themes.

The first sub-theme was named “We both do it”, males and females, indeed, agreed upon the idea that both sexes engage in sexting with the same frequency and that the difference lays on personal characteristics rather than on sex: “In my opinion it’s not so much between males and females but really between people who are different, certainly there are people who try to get these conversations started more than others” (female). “There is no distinction between boys and girls. I mean it’s more of a mental factor than based on gender, if you are more open minded or more predisposed let’s say to do this thing you do it” (male).

However, only males reported that the approach to sexting may be slightly different since males take the engagement in sexting more lightheartedly: “Perhaps in boys it is something that comes more naturally and spontaneously, without fear, while girls are more wary. However, it also depends a lot on the person in my opinion” (male).

The second sub-theme was named “The double standard” regarding the perception of a discrepancy in rules and standards of sexual behavior between males and females. Both of them described differences in the way sexting is evaluated from the society on the basis of the gender, as emerged from a male participant:

In my opinion being a patriarchal society legitimizes this kind of dynamic and therefore also a different perception of men and women, so there is always a subject and an object and the object is the woman. There is also a different moral criterion in judging males and females (male).

Also, females reported to be the ones who are usually more pressured to do sexting, limiting the consensus and that, at the same time, males have to fit masculinity standard: “The fact that males, if they receive photos or otherwise anything racy from females, should always be “grateful” or otherwise happy about it” (female).

I can also think of a girl who maybe feels a lot of pressure to send certain photos, maybe someone she’s feeling with, even just a boyfriend who feels legitimized to ask, keeps pushing her until she sends the nudes, so the consent is very forced, so the girl also feels not totally comfortable (female).

Male and female participants agreed upon the opinion that the strong difference between the two sexes are consequences experienced in case of photo-dissemination, as showed in these quotations:

In my opinion it's like that because of a cultural and traditional issue, I mean if a picture comes out of a girl half naked or, even worse, naked, she is given some heavy labels, and this affects the girl causing emotional damage, whereas a male... what can you say to him? (male)

Definitely the woman is stereotyped more than the man. The woman is referred to as a no-good girl, "why did you send this?", "why did you do that?". Whereas the man is the one who is always less affected when these things happen, in my opinion. A male would feel a little cooler to have received it, that is, he would feel more important. Flattered (female).

The third theme was labeled "Me and the significant others" and it comprised adolescents' perceptions and expectations about the role of adults (and in particular parents), other potential figures of reference and school system. It included three sub-themes.

The first sub-theme was labeled "Whom (not) to talk to?" describing adolescents' perception of potential interlocutors with whom discuss about sexting.

A part of adolescents reported to prefer talking with a peer or someone slightly older such as brothers/sisters, since these people have experience regarding sexting: "I think I would talk with my sister who is 23 years old so she is also older than me, she has had experiences regarding sexting and I think she could help me, give me advice on what to do" (female).

I would maybe go to... If you have older brothers or sisters or people who maybe know a little bit more about it, because maybe people of our age have the same idea, so it's a comparison, but let's say not really a comparison, cos you agree about everything, whereas with someone who has more experience than you, you can go and maybe understand certain things more (male).

However, female participants reported preferring to keep it for themselves, as girls perceived sexting as something private and intimate that could be shared only with the partner: "I don't talk to anyone about it. I would confront my conscience, depending on how much I feel like doing it, and I would only talk to myself" (female).

It's very private thing, I would keep it as a private experience between me and the person I love, because it's always part of the sex sphere, I'm not saying it's like having sexual intercourse, but still it's a private, intimate thing for just the two of us to experience, it doesn't involve other people (female).

The second sub-theme was named "Generational Gap" referring to the fact that adolescents perceived a strong and deep generational gap between them and their parents.

This is mainly related to adolescents' perception of parents' low confidence with technology since their parents were adolescents in a different time where there were not new media yet, as emerged from both males and females:

In my opinion since my parents were born in other times where there was no smartphone and this phenomenon was not that widespread, they don't know much about this topic. Many parents see sexting as wrong, as something for nowadays youth. I don't know... they see sex in general as a wrong thing, very much related

only to us making mistakes. They are not from our generation, they don't understand and don't know much about this topic (female).

In my opinion some adults wouldn't even know what it is because they didn't even have mobile phones back then. Others, if they have heard of it, know what it is, but in my opinion, they only get the bad part of that (male).

