



Perceptions of Adolescent Sexting: A Cross-Cultural Study of Israeli and Italian Parents

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Abstract

Adolescent sexting is an increasingly normalized phenomenon situated at the intersection of sexual development, peer culture, and digital communication. While consensual sexting may support intimacy and identity exploration, concerns persist regarding coercion, peer pressure, and non-consensual distribution. This cross-cultural qualitative study explores how Israeli and Italian parents perceive adolescent sexting and interpret their educational responsibilities in addressing it. Drawing on a descriptive phenomenological approach, 54 in-depth interviews were conducted with parents of adolescents (aged 12–18) in Israel and Italy, recruited through purposive sampling via community and professional networks. Analysis followed systematic phenomenological thematic procedures, including identification of meaning units, cross-cultural clustering of themes, and iterative binational consensus meetings. Thematic analysis revealed three central themes: parents' interpretations of sexting, perceived risks and gendered vulnerabilities, and educational strategies for prevention and guidance. Findings highlight that while parents across both cultures recognize their role in educating youth about digital sexual behaviors, they often experience discomfort, uncertainty, and a tendency toward reactive or restrictive mediation. Cultural context significantly shaped parental responses: Israeli parents more frequently framed sexting as a matter requiring structured school and state based intervention, whereas Italian parents more often emphasized family responsibility, relational trust, and general value-based education, positioning schools as supportive rather than leading actors. Despite shared emotional tension and ambivalence, parents in both settings expressed a desire for open, supportive communication but lacked practical tools to initiate such dialogue. These findings underscore the need for culturally sensitive, evidence-based interventions targeting parental communication self-efficacy, including structured parent-training modules, school-family partnership programs, and developmentally adapted guidance on how to discuss consent, privacy, peer pressure, and digital boundaries without inducing shame.

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Keywords Sexting · Adolescent · Parental mediation · Parent–adolescent communication · Cross-cultural study · Qualitative research · Phenomenology

Introduction

Adolescents' sexual development increasingly unfolds within digitally mediated environments, where intimacy, identity exploration, peer interaction, and social status are intertwined with online communication practices. One prominent expression of this shift is sexting, commonly defined as the exchange of sexually explicit messages, images, or videos via digital media (Döring, 2014; Van Ouytsel et al., 2021). Empirical evidence indicates that sexting has become a relatively prevalent aspect of adolescent peer and romantic interaction rather than an exceptional or marginal behavior (Klettke et al., 2019; Madigan et al., 2018; Mori et al., 2021b).

Scholarly perspectives on adolescent sexting have evolved substantially over the past decade. Early discourse largely framed sexting as a deviant or high risk behavior associated with victimization, cyberbullying, coercion, and non consensual dissemination of intimate material (Gámez Guadix & Mateos Pérez, 2019; Patchin & Hinduja, 2020). More recent work, however, situates consensual sexting within normative processes of adolescent sexual development, relational intimacy, and identity formation, while still recognizing the serious harms associated with abuse, pressure, and image based sexual violence (Clancy et al., 2023; Döring, 2014). This dual framing, sexting as both potentially normative and potentially harmful, creates complex educational and ethical challenges for families.

Within this context, parents occupy a central yet undertheorized position. They are expected to guide adolescents' sexual socialization, mediate digital practices, and protect young people from harm, while simultaneously respecting growing autonomy and privacy (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008; Steinberg, 2014). Research has shown that open, emotionally attuned parent adolescent communication is associated with reduced digital risk and better psychosocial outcomes (Boniel Nissim et al., 2020; Dolev Cohen & Ricon, 2022a). Nevertheless, many parents report discomfort, uncertainty, and low confidence in addressing topics related to digital sexuality, including sexting (Speno & Halliwell, 2021; Dolev Cohen & Ricon, 2022a).

Despite the expanding body of research on adolescent sexting, most studies center on youth behavior, prevalence, or psychological correlates, while parents' subjective meanings, concerns, and educational strategies remain comparatively underexplored, especially from qualitative and cross cultural perspectives. Cultural norms regarding sexuality, gender, family roles, and state responsibility for education may shape how parents interpret sexting and how they position themselves in relation to schools and public institutions. Yet few studies have directly compared parental perceptions across distinct sociocultural and welfare contexts.

The present study addresses this gap through a qualitative, phenomenological exploration of how parents in Italy and Israel perceive adolescent sexting and interpret their educational responsibilities in relation to it. By focusing on parents' lived narratives, the study seeks to illuminate how broader cultural frameworks, institutional arrangements, and gendered expectations are translated into everyday parental

meanings and mediation practices. This approach allows sexting to be understood not only as an individual adolescent behavior but as a family, cultural, and social phenomenon embedded in specific contexts.

Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by a focused interpretive framework drawing on Social Representations Theory (Moscovici, 1984), the parental mediation model (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008), and Protection Motivation Theory (Rogers, 1975), which together support analysis of parents' meaning-making, perceived risks, and mediation strategies. Each perspective informed both interview design and analytic interpretation.

Social Representations Theory (Moscovici, 1984) illuminates how individuals make sense of novel phenomena by anchoring them in familiar cultural categories. This theory informed our focus on how parents connected sexting to established ideas about morality, reputation, gender, and intimacy.

