

## Supplementary Material

### Supplementary Material S1. Media Report Involving a Normalcy Discourse

#### *Sexting: A New Sexual Practice Among the Youth?*

Over the past 20 years, the practice of sexting among young people has attracted the interest of both media and scientists, with research showing the growing interest and participation of adolescents in this new trend. Sexting, which refers to the online exchange of self-created intimate content (photos, videos, “sexy” messages, etc.), has emerged as a new way for adolescents to express and share their intimacy within romantic or sexual relationships.

Scientific studies show that the prevalence of sexting among young people is increasing (Burén et al., 2021). In Belgium, for instance, a recent study indicates that half of the youth have engaged in sexting. Specifically, 49% of adolescents have sent sexts, and 59% have received them (RTBF, 2022). These figures are very similar in other European countries such as France (Rousseau et al., 2023), Spain (Molla-Esparza et al., 2023) and Italy (Morelli et al., 2023).

Although this new trend has raised concerns in the past, particularly regarding issues related to consent, recent research in this field also highlights a more nuanced perspective. Indeed, an increasing number of initiatives and prevention programs focus on “safe” sexting, encouraging adolescents to resist peer pressure and make thoughtful decisions about whether, when, how, and with whom they may consensually and responsibly send sexts. These initiatives seem to mitigate potential risks, as recent statistics show that many young people now opt for safer sexting practices (e.g., using anonymous photos or apps like Snapchat that automatically delete photos after a few seconds).

#### *When Do Young People Sext? And Why?*

Scientific reports on the topic of sexting suggest that a large proportion of sexting among young people occurs within the context of a romantic or intimate relationship or simply as a tool for flirting. Adolescents view sexting as a new way to express their intimacy in the digital age and as a relatively normalized sexual behavior. Developmental researchers have recently shown that sexting can indeed create opportunities for sexual exploration among young people, particularly when it occurs within consensual intimate relationships (Ferguson, 2011).

Recent studies on adolescent sexuality have examined the role of “safe” sexting in various contexts. They have revealed that experimenting with sexting can offer young people opportunities for intimacy in situations where physical intimacy in real life may be challenging, especially for adolescents with disabilities. In environments where adolescent sexuality is not well accepted, such as in stricter families, the digital world can provide new possibilities for intimacy. Moreover, sexting appears to present several benefits for young people from cultural and sexual minorities, who may feel freer to express their sexuality more openly, avoiding potential judgment from their surroundings.

Finally, these studies have also highlighted that during the COVID-19 lockdown, many young people turned to sexting to maintain intimacy with their partners. This seemed to help this generation feel more connected, desired, and even less lonely. This is echoed by N.P.\*, an 18-year-old, who shares her experience of using sexting with her boyfriend: “Well, you know, it's not something you do with just anyone. It's just with someone you really love and trust. Sometimes, when you're alone and missing your boyfriend, sexting can really help you feel closer to each other... Especially during the pandemic, when we were all stuck at home and couldn't see each other and spend some time together.”

#### *Is Sexting a New Type of “Real” Intimacy?*

Surveys conducted among adolescents have shown that young people primarily engage in sexting within stable, affectionate, and consensual



romantic relationships, as a way of enhancing relationship satisfaction (Speno & Halliwell, 2023). Scientific research suggests that sexting is associated with greater relationship satisfaction among young women (Rousseau et al., 2023) and may also strengthen romantic relationships when practiced between consenting partners. Therefore, for young people, sexting seems to reflect a new type of intimacy, often compatible with more stable affective relationships.

In conclusion, could sexting allow a new ultra-digitalized generation of adolescents to express their desires, especially when done in a “safe” and responsible way? While serious cases, particularly those of non-consensual sexting, have garnered media attention in recent years, research suggests these are exceptions. As studies emphasize the opportunities for “safe” sexting, this finding could be particularly significant for Generation Z, for whom digital life is an integral part of their romantic and sexual lives.

\*To protect the young woman’s anonymity, we’ve used only her initials.

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## Supplementary Material S2. Media Report Involving a Deviance Discourse

### *Sexting: The Evolution of a Concerning Sexual Practice Among the Youth?*

Over the past 20 years, the practice of sexting among young people has attracted the attention of both the media and scientists, with research showing a growing interest and participation among adolescents in this new trend. Sexting, which refers to the online exchange of self-generated intimate content (photos, videos, “sexy” messages, etc.), has emerged as a new way for adolescents to express and share their intimacy within romantic or sexual relationships. This practice appears to be increasingly widespread among the youth. Indeed, scientific studies show that its prevalence among young people is rising (Madigan et al., 2018). In Belgium, for example, a recent study indicates that half of the young population has engaged in sexting. Specifically, 49% of adolescents have sent sexts, and 59% have received them (RTBF, 2022). These figures are very similar in other European countries, such as France (Rousseau et al., 2023), Spain (Molla-Esparza et al., 2023) and Italy (Morelli et al., 2023).