The gap is also caused by the perception of a presence of a taboo in families that was in general related to the topic of sex, thus also including sexting: "...they don't have our ideals, we are much more chill on this thing, we don't have so many taboos. Maybe in the future as parents we will talk about it more freely compared to them" (male).

We take it easier, we don't have so many taboos on so many issues about sex, and so, in my opinion, the negative view on sexting and other issues also comes from the fact that they have not experienced them and therefore don't understand them to the fullest (female).

The last sub-theme was "School must be the place" gathering adolescents' opinions about the school and its educational role. This reflected a deep need for education which was strongly stressed by adolescents. Most of them, indeed, believe that contemporary topics, such as sexting, should be taught at school together with other curricular subjects: "It should be included as a once-a-week subject" (male).

In my opinion, the school must be a place where you don't only study history, mathematics... But where you also deal with very important current topics, besides sexting, many others would come to mind, such as violence, social networks, but indeed a focus on current topics is missing now (female).

Adolescent participants, however, believed that these topics should be handled differently, reporting different experiences of ineffective interventions that were made at their school predominantly based on giving information or sexting avoidance: "At our middle school they did this presentation where they explained all the consequences, it was about raising awareness and saying "be careful if you do this", just this" (female).

Adolescents, indeed, rather preferred to talk and discuss this topic with an open communication that fosters the discussion in a non-judgmental climate: "We need meetings with people who know about these things, not just talking with professors" (female).

At least you're telling youth what they're up against, not demonizing the topic as they usually do. They should talk about how to deal with certain things and not just saying "Just avoid it" since they do it anyway. Usually at school they don't tell you how to prevent a problem, or how to solve it (male).

Discussion

The present study represented an effort to explore and describe Italian adolescents' opinions and attitudes towards sexting. Since there are no qualitative studies in Italy directly involving adolescents, this work could fill this gap in literature. Moreover, this study could contribute to the understanding of sexting in adolescence by enriching literature on the theme also showing some new evidence.

Results from the focus group analysis, in line with previous studies (Cucci et al., 2024; Gewirtz-Meydan et al., 2018; Strassberg et al., 2012), confirmed that adolescents have an ambivalent attitude towards sexting since participants were able to identify both positive functions and negative consequences of this behavior. Further to this point, adolescents recognized a positive function of sexting reporting that it may serve as a reinforcement for body image, by receiving positive feedbacks that make the adolescent feel appreciated, as already showed in other studies (e.g., Alonso-Ruido et al., 2018; Burén et al., 2022; Lippman & Campbell, 2014; Van Ouytsel et al., 2017). Additionally, females in particular, mentioned a new potential added value of sexting as an online behavior. As a matter of fact, it offers the opportunity to monitor one's own self-image online, by providing the chance to control how the person is depicted before sharing the content. This in turn may increase self-confidence. Despite the attention of female adolescents towards body appearance and photo-manipulation had already emerged in literature concerning the selfie phenomenon (e.g. Chang et al., 2019), findings suggested that these concerns could be applicable also in case of sexting.

Moreover, findings underlined another positive function concerning the role of sexting in the frame of romantic relationships highlighting, consistently with literature (e.g. Ringrose et al., 2012; Van Ouytsel et al., 2017; Walker et al., 2013), that sexting behaviors may help in maintaining the relationship, especially in case of long-distance ones. Adolescents also identified sexting as helpful at an earlier stage as a way of flirting or approaching a potential partner. According to the participants, this may be due to the fact that sexting is perceived as less challenging than face to face interactions. Adolescents' perception of online context in general as a facilitator of interpersonal interactions represented a new aspect in literature, although some authors previously hypothesized a social compensation function stating that adolescents, who have difficulty with face-to-face interactions, choose to use the Internet to communicate in order to meet their social needs (e.g. Mc Kenna et al., 2002).

At the same time, adolescents recognized several negative aspects of sexting. In particular, both males and females reported concerns about contents dissemination and the consequent damages to personal reputation due to public judgment and underlined the risk to be involved in other online risk-taking behaviors such as image-base sexual abuse, as emerged in previous studies (e.g., Alonso-Ruido et al., 2018; Lippman & Campbell, 2014; Van Ouytsel et al., 2017). The findings of the present study enriched literature about gender differences concerning the impact of sexting, allowing a better understanding of the negative emotional experience associated with sexting. In particular, females resulted to be more worried about negative emotions of embarrassment, shame and sense of guilt associated to unconsensual dissemination, experienced more often than males. Male participants, on their side, appeared to be more concerned about the potential side effects in case the other's reaction does not match with one's expectations, reducing self-esteem.