The parental mediation model (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008) provided conceptual vocabulary for interpreting strategies parents described. Even when parents did not explicitly use terms like "active," "restrictive," or "monitoring," their accounts of rules, dialogues, or avoidance behaviors were interpreted within this framework. This enabled classification and comparison of parental strategies across cultural contexts, highlighting how these map onto broader mediation styles identified in literature.

Finally, Protection Motivation Theory (Rogers, 1975) explained parental ambivalence and reactive stances. The theory posits that responses to risk are shaped by threat appraisal (e.g., perceived severity) and coping appraisal (e.g., perceived efficacy and response effectiveness). This guided interpretation of parents who appraised sexting as highly threatening but expressed uncertainty about their ability to intervene effectively, leading to avoidance, reliance on institutions, or restrictive control rather than sustained dialogue.

Conceptually, these perspectives operate at complementary levels. Social Representations Theory illuminates the cultural and moral categories through which sexting is made meaningful; Protection Motivation Theory explains how these meanings are translated into threat appraisals and coping appraisals; and the parental mediation model captures how these appraisals are enacted in everyday communicative or restrictive practices. Together, they link cultural meaning-making, risk evaluation, and concrete mediation behavior into a coherent analytic lens.

Adolescent Sexting: From Risk-Focused to Normative Perspectives

Sexting, defined as the sending or receiving of sexually explicit messages, images, or videos through digital media (Van Ouytsel et al., 2021), has become highly prevalent among adolescents (Klettke et al., 2019; Mori et al., 2021). Recent meta-analytic evidence indicates 19.3% of adolescents have sent a sext and 34.8% have received one (Mori et al., 2021b). Distinguishing between sending and receiving is important, as these behaviors carry different implications for risk and agency (Klettke et al., 2019).

Early investigations framed adolescent sexting as deviant or high-risk behavior requiring strict prohibition (Wiederhold, 2011). This risk-oriented lens was fueled

by legitimate concerns over negative outcomes including cyberbullying facilitated by circulated intimate images (Gámez Guadix & Mateos-Pérez, 2019), sextortion and blackmail (Patchin & Hinduja, 2020), and non-consensual sharing violating privacy and trust (Dolev-Cohen & Henry, 2025). Non-consensual sext dissemination is broadly recognized as digital sexual abuse with serious social and psychological repercussions (Clancy et al., 2023).

In the past decade, scholarship has shifted beyond exclusively risk-focused interpretations toward more nuanced understandings of sexting as part of normative adolescent sexual development (Cucci et al., 2024; Murphy & Spencer, 2021). While potential dangers remain concerning, recent studies highlight that most teen sexting occurs in voluntary, private contexts stemming from typical sexual or relational motivations rather than malicious intent (Dolev-Cohen, 2023; Lee & Darcy, 2021).

An emerging sex-positive discourse frames consensual sexting as sexual expression and exploration in the digital era, serving as a modern medium for flirting, intimacy, and identity exploration paralleling developmentally normative behaviors (Döring, 2014; Madigan et al., 2018). Qualitative evidence suggests many youth perceive consensual sexting with trusted partners as relatively normal within teen dating culture, often endorsed by peers as acceptable practice (Clancy et al., 2023).

Despite growing normalization, adolescent sexting remains socially and emotionally complex, situated at the intersection of sexual development, peer culture, and digital communication (Dolev-Cohen, 2023). While consensual sexting may serve intimacy, identity expression, and sexual self-efficacy (Döring, 2014; Van Ouytsel et al., 2017), concerns persist regarding coercion, peer pressure, or non-consensual distribution (Clancy et al., 2023; Dolev-Cohen & Shaul, 2025; Patchin & Hinduja, 2020).

Parental Mediation of Digital Sexuality

Adolescence is marked by increased striving for independence and privacy, particularly regarding identity and sexuality (Steinberg, 2014). These developmental needs often create tension with parental safety concerns, especially as digital platforms enable private sexual communication beyond adult supervision (Powell & Henry, 2018). Parents must navigate delicate balance between trust and protection, where monitoring may preserve safety but erode parent-child bonds, while unrestricted privacy risks harm (Liu et al., 2023; Dolev-Cohen, 2023; Sasson & Mesch, 2014). Sexting becomes not only individual behavior expressing adolescent autonomy but also grounds for emotional, ethical, and relational negotiation within families (Ricon & Dolev-Cohen, 2024; Widmanet al., 2021).

Parental mediation styles range from active (dialogic and educational) to restrictive (rule-based and punitive) approaches, extensively studied in general digital behavior contexts (Boniel-Nissim et al., 2020). Parental mediation operates as a key relational process through which culturally shaped meanings are translated into everyday guidance and rules. Regarding sexting specifically, active mediation characterized by open, respectful conversations associates with better adolescent outcomes, whereas purely restrictive approaches often lead to secrecy, resentment, or disengagement (Dolev-Cohen and Ricon 2022a).

