



“When It Deviates It Becomes Harassment, Doesn’t It?” A Qualitative Study on the Definition of Sexting According to Adolescents and Young Adults, Parents, and Teachers

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Abstract

Sexting was originally made public by dramatic consequences involving youths with contents that were disseminated and then used as a base for harassment. Despite a growing public and research interest, there is no consensus regarding its definition and measurements. As part of a larger qualitative study on sexting, we aimed to gather and compare opinions and perceptions of 32 youths (16–21 years) and 29 adults (11 parents and 18 teachers) on how sexting can be defined. Different constituent elements were discussed in terms of knowledge, mediums (text-only, photographs, videos, etc.), characteristics, actions (receiving, sending, disseminating, etc.) and contexts. The knowledge and the use of the term sexting was approximate for several participants. Youths used more suggestive elements in their definition and the vast majority of them defined sexting as an activity that could be positive and respectful between two consenting persons. It is necessary to develop a precise and consensual definition of sexting by separating different dimensions and by using a specific vocabulary according to youth perceptions as their main definition of sexting seems to be different from the one of most adults. Prevention messages should aim to reduce the risks by targeting the problems linked to sexting rather than prohibiting sexting per se. This exploratory study could pave the way for a clearer definition and measurement of sexting.

Keywords Sexting · Adolescents · Parents · Teachers · Qualitative research

Introduction

The place of the Internet in daily life, the rapid evolution of new technologies, and the popularity of communication and device sharing, especially among youths, have modified social interactions (Davis, 2013; Houck et al., 2014) and created new behaviors such as sexting (Gómez & Ayala, 2014). Sexting was first made public by dramatic consequences involving adolescents with contents that were disseminated and then used as a base for harassment (Celizic, 2009; Crimmins & Seigfried-Spellar, 2014; Kaye, 2010). Such cases have led to a growing scientific interest for this phenomenon. However, since then, this activity has also been considered in a more positive and normative way, as being part of the sexual

and/or romantic development and experimentation of youths (Döring, 2014; Holoyda, Landess, Sorrentino, & Friedman, 2018; Kopecký, 2015; Temple & Choi, 2014; Walrave et al., 2015). In this line, this activity has been studied in terms of strengthening intimacy and trust between romantic partners (Fox & Bridget, 2014), flirtation (Ringrose, Harvey, Gill, & Livingstone, 2013), foreplay to a sexual act (Temple & Choi, 2014), expression of one’s desires and feelings (Walrave et al., 2015), alternative to face-to-face contact (Lippman & Campbell, 2014; Walker, Sanci, & Temple-Smith, 2013), and building a positive image of one’s body (Jørgensen, Weckesser, Turner, & Wade, 2019).

In the 2010 EU Kids survey on European children’s online opportunities, risks, and safety (Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig, & Ólafsson, 2011), 15% of 11–16 years old had received peer-to-peer sexual messages or images, and 3% reported having sent or posted such messages in the past 12 months. In 2014, the European Net Children Go Mobile study (Mascheroni & Cuman, 2014) on children’s online experiences through mobile media found that 11% of children aged 11–16 reported having received such messages in the past 12 months, the

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highest rates being among 15–16-year-old children (19%). In Switzerland, as part of a larger study on media use among youths aged 12–19, lifetime sending a flirtatious or erotic photograph or video of oneself increased from 8% in 2014 (Willemse et al., 2014) to 11% in 2016 (Waller, Willemse, Genner, Suter, & Süß, 2016). Similarly, if 37% of participants reported having already received such a photograph or video in 2014, they were 43% in 2016.

However, comparisons between prevalence rates are difficult to make. In 2017, our research team published a review on sexting and evaluated the definition used by researchers to measure it (Barrense-Dias, Berchtold, Surís, & Akre, 2017). This review highlighted a gap in the literature as current definitions and conceptualizations of sexting are multiple and disparate in terms of media types (text-only, photographs, videos, etc.), actions (sending, receiving, disseminating, etc.) and/or content, even when the research focus is the same.