According to adolescent participants, thinking about their experience and that of their peers, both males and females engage in sexting behaviors with the same frequency. This is partially consistent with literature showing a great variability (e.g., Burén et al., 2022; Morelli et al., 2016; Van Ouytsel et al., 2020; York et al., 2021). According to participants, the difference in sexting engagement should not be

attributable to gender, rather to personal characteristics and attitudes (e.g. be more open-minded).

Particularly noteworthy, was the fact that males and females agreed upon the idea that there is a sexual double standard, namely a discrepancy in rules and standards about sexuality based on gender. This affects the way males and females engaging in sexting are evaluated from the society and has implications for the experienced consequences. According to the participants, males and females are generally judged differently for the same behavior, with the first ones being reinforced in their masculinity and social status. Females, on the other hand, suffer the consequences of social shame for a behavior that is perceived as morally wrong. The presence of this sexual double standard has already emerged in qualitative studies carried out in other countries, such as Northern Ireland, Spain, Sweden, Australia (e.g., Alonso-Ruido et al., 2018; Burén et al., 2022; Walker et al., 2013; York et al., 2021), thus findings showed that sexting is perceived as gendered also in the Italian context. In particular, participants reported that, in case of photo-dissemination, consequences of sexting are heavier for females due to the presence of gender stereotypes in the current society. Therefore, findings clearly suggested that for adolescents the cultural dimension strongly influences both beliefs and behaviors. In light of these considerations, the discussion on these gender gap could also be enriched adopting an intersectional approach (Shields, 2008), which proposed to examine gender differences in interaction with other factors. With this regard, digital literacy could be considered. Further to this point, one study (Lebedíková et al., 2025) reported that digital skills may promote in some cases safer sexting behaviors. However, this study did not include gender as a variable, even if some other studies on digital literacy suggested that females have higher digital skills (e.g., Jones & Procter, 2023). This is an aspect that should be addressed in the future.

One of the most interesting findings was that related to adults and school, who are still understudied, representing a novelty in literature. Participants reported to feel a distance with their parents who were not always considered as reliable interlocutors when talking about sexting. Adolescents, indeed, described their parents as poorly informed about digital matters and poorly confident with technology, thus appearing as worried and figures not to rely on. Moreover, the majority of the parents were perceived as close-minded towards the topic of sexuality in general, that adolescents reported to be still a taboo in several families because of a generational gap. For this reason, adolescents reported preferring to talk and discuss about sexting with other people, such as peers or older brothers or sisters who were perceived as more expert about sexting than their parents. At the same time, females raised the opinion that sexting was something perceived as private, thus preferring to manage sexting-situation on their own. Findings of the present study may enrich the understanding of parental role, mainly studied by quantitative studies (e.g. Confalonieri et al., 2020; Cucci et al., 2024; Dolev-Cohen & Ricon, 2021; Dolev-Cohen & Ricon, 2022), which showed that effective parental strategies are a protective factor for adolescents' engagement in sexting, shaping an attitude of awareness towards the phenomenon. In particular, for adolescents, it seemed important that, alongside greater knowledge and confidence with technologies, parents take a more open perspective regarding

sexuality. Therefore, these changes could help adolescents in relying more also on their parents.

For what concerns school, adolescents identified it as the right place for education. Participants indeed stated that school should include the discussion on topics, such as sexting, as curricular activities, reporting the desire for an education about how to deal with these contemporary phenomena. Moreover, adolescents highlighted the need to be involved in interventions based on an open discussion, avoiding prejudiced attitudes, and conducted by experts in the field, rather than interventions based on giving “terroristic” information only. This point of view of the Italian participants was consistent with the one reported in another study in Australia (Woodley et al., 2024) that, to our knowledge, is the only one investigating adolescent perception about the role of school in sexting education until now. Australian adolescents, indeed, considered fear-based school education about sexting not to be enough efficient. Therefore, it emerged that in adolescents' perspective the school function is not only transmitting knowledge to students but also promoting individuals' adjustment and wellbeing. This result is particularly important since it indicates awareness in adolescents concerning the educational role of school.