Research emphasizes that open, emotionally attuned parent-adolescent communication associates with reduced digital risk behaviors and greater adolescent well-being (Boniel-Nissim et al., 2020; Dolev-Cohen & Ricon, 2024; Resnick et al., 2019). However, despite evidence supporting active mediation, many parents report uncertainty, discomfort, or lack of knowledge about addressing sexting with their children (Dolev-Cohen and Ricon 2022a; Speno & Halliwell, 2021). Parents often fear “putting ideas in their child’s head,” overstepping boundaries, or triggering shame—concerns resulting in delayed or reactive responses (Ricon & Dolev-Cohen, 2025). This creates growing gaps between adolescents’ increasing digital engagement and parental preparedness for constructive dialogue.

Communication challenges are complicated by persistent gendered perceptions. Across cultures, parents tend to view daughters as especially vulnerable to reputational damage and emotional harm, while boys are perceived as more sexually driven and less susceptible to long-term consequences (Cavallini & Caravita, 2021; Clancy et al., 2023). Such gendered scripts, often unconsciously internalized, shape how families frame digital sexuality and can lead to unequal standards of concern and intervention. According to Social Representations Theory (Moscovici, 1984), parents make sense of unfamiliar phenomena like sexting by anchoring them in familiar ideas about morality, gender, and risk, potentially reproducing cultural patterns that reinforce stigma or limit open communication.

Cross-Cultural Contexts: Italy and Israel

Italy and Israel provide valuable comparison between contrasting educational and welfare regimes concerning adolescent sexuality, representing approaches where responsibility is either privatized within families or shared between parents and state institutions.

Italy lacks mandatory nationwide sex education programming. Sexuality education remains highly fragmented, delivered through local or school-level initiatives typically focusing on biology, health, or risk prevention rather than comprehensive discussions of digital intimacy (Servettini et al., 2023). Families are expected to assume primary responsibility for adolescents’ sexual socialization, with schools serving complementary roles. This family-centered orientation reflects broader Italian cultural values where family is regarded as the main institution for transmitting norms and morality (Bacchini et al., 2024).

Israel maintains a welfare-oriented educational system where schools and public institutions play explicit roles in shaping youth behavior and well-being. Sexuality education is formally included in the national curriculum, delivered through health education, civics, and school counseling programs emphasizing healthy relationships, consent, online risks, and responsible digital practices (Gal & Tarabeih, 2024). Israeli parents often expect structured state frameworks combining family, school, and legal systems to address topics like sexting, reflecting Israel’s broader welfare regime promoting state responsibility in education, child protection, and public awareness (Benish et al., 2018). While these institutional and educational differences suggest the possibility of divergent parental perceptions, socio-cultural structures do not operate in isolation. Parents across contemporary societies are also embedded in

transnational digital cultures, shared media discourses about online risk, and common developmental concerns regarding adolescence, sexuality, and reputation. Thus, alongside structural differences, it is also plausible that parents' emotional and moral responses to adolescent digital sexuality may converge across contexts shaped by globalization and similar media narratives.

Research Gap and Study Rationale

Despite the expanding literature on adolescent sexting, significant gaps remain regarding how parents themselves interpret and negotiate this phenomenon. Most research has focused on adolescents' behaviors, prevalence, and psychological correlates (Klettke et al., 2019; Madigan et al., 2018; Mori et al., 2022), while parents' subjective meanings, emotional responses, and concrete mediation practices concerning digital sexuality have received more limited qualitative attention. When parents are addressed, studies often examine general internet mediation rather than the specific moral, relational, and gendered meanings attached to sexting (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008; Boniel Nissim et al., 2020).

In addition, cross cultural qualitative comparisons of parental perceptions of adolescent sexting are scarce. Cultural norms regarding sexuality, gender, family authority, and the role of the state in education are likely to shape how parents define risks, assign responsibility, and position themselves in relation to schools and institutions, yet these processes have rarely been examined comparatively.

To address these gaps, the present study adopts a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore how parents in Italy and Israel perceive adolescent sexting and interpret their educational responsibilities. By focusing on parents' lived narratives, the study illuminates how cultural frameworks, institutional contexts, and gendered expectations are translated into parental meanings and mediation strategies, framing sexting as a family and cultural issue embedded in specific social systems.

In light of the gaps identified above, the study was guided by the following research questions: (1) How do parents in Italy and Israel interpret and make sense of adolescent sexting within their cultural contexts? (2) How do parents perceive the risks and vulnerabilities associated with adolescent sexting, including possible gendered dimensions? (3) How do parents define their educational role and describe their mediation strategies regarding adolescents' sexting practices? (4) How are these perceptions and strategies shaped by broader cultural expectations concerning family responsibility and the role of educational and state institutions?

Method

Research Paradigm

This study adopted Giorgi's descriptive phenomenological psychological approach (Giorgi, 2012). In line with this tradition, researchers engaged in epoché through reflexive bracketing discussions and analytic memoing, explicitly identifying prior professional and cultural assumptions about adolescent sexuality and digital risk

before and during coding. Phenomenology seeks to understand phenomena as they are experienced, emphasizing the meanings individuals assign to events in their lived world. Interviews were designed to elicit parents' first-person accounts of sexting, while researchers maintained a stance of openness and reflexive bracketing throughout data generation and analysis (Sokolowski, 2000; Giorgi, 2012). Reality was approached as co-constructed within interpersonal dialogue, consistent with phenomenological and constructivist perspectives (Spinelli, 2005). Within this framework, the study examined how Italian and Israeli parents of adolescents perceive sexting within their cultural contexts.