Thus, despite a growing public and research interest to better understand sexting and its potential negative consequences, there is no consensus regarding its definition, and previous studies have already highlighted the need of a clearer one (Klettke, Hallford, & Mellor, 2014; Livingstone & Görzig, 2014; Lounsbury, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2011; Walker et al., 2013). Recently, this lack of consistency in the literature was presented as one of the current research challenges on adolescent sexting (Van Ouytsel, Walrave, & Ponnet, 2018).

Including youth perspective in the conception of this definition also appears crucial to precisely understand the activity, improve prevention messages and ensure that such messages reach their targets by using their interpretation and language (Walker et al., 2013). In addition, relevant adults such as parents and educators strongly demand to better understand the use of media by youths, including the meaning given to some activities such as sexting. A better knowledge of sexting could also enable more effective measures of this activity and all its dimensions. Indeed, with vague and inconsistent definitions, measurement of behaviors is not precise enough (e.g., when text-only messages, pictures and videos are integrated in one and only question [Baumgartner, Sumter, Peter, Valkenburg, & Livingstone, 2014]).

As part of a larger exploratory qualitative study on sexting, we aimed to pave the way for a clearer definition and measurement of sexting by collecting opinions and interpretations of adolescents and young adults (AYAs) on how sexting can be defined and determine its important constituent elements. We also had the goal to compare their perspective to the one expressed by parents and teachers, two categories of relevant adults who could be involved in preventive action and discussion, and in solving problems linked to sexting.

Method

We conducted an exploratory qualitative research on sexting in the French-speaking part of Switzerland using focus groups (FGs) to obtain in-depth understanding of the different dimensions of this activity and on the meaning given to it (Collingridge & Gantt, 2008; Rich & Ginsburg, 1999). The group dynamics and the interactions between participants lead to spontaneous discussions and exchanges of outlooks, consensual and opposite, enabling to reveal and deepen different dimensions of the topic from the participants directly (Flick, 2009; Rich & Ginsburg, 1999). FGs methodology is also recommended for research that has an exploratory aim (Flick, 2009; Frith, 2000), especially to capture the different terms and definitions used by participants. Indeed, FGs methodology with group dynamics is particularly powerful in an early discovery process to gather group language (Gill, Stewart, Treasure, & Chadwick, 2008). Furthermore, this method helps to create a climate of trust and safety during discussion, which is interesting with AYAs who are invited to discuss sensitive issues such as sexuality and intimacy (Frith, 2000; Hyde, Howlett, Brady, & Drennan, 2005). Some scholars (Kitzinger, 1995; Wilkinson, 2004) even argue that FGs could specifically facilitate the discussion of taboo topics thanks to a mutual comfort and solidarity. Thus, it could give youth a sense of belonging and acceptance allowing them to open up and be drawn into the discussion.

Our study included 11 FGs performed between February and June 2016. Discussions lasted an average of 90 min and were audio-recorded. Every recording was anonymously transcribed verbatim and then deleted. To ensure anonymity, all identification elements (first name, surname, school, town, etc.) were removed. Each participant received an information letter and signed a consent form before starting the discussion. At the beginning of each session, we verbally recalled the important points such as aims of the research and confidentiality issues. An interview guide with open-ended questions was developed and used to discuss several dimensions of sexting. Discussions were triggered through the presentation of two vignettes corresponding to testimonies posted on a youth support website (www.ciao.ch) by a young male and a young female facing a problematic situation with the unwanted dissemination of their previous intimate sending. To avoid preconceived ideas, we started the discussion with the following large question: *Do you know the term sexting?* and we did not give a definition of it. Furthermore, the two vignettes were not presented as problematic cases of sexting to let participants consider if such a situation could be defined as sexting or not. At the end of each FG, to thank the participants, a snack was served and each of them received a gift card worth the equivalent of 30US\$.