The present study has some limitations that should be taken into consideration. The first one is that participants were adolescents coming from the North of Italy thus limiting results generalizability. In the future, it could be interesting to investigate also cultural and socio-economic differences by recruiting participants from the whole Italy. However, for the present study, every attempt was made to include adolescents attending different schools and different backgrounds. A second limitation could be that some adolescents may have been more sensitive to social desirability bias or been inhibited by the group dimension. In order to contrast these biases, focus-groups were conducted by an expert researcher, establishing a non-judgmental climate and questions were posed giving adolescents the opportunity not to directly report their personal experiences.

Along with its limitations, this study provides interesting findings that enrich the literature on the theme, deepening aspects (i.e. role of parents and school) which are still little investigated. Moreover, to our knowledge, in Italy there are no qualitative studies directly investigating adolescents' points of view on sexting.

Conclusions and recommendations

The study showed that adolescents are ambivalent towards sexting since participants provided both positive motivations associated to the engagement as well as potential negative consequences. Moreover, adolescents strongly advocated the need for education about this phenomenon. The present study, indeed, has strong implications for practical interventions.

First of all, the study suggested that it is fundamental to work also with parents, fostering their knowledge about sexting as well as other online behaviors and use of technology. Along with this, intervention should empower parents' abilities in order to make them more able to engage in effective communication about sexting. This

in turn could help adolescents in identifying adults as reliable figures with whom discussing about these new online phenomena.

Moreover, it seems extremely important to propose effective adolescent-tailored interventions. In order to do this, it should be avoided to propose programs of abstinence-based education and information deficit-based education. In fact, these kinds of programs are mainly focused on disseminating relevant information about an issue, highlighting all the potential risks and negative consequences. However, these programs resulted to be ineffective or only partially effective (e.g. Stanger-Hall & Hall, 2011; Tobler et al., 2000) since, although they promoted an increase in the level of knowledge, changes in attitudes and behaviors have not been recorded. For this reason, programs should also include the empowerment of skills with a “bottom-up” methodology, that encourages interactions, thus making adolescents active participants in the intervention and more able to deal with online phenomena adaptively. Possible interventions to consider are related to media literacy, which resulted to be effective in promoting knowledge, skills and effective decision-making processes, and influencing behavior-relevant outcomes (Cho et al., 2025; Polanco-Levicán & Salvo-Garrido, 2022). Moreover, psychologists and pedagogists should develop proactive interventions based on the topic of consent in order to foster skills in recognizing and negotiating affirmative consent as proposed by Albury et al. (2017).

Lastly, it is important to consider that adolescents highlighted cultural issues related to the presence of a sexual double standard between males and females and of a taboo with regard to the topic of sexuality in the current society. Therefore, it is also fundamental to work educational agencies and at an institutional level to foster a change also in cultural terms.

Appendix

Focus group semi-structured framework.

1. Brainstorming: What comes to your mind if I say “sexting”?*
2. In your opinion, sexting is a common behavior at your age?
3. What is your idea about the motivations that lead an adolescent to engage in sexting?
4. In your opinion, are there any advantages in engaging in sexting?
5. In your opinion, are there any risks in engaging in sexting?
6. Do you think there might be consequences for engaging in sexting?
7. What would you think if one of your friends confided to you that he/she is sending a nude photos or videos?
8. Scenarios**:

Scenario 1: Valentina (2-year high school) has just come home and opening Instagram finds an unread message from a boy (4-year high school) in direct. She opens it and finds a nude picture of the boy....

Scenario 2: Serena is on the chat room of the guy she is dating, she has just taken a nude picture of herself. She looks at it carefully and then decides to send it....

9. In your opinion, if I asked these questions to some adults, what would they answer?
10. If you were asked to do sexting and you needed to discuss this, with whom would you talk to?
11. Does it happen to talk about these things with your parents or at school with teachers?

Note.

*After the brainstorming a definition of sexting was provided.

**Each scenario was also proposed in two versions. With the boys we started with a male main character, with girls with a female main character and then we proposed the same situations switching the gender of the characters.

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Declarations

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Consent To Participate Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Consent To Publish The authors affirm that human research participants provided informed consent for publication.

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