Participants and Recruitment

The data analysed draw on 54 semi-structured individual interviews, 28 Italian parents (Nmothers=16, Nfathers=12) and 26 Israeli parents (Nmothers=14, Nfathers=12). Participants were recruited through key informant connections as part of a purposeful sample, facilitated by local networks in each country. Their ages ranged from early 30s to late 50s, and all had at least one adolescent child (between 12 and 18). The inclusion of mothers and fathers from two distinct cultural contexts provided variation in parental perspectives across gender and socio-cultural settings. All participating parents came from different families; no two parents in the study were yoked. Inclusion criteria required participants to be parents of at least one adolescent aged 12–18 and to be actively involved in their child's daily life. During recruitment, efforts were made to include parents from varied educational and socio-economic backgrounds through multiple community entry points; however, the sample was not designed to be statistically representative.

Procedure

The data collection and analysis were conducted by two collaborative research teams, one in Italy and one in Israel. Each team conducted interviews in their respective country's local language, using a consistent semi-structured protocol. The interviews typically lasted between 45 and 90 min. The interview guide included open-ended questions such as: "What comes to mind when you hear the term sexting?", "What do you see as possible risks or benefits for adolescents?", and "How, if at all, have you addressed this topic with your child?". Probes explored gender perceptions, responsibility attribution, and expectations from schools and institutions.

All interviews were conducted by female researchers from therapeutic professions (psychology and counseling) with extensive experience in qualitative interviewing and in research on sensitive topics related to sexuality and digital practices. As a result, the interviews were carried out with sensitivity, and the atmosphere was intentionally cultivated to be non-judgmental, respectful, and accepting.

To facilitate binational collaboration, research team meetings were conducted in English, while the primary analysis of interviews was carried out in the original language of each dataset. Each national team, consisting of three to four researchers, analyzed all interviews conducted in its local language. Not all members of the overall binational research collaboration were fluent in both languages. Following

the initial within country analyses, thematic structures and analytic summaries were translated into English for joint analytic meetings. In order to ground cross cultural interpretation in the data while preserving linguistic and contextual nuance, selected interview excerpts relevant to emerging themes were translated into English, rather than entire transcripts. These excerpts were discussed collaboratively in binational meetings, and translations were reviewed by the respective national teams in comparison with the original language versions to ensure conceptual and contextual accuracy. This iterative process enabled shared interpretation while maintaining analytic sensitivity to the meanings embedded in the source languages.

Data Analysis and Reliability

After completing data collection, thematic analysis was conducted collaboratively by the Italian and Israeli teams, guided by phenomenological principles. The process involved several stages. First, each transcript was read in its entirety to gain a holistic sense of the lived experiences parents attributed to adolescent sexting. In the second stage, researchers identified meaning units, words, phrases, or ideas that captured essential aspects of participants' consciousness and subjective interpretations (Giorgi, 2012). These units were then clustered into subthemes and themes that reflected shared structures of meaning across participants. Throughout this process, interpretation was approached reflexively, with researchers acknowledging how their own cultural backgrounds and professional positions could influence analysis.

To enhance trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), we aligned our rigor criteria with qualitative research standards rather than quantitative notions of validity and reliability. Thus, credibility was pursued by grounding themes in participants' own language and including illustrative quotations; dependability through maintaining an audit trail of analytic decisions; confirmability via peer debriefing and collaborative cross-cultural coding; and transferability through thick description of context and process.

In line with phenomenological rigor, reflexivity was integral to the analysis. Team members engaged in reflexive journaling, peer dialogue, and repeated cross-cultural discussions to surface assumptions and biases. Quotes were selected collaboratively to illustrate central subthemes, demonstrate convergence/divergence across cultures, and remain faithful to the parents' lived accounts.

Coding discrepancies between researchers were discussed in joint meetings until interpretive consensus was reached. Rather than calculating statistical agreement indices, consistency was ensured through repeated cross-coding, peer debriefing, and transparent documentation of analytic decisions, consistent with qualitative criteria of dependability and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Research Ethics

In accordance with accepted ethical guidelines, participants in the current study were fully informed about the research objectives and significance both during initial contact and at the beginning of each interview. Participants were assured that all personal information would remain strictly confidential through the use of pseudonyms and

omission of any identifying details. It was explicitly emphasized to participants that their involvement was entirely voluntary, that they could choose not to answer specific questions, and that they had the right to discontinue participation at any time. Participants were also asked to provide a written consent for recording the interviews, with the assurance that these recordings would be securely stored and permanently destroyed five years following the completion of the study. Given the potential for emotional discomfort when discussing sensitive topics, interviewers monitored signs of distress and offered participants the opportunity to pause or discontinue. When needed, participants were provided with information about counseling and support services in their local community. Ethical approval for conducting the study was granted by the Institutional Ethics Committees for Israel and by the Institutional Ethical Commission of the Department of Psychology for Italy.