Participants

Inclusion criteria were to be aged between 16 and 20 years for youths, having at least one child aged between 11 and 20 years old for parents, and teaching students in 8th grade (11 years old) or higher for teachers. All participants had to be fluent in French. A total of 61 participants took part in the study including 32 youths and 29 adults (11 parents and 18 teachers). The choice of the 16–20 age range for youths is linked to the fact that these ages do not request a parental consent to interview young people, facilitating recruitment and participation. We also hypothesized that this age group could have more experience and perspective with this relatively new topic for an exploratory research. We decided to include the opinions of reference adults (parents and teachers) to obtain an overview of different actors who can be involved in prevention, discussion and crisis management. For parents and teachers, we used a larger inclusion criterion in terms of age with children and pupils aged between 11 and 20 years old. This age range was chosen to indirectly explore the 11–15 age range as younger teens may also be involved in sexting (Livingstone & Görzig, 2014) and determine if a second qualitative study with younger adolescents could be necessary.

As the topic of sexting could lead to discussions on sexuality and intimacy, females and males participated in same-gender groups of youths. Moreover, gender homogeneity is often recommended for FGs with youths to avoid an adaptation of their speech or a discomfort due to the presence of the opposite sex and to encourage the discussion through this common characteristic (Frith, 2000; Heary & Hennessy, 2002). Therefore, youths (mean age 18.2 years old) were separated by gender and divided into three groups of females ($n = 15$) and three groups of males ($n = 17$) (Table 1). In addition, this separation enabled us to conduct gender analyses (see data analysis below). Even if one inclusion criterion was to be aged between 16 and 20 years, two participants were 21 because one of them came without contacting us (snowball method) and the other had celebrated his birthday between contacting us and the FG.

Eleven parents, including 10 mothers, were gathered in two other groups (mean age 44.3 [41–49], 13.0 for their children [7–18]) (Table 2). Finally, one group included teachers of mandatory school (pupils aged 10–15 years) and two groups comprised teachers of post-mandatory professional schools (students aged 16 or above) (Table 3). For general comprehension in the following text, if not otherwise specified, when we use the term adults we refer to teachers and parents together.

For the recruitment we posted online ads on a job recruitment website for youths (for 15–22 years old), and paper ads on boards in a university hospital and university campus. We also used a snowball method by asking youths who contacted

Table 1 FGs participants' characteristics (AYAs)

Focus group	Gender	Age	Focus group	Gender	Age
FG1 ($N=3$)	F	19	FG4 ($N=6$)	F	20
	F	19		F	20
	F	19		F	16
		F		20	
				F	21
				F	20
FG2 ($N=5$)	M	16	FG5 ($N=7$)	M	17
	M	18		M	18
	M	20		M	20
	M	19		M	18
	M	20		M	17
			M	17	
			M	21	
FG3 ($N=6$)			FG6 ($N=5$)		
	F	16		M	16
	F	16		M	19
	F	18		M	18
	F	16		M	16
	F	18		M	17
			F	16	

Table 2 FGs participants' characteristics (parents)

Focus group	Gender	Age	Child(ren) age
FG1 ($N=6$)	F	41	7; 11
	F	43	10; 13; 16
	F	41	7; 11
	F	44	9; 13; 15
	F	44	13; 16
	F	49	14; 16
FG2 ($N=5$)	F	46	12; 12
	F	42	12
	F	47	13; 18
	F	47	12; 18
	M	43	14; 16

us if they knew anyone (friends, siblings, parents, etc.) who might be interested in participating. For teachers, we asked some of our contacts to ask their colleagues if they would be interested in discussing this topic. Participants were recruited regardless of their own experience related to sexting and until reaching data saturation.