In attempting to understand this troubling trend, experts suggest that its rise can be attributed to the widespread availability of pornography. Several studies have identified significant links between online pornography use and sexting. According to these experts, easy access to online pornographic content seems to distort young people’s perceptions of intimate relationships. This may involve the exchange of sexually explicit images, often produced under pressure.

At the same time, the development of social media and platforms over the last decade has also led to new types of dangers, including sexually aggressive behaviors among young people. These include “revenge porn” (pornographic revenge), cyberbullying, sexual coercion, and “grooming” (manipulation of a minor by an adult to gain their trust for sexual abuse; American Academy of Pediatrics Council on Communications and Media, 2022).

### *Sexting in Adolescence: A Danger to Adolescent Development?*

Sexting appears to be a vector for risky behaviors. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics (2022), young people who send sexts are more likely to engage in dangerous behaviors, including risky sexual activities, sexual violence, and the consumption of alcohol, drugs, or cigarettes (Mori et al., 2019). Additionally, sexting among young people seems to have significant negative consequences on their mental health. Adolescents who engage in sexting are at a higher risk of developing anxiety and depression compared to those who do not (Wauters et al., 2022). In other words, sexting not only has direct repercussions on the psychological and physical health of young people but may also pose a risk to their development during adolescence—a crucial period marked by many emotional and bodily changes.

### *Is Sexting Truly “Intimate”?*



Despite the well-documented potential risks of sexting, many adolescents continue to engage in this practice. Peer pressure, the desire for popularity, and even pressure from partners can drive many young people to participate in sexting. In this context, the non-consensual disclosure of intimate content poses a significant risk, especially for adolescents. Once a photo is sent or uploaded online, copies can resurface and be found on the internet for years. A moment of poor judgment can ruin a person’s life.

Triggered by events such as breakups, jealousy, or even friendly disputes, this behavior of revenge, often accompanied by blackmail from the perpetrator, is commonly referred to as revenge porn. This phenomenon is causing growing concern among young people, with a

sixfold increase in revenge porn incidents in recent years (Giordano et al., 2022).

This was also the case for S.D.\*, a young man now 21 years old, who faced the dangers of sexting at the age of 17, while still in school. When he decided to break up with his partner, she threatened to share an intimate photo of him publicly. S.D.’s world turned upside down when the image circulated within his school. During this time, he received numerous hateful and harassing messages, which eventually led to his fear of returning back

to school. His parents decided to transfer him to a new school, but the story and the “infamous” photo had already spread there. This took a toll on his mental health: S.D. still experiences symptoms of anxiety, depression, and even suicidal thoughts today. Unfortunately, S.D.’s ordeal is not an isolated incident. Sexting takes only a moment, but its dramatic consequences can last a lifetime.

In conclusion, awareness and caution are absolutely crucial to protecting oneself from the potentially devastating consequences of intimate exchanges online. This is even more imperative for young people who do not yet have the emotional maturity to understand the potential negative consequences of sexting. Stories like S.D.’s remind us of the harsh reality and dangers of sexting. Youth sexting: a dangerous path to be avoided at all costs before it’s too late?

\*To protect the young man's anonymity, we've only used his initials.

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## Supplementary Material S3. Control Condition



### *The Doors of Brussels*

Below is a short text describing the aesthetic diversity of front doors in Belgium. After reading, you will find some questions related to it.

There are a multitude of front door designs in Belgium. Some are made of wood, others of plastic, glass, or metal, and some combine several materials, with solid or glass sections, for example. They can be painted in color, varnished, or left natural. Above the doors, there are sometimes glass panels or stained glass that let in light.

## Supplementary Material S4 Descriptive Statistics and Correlations Between the Study Variables.

	Mean (SD)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Pressure	3.31 (0.81)	—								
2. Traditional values	2.72 (1.09)	.17**	—							
3. Positive attitudes	2.37 (0.89)	.26***	.11**	—						
4. Negative attitudes	4.14 (0.74)	-.04	.00	-.60***	—					
5. Auton.-supp. active mediation	4.07 (0.63)	.09	.03	-.02	.21**	—				
6. Auton.-supp. restr. mediation	4.26 (0.76)	-.04	.03	-.47***	.68***	.31***	—			
7. Trust	3.71 (0.91)	.07	.12*	.15**	-.14**	.26***	-.08	—		
8. Controlling mediation	2.84 (1.00)	.01	.26***	-.23***	.37***	-.19**	-.30***	-.07	—	
9. Internet control	2.72 (1.19)	.05	.41***	-.18**	.29***	-.09	.24***	-.18**	.63***	—
10. Overprotection	3.24 (0.88)	-0.02	.31***	-.38***	.52***	.03	.45***	-.11*	.68***	.69***