Findings

The aim of the present study was to explore Italian and Israeli parents' perceptions of adolescent sexting. Analysis of the interviews revealed three central themes: (a) parents' overall views and interpretations of sexting among adolescents; (b) parents' perception and characterization of the risks associated with adolescent sexting; and (c) parents' reflections on responsibility for education about safe sexting practices. Analytically, parents' accounts revealed a continuum between dialogic engagement and what we conceptualize as reactive or restrictive mediation, referring to parental strategies marked by delayed conversations, reliance on warnings about negative consequences, and attempts to manage risk through monitoring, control, or prohibition rather than ongoing communicative guidance. Many parents oscillated between these positions depending on their comfort, perceived risk, and confidence in handling sexual topics. Quotations were selected to represent central subthemes, to illustrate cross cultural convergence and divergence, and to highlight both typical and unique perspectives. All selected quotations were chosen collaboratively by the research teams to ensure they were illustrative of the analytic claims and not anecdotal.

Parents' Overall Views and Interpretations of Sexting Among Adolescents

Analysis revealed that most of the parents in both Italy and Israel had limited awareness or only vague understanding of the concept of sexting, often relying on indirect sources such as media or their children for information. This limited awareness was expressed by several parents across both contexts. An Italian mother explained her limited knowledge thus: *"I had to investigate a little bit and ask my daughter... to be honest, I wasn't really aware of the technical term of what was meant."* Similarly, an Israeli mother echoed uncertainty: *"I know it's related to sex, but beyond that, I don't know anything specific."*

Notably, fathers from both countries demonstrated discomfort regarding sexting and online sexuality. Discomfort regarding digital sexuality was particularly evident in several fathers' narratives. An Israeli father described his aversion as rooted in a preference for traditional intimacy: *"I guess I'm old school; I don't like fake intimacy, I like the real thing... sending a picture of an intimate part... no way."* Likewise, an

Italian mother addressed sexting to a strong feeling of detachment from reality: “... *discovering sexuality or otherwise approaching sexuality in this way is definitely not in my way of thinking... that is, sexuality in my opinion comes after a kind of relationship*”.

Both groups viewed sexting as a phenomenon influenced by peer pressure, curiosity, and social dynamics. An Italian father mentioned adolescent boredom as a potential motivation: “*It may be maybe a fad... teenagers have always been a bit bored and maybe now this becomes a way to escape boredom.*” Similarly, an Israeli mother highlighted social influence: “*It’s influenced by the environment and the desire to be part of the group.*” Differences were also noted regarding gender perceptions, with both Italian and Israeli parents asserting boys engage in sexting primarily driven by biological impulses, while girls’ motivations were viewed as socially driven and associated with self-validation and social acceptance. An Israeli mother stated, “*Many times, they want to prove themselves... to be attractive in the eyes of a man... to appeal to the boy in front of them.*” Echoing similar sentiments, an Italian father observed, “*Let’s say on the female side the motivation is showing off. For a boy? Well the motivations are sexual drive, the male has to deal with testosterone a lot more... this kind of drive.*” Alongside convergence, Italian parents more often framed sexting as detached from “real” relational intimacy, whereas Israeli parents more frequently emphasized moral discomfort and artificiality in digital sexual expression.

This theme demonstrated cross-cultural convergence in parental discomfort and ambivalence towards adolescent sexting, underscored by gendered interpretations of adolescent behavior and motivations.

Parents’ Perception and Characterization of the Risks Associated with Adolescent Sexting

Parents from both Italy and Israel expressed significant concerns about potential emotional and social harms resulting from adolescent sexting. Italian parents particularly emphasized risks of psychological distress, such as shame and isolation. Concerns about emotional harm recurred across interviews. One mother described the severe consequences: “*So a picture of you starts circulating, and you feel so ashamed that you don’t go out anymore... you will always feel uncomfortable.*” Similarly, Israeli parents articulated fears about social and emotional repercussions, as one father vividly described: “*Suddenly your pictures are spread all over school, or the country, or websites... you lose control*”.

A specific aspect of concern among Italian regards the risk of losing contact with reality. As one mother noted: “*Confusing reality with a virtual thing... then when you go to do it for real, the thing changes,*” reflecting anxieties that sexting distances adolescents from authentic intimacy. Another father echoed this sentiment, stating: “*In my opinion, a risk is the detachment from what may be an actual reality and a physical approach.*”

Parents frequently highlighted gender disparities in risks. Israeli parents perceived girls as particularly vulnerable, with one father noting: “*The potential for harm is lower for men since it’s less likely that the other party will misuse it... girls need to be more cautious than boys.*” An Italian mother similarly emphasized the greater risk for

girls, associating it with societal attitudes: "...videos and messages, out of jealousy or revenge, were put to the public hurting the girl's reputation." Another Israeli mother noted: "*We hear in the news all the time about those dangerous online groups where they send pictures like this of girls.*"

The emotional responses of parents, such as fear, anxiety, and even dread, were palpable in their narratives. Israeli mothers, for example, openly expressed profound anxiety: "*Just thinking about it fills me with fear and anxiety.*" These emotional reactions highlighted the seriousness with which parents perceive sexting risks, particularly the potential for irrevocable damage to their children's wellbeing and reputation. While both groups emphasized emotional and reputational harm, Italian parents more frequently described risks in terms of detachment from reality, whereas Israeli parents more often stressed loss of control and public exposure.