Approval for the research protocol was obtained from the Cantonal (Vaud) Ethics Committee. A safety net was intended for problematic cases that might come to the knowledge of the authors. Young people with personal difficulties could be referred to support institutions (ciao.ch, Pro Juventute) or to support and care units (Interdisciplinary Division of

Table 3 FGs participants' characteristics (teachers)

Focus group	Gender	Age	Grade
FG1 (N=7)	F	44	7–11 (mandatory)
	M	35	7–11 (mandatory)
	M	42	7–11 (mandatory)
	F	44	7–11 (mandatory)
	F	28	7–11 (mandatory)
	F	28	7–11 (mandatory)
	F	42	7–11 (mandatory)
FG2 (N=5)	F	39	Post-mandatory
	F	53	Post-mandatory
	M	57	Post-mandatory
	M	52	Post-mandatory
	M	52	Post-mandatory
FG3 (N=6)	F	55	Post-mandatory
	M	61	Post-mandatory
	F	30	Post-mandatory
	F	36	Post-mandatory
	M	52	Post-mandatory
	F	41	Post-mandatory

Adolescent Health, Violence Medicine Unit). This information was included in the information letter.

Data Analysis

FG transcripts were transferred to the qualitative analysis software MAXQDA (version 12.2.1). An inductive approach was used to perform a thematic content analysis which enabled to extract the different themes and dimensions brought up by the participants (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2014; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This method aims to focus on subjective interpretations and meanings of a social phenomenon by using a classification and categorization process. First, the first author read the transcripts several times to obtain a general overview of the collected data. Second, she created codes by labeling sections and defined quotes based on predominant and significant patterns. Third, she combined and merged similar codes to form overarching thematic categories relevant to the research questions. The first author generated and defined the codes with definitions when they could be interpreted in different ways, analyzed the data and formed the broader themes. Based on coding definitions, the last author reviewed the first analysis, highlighted discrepancies and identified additional themes. To ensure accuracy and consistency in the application of codes, the two authors discussed divergences until reaching consensus. We also conducted an analysis per group (youths versus adults; females versus males for youths) in the same way to explore possible differences or similarities between them. The first

author translated the quotes used in this text from French to English, and translations were verified by the last author.

Results

No gender differences were found regarding the definition of sexting. For the comparison between adults and youths, we only specified when differences were found. Therefore, if no difference was found between these groups, results are presented as a whole because interpretations did not differ and only one quotation of a youth or an adult was used to illustrate this common opinion.

Results are structured in five parts helping to define sexting and identify several elements used by participants as components of the activity. First, as the term sexting is also regularly used in French in some prevention campaigns (e.g., Pro Juventute in Switzerland [Pro Juventute, 2013]), participants were asked about their knowledge of this term. Second, participants defined sexting in terms of mediums to perform it. Third, characteristics of the message content were discussed. Fourth, people with whom sexting takes place were also part of the definition of this activity. Fifth, discussions focused on the actions that compose the activity.

Knowledge of the Term Sexting

When participants answered that they did not know the term sexting, most of them, however, said that they understood what the discussion would be about because they knew the activity, but the specific term of sexting was not always known. “I have to confess. To be sure, I quickly looked on the Internet to have a definition and in fact, I already knew the issue but I did not know the exact term.” (Teacher)

If the term was unfamiliar to them before participating, some participants directly deduced the behavior from the term. “I have never heard the word but when I saw it [the ad] on the website, I immediately understood what this discussion will be about [...]” (Male, 18)

Moreover, in a group of youths, some participants reported that they never used the specific term of sexting to talk about the activity. Indeed, they directly discussed the action per se. “I tend to use a definition rather than a term, with an example. [...] I would say: ‘It is the fact of sending messages with a nude photo of yourself’.” (Female, 19)

Few participants used a kind of French equivalent with the term *sexto* to define sexting. “It [sexting] is the sending of sexual pictures or something like that, [also] sextos” (Female, 18). Others used another English term *nudes* to define sexting. “Nudes. (Male, 18); What is ‘nudes’? (Interviewer); It is in English, nudes [...]. These are sexy pictures.” (Male, 18)

Mediums for Sexting

Three mediums were regularly reported to perform sexting: text-only messages, photographs and videos. “For me, [...] it ranges mainly [...] from photos to videos I think. And there are also text messages” (Female, 16). Compared to the adult groups, one AYA group also thought of another way to do sexting with audio messages. “Audio? WhatsApp? I am suggesting!” (Male, 16) “Yeah, that is right too!” (Male, 19).