Note. Auton.-supp. active mediation: autonomy-supportive active mediation, auton.-supp. restr. mediation: autonomy-supportive restrictive mediation. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

## Supplementary Material S5. Manipulation Checks

The analysis of participants' evaluation of the media report's tone showed a significant main effect of condition,  $F(1,206) = 28.15$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .12$ , with the deviant condition rated as more negative ( $M = 2.61$ ,  $SE = 0.15$ ) than the normalcy condition ( $M = 3.76$ ,  $SE = 0.15$ ). A similar effect was found for perceptions of how alarming the report was for the youth,  $F(1,206) = 19.74$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .09$ , with the deviant condition rated as more alarming ( $M = 5.68$ ,  $SE = 0.13$ ) than the normalcy condition ( $M = 4.87$ ,  $SE = 0.13$ ). Participants in the deviant condition perceived sexting as significantly more dangerous ( $M = 5.67$ ,  $SE = .14$ ) than participants in the normalcy condition ( $M = 4.76$ ,  $SE = 0.13$ ),  $F(1,206) = 22.54$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .10$ . In addition, participants in the normalcy condition rated sexting more strongly as part of normal adolescent development ( $M = 4.63$ ,  $SE = 0.14$ ) compared to participants in the deviant condition ( $M = 3.86$ ,  $SE = 0.14$ ),  $F(1,206) = 14.54$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .07$ . Finally participants in the normalcy condition rated the article as presenting more positive aspects of sexting ( $M = 4.17$ ,  $SE = 0.15$ ) compared to those in the deviant condition ( $M = 2.98$ ,  $SE = 0.15$ ),  $F(1,206) = 31.72$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .13$ . These results indicate that our manipulation was successful.

## Supplementary Material S6. Content Validity Checks

Next, we calculated the mean ratings for content validity assessments that were measured on a seven-point Likert scale. Parents generally perceived the reports as informative ( $M = 5.58$ ,  $SE = 1.33$ ), convincing ( $M = 4.88$ ,  $SE = 1.57$ ), realistic ( $M = 5.30$ ,  $SE = 1.38$ ), and precise ( $M = 5.00$ ,  $SE = 1.37$ ).

## Supplementary Material S7. Randomization Checks

We examined participant characteristics across the three conditions to ensure comparability. Age did not differ significantly across conditions,  $F(2, 309) = 0.36, p = .701, \eta_p^2 = .00$ . Socioeconomic level differed significantly by condition,  $F(2, 309) = 5.13, p = .006, \eta_p^2 = .03$ . Post hoc Tukey tests revealed a significant difference between normalcy and control conditions with a mean difference of 0.81,  $SE = 0.25, p = .004$ , while other pairwise comparisons were not significant. Socioeconomic level was thus included as a control variable in the main analyses. Gender distribution did not differ across conditions,  $\chi^2(2, N = 312) = 2.42, p = .299, V = .04$ . Similarly, educational level was comparable across conditions,  $\chi^2(14, N = 312) = 13.06, p = .522, V = .00$ , as was civil status,  $\chi^2(14, N = 312) = 7.33, p = .921, V = .00$ .

## Supplementary Material S8. Associations With Sociodemographic Variables

The MANOVAs examining associations between socio-demographic variables and our target variables revealed significant effects of parents' gender,  $F(8, 310) = 3.24, p = .001, \eta^2 = .08$  and age,  $F(8, 310) = 2.61, p = .008, \eta^2 = .06$ , on their intended parenting practices. Univariate analyses revealed a significant effect of parent's gender on autonomy-supportive active and restrictive mediation,  $F(1, 310) = 6.60, p = .010, \eta^2 = .02$ , and  $F(1, 310) = 9.63, p = .002, \eta^2 = .03$ , respectively, with fathers scoring higher on both measures; and on controlling mediation,  $F(1, 310) = 4.03, p = .045, \eta^2 = .01$ , where mothers reported more controlling mediation. They also revealed a significant negative effect of parents' age on overprotection,  $F(1, 310) = 4.24, p = .020, \eta^2 = .02$ , internet control,  $F(1, 310) = 8.60, p = .003, \eta^2 = .03$ , and controlling mediation,  $F(1, 310) = 7.30, p = .007, \eta^2 = .02$ . Therefore, these variables were controlled for in subsequent analyses. We did not find any significant effects for parents' educational level,  $F(8, 310) = 0.62, p = .753$ , or subjective socio-economic status,  $F(8, 310) = 1.01, p = .425$ .