In summary, parents from both countries shared deep concerns about emotional harm, societal judgments, detachment from reality and gender-specific vulnerabilities associated with sexting. Their perceptions were largely shaped by media narratives and reinforced by personal fears of losing control over their adolescents' digital interactions.

Parents' Reflections on Responsibility for Education about Safe Sexting Practices

Across both Israeli and Italian contexts, parents acknowledged their essential role in educating adolescents about safe sexting practices, emphasizing the importance of proactive communication, yet differing in their confidence and approaches. Israeli parents explicitly highlighted the necessity of early intervention and continuous open dialogue. For instance, an Israeli father expressed the need for dedicated parental training: "*I think there should be a class for parents because we need to know how and what to talk about with our child before it starts, like getting the tools for it.*" Similarly, Israeli mothers emphasized proactive communication, asserting, "*Parents play a very significant role... the mediation that parents provide to their children has such an important role here,*" advocating ongoing discussions to help adolescents understand potential risks and consequences.

Italian parents shared similar views regarding open communication but were slightly more reserved in their approach. An Italian mother explained, "*As parents, we have two options: either you take away the tool they live with and make them a-social... Or you don't take it away from them... by necessity, we have to adapt to this virtual world. So the only way is the education that the family gives them.*" Another Italian mother added, "*Obviously parents should definitely talk openly with their children about everything, so risks, good things, and so on*" reflecting a commitment to comprehensive guidance. An Italian father also underscored the greater weight of parental responsibility compared to educational institutions, stating, "*School for me has a value on the education of the person of 30%, while the 70% is a task of the parents, the family. Families need to show more commitment to their children, we brought them into the world and it is right that we need to follow them especially at this age, where they want to have freedom and autonomy.*"

Despite this general consensus on the importance of parental education, some parents in both contexts displayed hesitation and adopted a more reactive approach.

Israeli fathers particularly demonstrated caution: *“People need to know that this exists. Beyond that, once again, in these contexts, I’m not overly proactive. Meaning, if it hasn’t come up for them, I don’t see a reason to bring it up; why would I put such ideas in their heads?”* Likewise, an Italian father recognized limitations on parental control, stating, *“I am one who controls however the control cannot be 360 degrees... unfortunately, it is not possible to control everything.”* Additionally, few Italian parents also emphasized respecting adolescent autonomy, as one mother highlighted, *“You can warn them but don’t check their cell phones, especially now that they are 18 years old, because I don’t think it’s right to control.”*

Both Israeli and Italian parents expressed clear expectations from the educational system to supplement their educational efforts. Israeli parents advocated integrating ongoing discussions into the school curriculum: *“Not to talk to teenagers (only) once a year about the whole topic of sexuality and sexting... but to include a weekly class that truly encourages the kids to talk.”* Similarly, Italian parents emphasized the educational system’s responsibility, noting, *“It is necessary to help youths to understand sexting... promoting in school courses to help them interpret, elaborate, and deal with these topics at such a young age.”* Regarding the state’s role, Israeli parents demonstrated a clearer expectation for systemic intervention, advocating for legal frameworks and funded educational programs. One Israeli father specifically called for targeted state support: *“Allocate budgets to provide support from a trained team... and facilitate classroom discussions.”* In contrast, Italian parents referred primarily to legal enforcement in case of non-consensual dissemination, emphasizing parental and school responsibilities over state intervention.

In summary, parents from both Israel and Italy clearly recognized their critical responsibility in educating adolescents about safe sexting practices. Although a general agreement existed on proactive communication, differences emerged regarding the extent of parental intervention and confidence. Additionally, there was strong agreement across both contexts regarding the essential role of the educational system in supporting parental efforts through structured educational interventions and continuous open dialogue.

Overall, the findings illustrate complex, culturally nuanced parental perceptions of adolescent sexting, underscoring common concerns, emotional vulnerabilities, and the urgent need for multi-level educational responses.

To provide an analytic overview beyond the narrative description, Table 1 summarizes the three central themes, their subthemes, and illustrative parental perspectives.

Discussion

The current study explored Israeli and Italian parents’ perceptions of adolescent sexting, aiming to understand how they interpret their roles, assess risks, and perceive their responsibilities in educating their children about safe practices.

Findings show that parents in both Israel and Italy recognized their critical role, but differed in how they addressed it. Israeli parents emphasized proactive approaches: early intervention, systematic training, and structured dialogue, often accompanied by expectations for state involvement through education, legislation,

Table 1 Themes and Subthemes Identified in Parents' Perceptions of Adolescent Sexting