While some youths discussed the possible old-fashioned or infrequent nature of text-only messages compared to photos and videos, their inclusion in the definition of sexting was never questioned in their groups. “Actually, they [a couple of friends] only did it with text messages. And she told me that what was cool with him was precisely the fact that he wrote gentle messages. He was like a poet and that turned her on [...]. Maybe it [text-only message] is less frequent but it exists” (Male, 17). However, without contesting the use of texting as a support for sexting and its place in the definition, a different term was once used to talk about text-only messages when they are used without any visual support. “It (sexting) makes me mostly think of people, for example, who send photos of themselves on Snapchat [...]. Because flirting, trying to seduce or just saying: ‘Would you do this or that...?’, makes me not think of sexting. For me this is sexting and not sexting” (Female, 16). On the contrary, among adults, text-only messages were sometimes the subject of deeper discussions on their inclusion in the activity of sexting. Indeed, adults had more difficulties considering that text-only messages could be a way to do sexting. “I did not think of text messages at all [...]. I directly imagined [...] WhatsApp with photos and comments but always with a visual support” (Teacher).

Even when the inclusion of text-only messages in the definition of sexting was not questioned, this support stayed in the background in all FGs. Indeed, when participants gave an example or remembered a real case, only photographs and videos were used to illustrate their words. “But when there was this story all over the canton [state] with two youths in secondary school who filmed themselves during intercourse, my step-son received the video [...]. He was not in the same school but the video went around so much... [...].” (Teacher). This secondary place of text-only messages was even more concretely observed in one group of AYAs in which sexting was reported as a stepwise process: “I think that it begins with flirting by SMS and the extreme limit is precisely these stories of videos or even Webcams [...].” (Female, 20).

Discussions on different ways to perform sexting also focused on Smartphone applications, and Snapchat was the most often cited, especially in the AYAs groups. For some of them, this application contributed to the activity of sexting because, originally, message content was visible to the addressee for a few seconds only and then it disappeared.

Thus, this idea of a safe application was often reported in the AYAs groups. “But strangely, [...] I would trust more Snapchat than Facebook just because the photo is removed after 10 s maximum” (Male 17). In contrast, the security offered by such an application was more questioned by adults. “He [a boy whose content was disseminated] did not think because he sent it on Snapchat. [...]. Snapchat is sold as an application for sending temporary images that are not kept in memory and are not recordable by the other person. [...] But there are 10,000 applications that allow to workaround.” (Parent). Finally, although some adults seemed to be aware of the different applications that could be used for sexting, most of them confessed being completely lost and worried about not following technological evolution. “[...] My daughter began to use a mobile phone last year [...]. Therefore, I began to be interested in WhatsApp and Facebook. Fortunately, I knew these ones. But now, it goes so fast. She comes back and says: ‘Snapchat!’ Well, ok, what is this? Wikipedia, quick!” (Parent).

Characteristics of Message Content

In every FG, sexual characteristics were used to describe the message content in a sexting context. More specifically, in addition to the term *sexual*, two kinds of terms were used. First, mainly in the groups of AYAs, suggestive terms such as sexy, erotic, flirtatious, intimate, seductive and naughty were part of their definition. With these terms, participants associated the content of sexting with more subtle and larger terms. “[...] I would say intimate rather than sexual, [...] it can be something not necessarily sexual but still part of the intimacy, [...] something pleasant. [...] I think sexting falls into this wider category” (Male, 20). On the contrary, some of these terms led to deeper discussions among adults such as the terms sexy or erotic. Indeed, some of them considered that these terms were not so adapted to the activity of sexting among youths. “For me, sexy is for seduction, we do not cross the limit, [...] there is a lot of suggestion in a sexy message. Unfortunately, with sexting, it could be suggestive but, in my opinion, it goes quickly much further [...].” (Parent).

Second, mainly among adults, more explicit terms such as risqué content, sexual intercourse, pornography and provocation were also used to describe a message and define sexting. “Honestly, I do not have a clear definition of what it [sexting] is. I clearly see that it is sending pornographic pictures but I do not know anything else” (Parent). On the other hand, in the groups of youths, the word pornography was very rarely present when they defined sexting compared to other terms. Some doubts were even reported on the inclusion of pornographic content in the definition of sexting. “It was one year ago, I was shown a video of [...] a young couple aged 14 who recorded themselves during an intercourse in the schoolyard [...]. And it lasted maybe 15 min and I was

like: ‘But I do not want to see that!’. It was totally pornographic. But I do not know if it could be included in the field of sexting, I have the impression that it is really another field” (Female, 20). Furthermore, some adults associated sexting with a larger concept including sexual insults whereas this idea was never reported by AYAs. “I considered it [sexting] very largely, things like language. When children talk to each other: insults, jokes or things with sexual words [...]. And then, it goes through social media, mobile phones” (Parent).

Another characteristic of the messages’ content was that total nudity, or even partial nudity, was not requested to consider a message as being part of sexting. A suggestive position, an attitude, and the context of the message were considered as more decisive to qualify a message as sexting. “There is no need to be half-naked, there is also the way to take the photo or to send messages” (Female, 19). However, for some youths, even if nudity was not a condition, some specific body parts had to appear to consider the message entering in the category of sexting and these body parts depended on the gender of the sender. “A guy who sends a photo of him shirtless, this is not sexting, but a girl who sends a photo of her shirtless, this is sexting” (Male 16).

Finally, the content had to be personalized and individualized. To highlight the importance of these characteristics, a group of AYAs considered that the photograph or the video had to be taken in self-portrait (selfie). “It is not even him who takes the photo! [In reference to a poster of a prevention campaign] (Male 18); So, has it to be taken in a selfie mode to be considered as sexting? (Interviewer); It has to be personal, yes! It has to be from us” (Male 17). Some parents also reported these characteristics to differentiate sexting from other types of sending such as sexual pictures of unknown persons. “Sexting is personalized, it is not just a transmission of sexual images. [...] It means that it is the sender who presents his/her own image and who sends to his/her addressee something that is personalized” (Parent). Thus, in this definition, a photograph or a video taken without the person knowing about it was not included in the definition of sexting. However, some adults considered that this scenario was also part of the definition of sexting. “For me, [...] one day, a student will come to my office and will say: ‘I was photographed or filmed under the shower after the sports course and they send it to the whole class!’” (Teacher).

Sexting Participants

Based on the main definition from the perspective of the participants, sexting was reported to be performed between peers or, at least, between people who knew each other. “Sexting is better with someone that we already know than with a stranger because with a stranger, it means nothing. Ok, we got a little excited but when we meet, it is not the same thing at all.” (Male, 17). Indeed, sexting between perfect strangers

was rarely considered as an option, and if so, it implied a different goal than seducing or flirting. “Sending to strangers is more for self-talk than seducing the other person I think” (Male, 17). For some participants, sexting with strangers was considered as risky because of the danger of false identity. “I think that there is another inconvenience. When you do sexting with someone that you know, you are sure to have a human being behind the screen who will receive your photo. If it is with a stranger, for example on Facebook, it might not be really the girl, it might be another guy who wants [...] to receive a photo of you and take the piss out of you” (Male 18). When they discussed sexting with strangers, youths also gave examples with celebrities who received messages from fans who are total strangers to them confirming that youths mainly do sexting with peers. “For example, there are some artists. I saw interviews: ‘I received Snaps [messages from Snapchat] of girls I do not know.’. They say that they do not feel comfortable because they are strangers and it is weird” (Male 19).