Main theme	Subthemes	Illustrative parental perspectives
Parents' overall views and interpretations of sexting	• Limited knowledge and uncertainty about sexting • Discomfort and detachment from digital intimacy • Peer and social influence as drivers • Gendered interpretations of motivations: boys: biological drive; girls: social validation	<i>"I wasn't really aware of the technical term"</i> (Italian mother) <i>"I guess I'm old school; I don't like fake intimacy"</i> (Israeli father) <i>"It's influenced by the environment and the desire to be part of the group"</i> (Israeli mother) <i>"Girls want to prove themselves... to be attractive in the eyes of a man"</i> (Israeli mother); <i>"For a boy? ... the motivations are sexual drive"</i> (Italian father)
Perceptions of risks and vulnerabilities	• Emotional and psychological harm (shame, anxiety, isolation) • Social consequences (loss of control, reputational harm) • Detachment from reality as a specific risk • Gender disparities (girls perceived as more vulnerable)	<i>"A picture starts circulating, and you feel so ashamed you don't go out anymore"</i> (Italian mother) <i>"Suddenly your pictures are spread... you lose control"</i> (Israeli father) <i>"Confusing reality with a virtual thing"</i> (Italian mother); <i>"Girls need to be more cautious than boys"</i> (Israeli father)
Responsibility for education about safe sexting	• Recognition of parental role in guidance and communication • Proactive vs. reactive mediation strategies • Respect for adolescent autonomy and limits of control • Expectations from schools and the state (Israel: systemic involvement; Italy: family priority, schools complementary)	<i>"There should be a class for parents... we need to know how and what to talk about"</i> (Israeli father) <i>"As parents we have two options: take away the tool or adapt to this virtual world"</i> (Italian mother) <i>"You can warn them but don't check their cell phones... it's not right to control"</i> (Italian mother) <i>"School... has 30% value, 70% is the family's task"</i> (Italian father)

and school-based programs (Benish et al., 2018; Gal & Tarabehi, 2024). Italian parents, by contrast, stressed the family's central role, favoring trust and general educational values over explicit discussions about sexting. While many acknowledged the need for openness, they often defaulted to admonishment and monitoring, and in cases where they avoided the topic, responsibility was delegated to schools (Alloni et

al., 2017; Confalonieri et al., 2020; Servettini et al., 2023). These cultural contrasts appear to stem from distinct welfare state traditions and family structures that shape parental expectations about institutional versus familial responsibility. This pattern is consistent with research showing that parental mediation practices are embedded within broader welfare and educational regimes that structure expectations regarding the division of responsibility between family and institutions (Benish et al., 2018; Livingstone & Helsper, 2008).

Despite these cultural contrasts, a common pattern of hesitation was evident across both contexts. Many parents, particularly fathers, adopted a reactive stance, delaying or avoiding conversations unless children raised the issue themselves. This reluctance manifested differently in each culture: Israeli parents often deferred to institutional expertise, while Italian parents struggled between maintaining family-centered control and acknowledging their own discomfort with explicit discussions. This echoes prior work showing that discomfort, fear of encouraging risky behavior, and low self-efficacy undermine parental dialogue (Dolev-Cohen and Ricon 2022a; Speno and Halliwell 2021; Ricon & Dolev-Cohen, 2025). In analytic terms, these patterns correspond to what we define here as reactive or restrictive mediation: parental strategies characterized by delayed engagement (waiting until problems emerge), reliance on warnings about consequences rather than ongoing dialogue, and attempts to manage risk through monitoring, control, or prohibition rather than sustained communicative guidance. These practices contrast with dialogic mediation, where sexting is addressed as part of broader conversations about relationships, consent, and digital boundaries.

Although the study was framed through contrasting institutional and educational contexts in Italy and Israel, the strong similarity in parents' emotional reactions, moral concerns, and mediation dilemmas suggests that formal educational structures may play a more limited role in shaping how sexting is experienced within everyday family life. Parents in both settings appear to be influenced by globally circulating media discourses that frame digital sexuality primarily in terms of risk, reputational harm, and loss of control, narratives that may override local curricular differences. In addition, parental interpretations were closely tied to developmental and relational concerns characteristic of adolescence, including sexuality, autonomy, peer belonging, and parental responsibility (Steinberg, 2014; Livingstone & Helsper, 2008). These concerns are negotiated within the family microsystem, where emotional proximity and moral socialization are more immediate than national policy arrangements. Thus, institutional differences shaped how parents positioned responsibility between family, school, and state, but had less impact on the underlying ambivalence, discomfort, and uncertainty that characterized parental meaning-making across both contexts.

Parents' ambivalence and reactive tendencies can be understood in light of Protection Motivation Theory (Rogers, 1975), as many appraised sexting as highly threatening while doubting their ability to intervene effectively. At the same time, Social Representations Theory (Moscovici, 1984) helps explain how sexting was anchored in familiar moral and gendered categories, particularly the portrayal of girls as reputationally vulnerable and boys as sexually driven. In this context, gendered vulnerabilities refer not only to differential exposure to risk, but to parents' culturally embedded assumptions that girls' primary danger lies in reputational and emotional

harm, whereas boys are constructed as driven by sexual impulse and less socially endangered. These representations shaped how parents evaluated severity, assigned responsibility, and adjusted their mediation strategies toward sons and daughters. These perceptions were translated into mediation practices consistent with patterns identified in parental mediation research (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008), where parents combined dialogue, warnings, and varying degrees of monitoring. Rather than operating as abstract explanatory systems, these theories serve here as lenses that illuminate patterns already evident in parents' narratives.