In the same line, for some youths, posting a photograph on a social media targeting a wider audience, including strangers, is not included in the definition of sexting but rather the definition of exhibitionism. “It is from a person to another but in this case, it is like showing myself to the entire world without knowing who is going to see it. So, I do not know if we can include this in sexting” (Female 20).

Actions of Sexting

Participants discussed the different actions to be included in the definition of sexting. Indeed, the vignettes that we gave at the beginning of the sessions presented two cases (young male and female) of an intimate photograph that was sent out without consent to a third party. Two interpretations were given to define sexting in terms of actions.

First, sexting under pressure, sharing with others without consent, blackmail and harassment were actions considered as being fully part of the definition of sexting. For these participants, sexting could not be considered as a possible initial positive and harmless activity but as a deviant and violent behavior per se. It was regularly presented in adult groups. “Just before, we were talking about sexual harassment, it is a violent term. And precisely, I have the impression that the word Sexting is a word that made harassment common place” (Teacher). Among youths, this interpretation was marginal.

Second, sexting was defined as two consenting persons sharing with only two possible actions, sending and receiving. “For me, it is the step before. [...] The rest for me is no longer sexting, it’s a problem that is related to sexting, which is the fact that the image escapes” (Parent). Therefore, the actions mentioned above were not part of the definition and these different behaviors had to be named differently. Indeed, for these participants, sexting that goes wrong or

that occurs under pressure was not considered as sexting anymore. “When it deviates, it becomes harassment does it not? It does not deviate at the beginning but it could deviate. Sexting is the fact of sending messages and then there are the consequences.” (Female 18). In this definition, sexting was not deviant or violent per se, it was considered as a risky behavior that could be diverted to harm someone, but harming someone was not the first aim of sexting. This second interpretation was mostly present in the group of youths. “It is a voluntary action. It is for pleasure that we do this, it is really not for anything else. In the definition of sexting it is really for pleasure and to turn someone on, it is something voluntary, positive.” (Male 18).

Some adults, for whom this second interpretation was a minority, even questioned their own definition of sexting after listening to other participants. Indeed, some of them realized that sexting could also be a private activity (for example within a couple) and that the problem would be at another level. “[...] Sexting that goes wrong...So originally, would sexting only be sending photos? [...] It is a simple sending of photos that could go wrong? But originally, it would only be, quote unquote, “an innocent sending”, a sending in trust...?” (Parent).

Discussion

This exploratory qualitative study presents several key elements to pave the way for a better understanding and definition of sexting.

First, the knowledge and the use of the term sexting was approximate for several participants, even when the French equivalent *sexto* was also considered. This contraction of *sex* and *texting* was first used in an Australian newspaper article published in 2005 (Roberts, 2005 as cited in Walker et al., 2013). This English term is also regularly used in French in some prevention campaigns (for example, in Switzerland [Pro Juventute, 2013], in Belgium [Child Focus, 2015] and in France [e-Enfance, 2017]). However, while some of our participants had already heard or read the term sexting or *sexto*, others confessed not knowing the term at all or not using it even though the issue was well known and even already experienced. This finding on the term sexting is in line with previous studies (Albury & Crawford, 2012; Ringrose, Gill, Livingstone, & Harvey, 2012; Walker et al., 2013) and should be considered by prevention policies. Indeed, the term sexting may be an overly specific term that is only used by adults in a scientific or journalistic context. The activity should rather be presented and discussed in a much more direct way in terms of action and content without going through a shorter term that could group several dimensions at once. This way,

prevention messages would be straightforward and young people would understand where exactly the focus is on.