Importantly, Social Representations Theory and Protection Motivation Theory intersect in that culturally anchored gendered representations shaped not only what parents perceived as severe, but also how capable they felt in addressing the issue. When sexting was anchored in narratives of irreversible reputational harm for girls, threat appraisal intensified while communicative coping appraisal weakened, reinforcing avoidance or restrictive mediation rather than dialogic engagement.

The findings also contribute theoretically to research on parental mediation and digital sexual socialization. They indicate that mediation strategies in the domain of adolescent digital sexuality are shaped not only by general parenting styles, but by parents' moral representations of sexuality, gendered risk narratives, and perceived self-efficacy in addressing sexual topics. In this sense, parental mediation is shown to be meaning-driven: parents' interpretations of sexting as moral threat, developmental norm, or reputational danger mediate how perceived risk is translated into communicative or controlling practices. This extends existing mediation models by embedding them more explicitly within processes of cultural meaning-making and sexual socialization.

Beyond theory, the study offers the first cross-cultural comparison of parental perceptions of adolescent sexting. Situating parents' voices within distinct welfare regimes and cultural norms highlights both convergences and divergences in how families negotiate digital sexuality. These insights extend existing research by emphasizing the importance of cultural context in shaping mediation strategies and offering guidance for culturally responsive interventions.

Limitations

The present study has several limitations. First, as a qualitative inquiry based on a relatively small sample, the findings cannot be generalized; rather, they are intended to provide rich insights into how parents perceive adolescent sexting. Second, detailed demographic data about parents, such as education level, income, religiosity, or sexual orientation, were not systematically collected. As a result, the study cannot characterize the sample in relation to broader populations, nor examine how such variables may shape parental perceptions. Recruitment relied partly on local networks and key informants, which may have increased the representation of parents who were socially connected or relatively open to discussing sensitive topics, while underrepresenting other groups. This sampling approach was consistent with the phenomenological aim of inviting diverse subjective meanings rather than constructing a statistically representative sample, yet it limits the scope of demographic interpretation and generalizability. Finally, although the sensitive nature of the topic was care-

fully managed by trained interviewers who created a supportive and non-judgmental atmosphere, it is possible that some parents may still have provided socially desirable responses. Taken together, these limitations highlight the importance of replicating the study with larger, mixed-method samples and integrating systematic demographic data to deepen understanding of how parental perceptions vary across groups and cultural settings. Consequently, transferability should be considered primarily in relation to socio-cultural contexts with comparable family structures, media environments, and educational arrangements, rather than assumed across all populations.

Conclusion

Taken together, the findings indicate that parental mediation of adolescent sexting is shaped by culturally grounded moral representations, perceived risk, and parental self-efficacy, linking meaning-making, threat appraisal, and everyday educational practice.

This study provides new cross-cultural insights into how parents in Israel and Italy perceive adolescent sexting and their role in addressing it. While both groups of parents acknowledged their responsibility to guide adolescents, their strategies diverged: Israeli parents tended to emphasize structured, state-supported interventions, whereas Italian parents highlighted family-centered education and trust. Across both contexts, hesitation and discomfort often constrained communication, leading some parents to adopt reactive or restrictive approaches rather than sustained dialogue. Additionally, gendered narratives portraying girls as especially vulnerable and boys as impulsive further framed parental strategies and highlight persistent inequalities in how digital sexuality is understood.

The findings underscore that parents' perceptions are shaped not only by personal beliefs but also by broader cultural and institutional frameworks. In Israel, welfare-state expectations encouraged reliance on schools and public systems, while in Italy, strong family traditions led parents to shoulder primary responsibility.

The findings indicate that institutional and educational regimes shape parental expectations regarding who should act, but appear to have a more limited influence on how parents emotionally experience adolescent sexting. Emotional reactions, moral concerns, and communication difficulties seem to be driven more by shared developmental dynamics and globalized media risk discourses than by national educational structures alone.

These results carry several practical implications. Strengthening parental self-efficacy is crucial: in Israel, through embedding parental support within school curricula and community services; and in Italy, through equipping families with tools for open and non-judgmental dialogue, alongside initiatives that foster school–family collaboration. More broadly, the study points to the need for culturally sensitive, evidence-based interventions at multiple levels. At the parent level, programs should focus on strengthening parents' confidence in discussing digital sexuality, providing concrete communication tools, example conversation frameworks, and guidance on how to address consent, privacy, and peer pressure without inducing shame. At the school level, regular, developmentally adapted sessions that include both adolescents and

parallel parent workshops may support a shared language around digital intimacy and risk. At the community and policy level, particularly in contexts such as Israel where state involvement is expected, coordinated initiatives integrating schools, counseling services, and public awareness efforts can normalize parent–adolescent dialogue about sexting as part of broader digital citizenship education. In family-centered contexts such as Italy, interventions may be more effective when framed as support for parental authority and relational trust rather than as institutional replacement of the family role.

Future research should extend these findings through longitudinal and mixed-method designs that integrate parents' and adolescents' perspectives, enabling examination of how parental meanings, mediation strategies, and adolescent experiences evolve over time across cultural contexts.

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Declarations

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Ethical approval All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committees. Ethical approval for conducting the study was granted by the Institutional Ethics Committees for Israel and by the Institutional Ethical Commission of the Department of Psychology for Italy.

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

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