Second, sexting seems to have several possible mediums such as text, audio and illustrations. However, we found a difference between adults and youths regarding the inclusion of text-only messages in the definition of sexting. Indeed, adults rarely thought or had more difficulty to consider text-only messages as a possible support to perform this activity. However, this diversification of mediums is important in terms of potential consequences. Indeed, in a case of dissemination to other people, photographs and videos could have more negative consequences (Houck et al., 2014). A clear knowledge and separation of the different mediums used to send a message could provide an accurate rate of the activity of sexting and determine precisely the part of text-only messages, photographs and videos sent in such a context.

Third, for the characteristics of message content, youths were more likely to use suggestive terms in their definition including a totally dressed person as a possible content for sexting. Indeed, a suggestive content, including the pose or the attitude of the person, was considered as more important than the nudity. On the other hand, adults were more likely to talk about explicit content or pornography to define sexting. In the same line, a French website that offered a French equivalent to a foreign term defined sexting as text pornography (Ministère de la Culture, 2013). This representation of rude content does not reflect the perspective of youths and their overall use. Another important issue in terms of characteristics of message content was the importance of the personalization and individualization of a message in the case of sexting. Thus, taking a photograph or a video without someone’s knowledge would not be part of sexting, but some adults considered that sexting also included that kind of behavior.

Fourth, for most youths and adults, in terms of participants, sexting was mainly defined as a peer activity or, at least, as an activity between two persons who knew each other. This point is also important for prevention policies to adopt an overall strategy and reach all the young people likely to be involved in a sexting activity. There is a need to lead general prevention and avoid focusing only on the potential victims to dissuade them from consensual sexting. Therefore, as sexting mostly occurred in a peer context, it is necessary and possible to include all young people in educative and preventive strategies whether for their own practice, as potential victims and perpetrators, or as witnesses and peers to encourage them not to transform the activity into a problem.

Fifth, another difference was found between youths and adults in terms of actions that composed sexting. Indeed, the vast majority of young people defined sexting as an activity that could be positive and respectful between two consenting persons. Other behaviors such as coerced sexting or using sexting as a way to blackmail and harass someone were

systematically discussed but not as part of the definition and the basic activity of sexting. Based on the vignettes used as icebreakers that presented a problematic situation (unwanted dissemination to others), this finding is even more interesting and revealing of their interpretation and understanding of sexting. Indeed, from negative vignettes, most young people clearly distinguished the practice of sexting per se and its possible positive sides from the potential problems.

This difference between youths and adults on the definition of sexting in terms of actions highlight the necessity of using the interpretations and terminology of young people in preventive and educative policies. Orientating prevention to avoid the sharing of personal sexually related material between two consenting persons would be ineffective and would prevent from focusing on the real problems (pressure to send, harassment, blackmailing, dissemination). Therefore, to improve prevention, understand the problems and determine accurate prevalence rates, actions have to be differentiated in terms of sending, receiving, requesting and disseminating to others. In the same line, some studies distinguished primary sexting from secondary sexting (Lievens, 2014), experimental sexting from aggravated sexting (Wolak & Finkelhor, 2011), consensual sexting from sextbullying (Eraker, 2010), and risk from harm (Livingstone & Görzig, 2014). Indeed, two types of discourse are currently used in the literature and in prevention to define and discuss sexting: the deviance one in which sexting is defined as a deviant behavior associated with other risk behaviors and the normalcy one in which sexting is considered as a normal and intimate way to communicate (Chalfen, 2010; Döring, 2014; Levine, 2013; Lim, 2013).

Some limitations need to be discussed. Firstly, our findings and our recommendations are based on self-reported narratives on an intimate topic. We could face a risk of social desirability or self-censoring, but we reduced it by clearly indicating in our ads that we were not looking for testimonies of their own behaviors and by presenting two vignettes at the beginning of the discussion to reassure them on our aim to gather general opinions only. Secondly, the snowball process, one of our recruitment methods, could have the bias of gathering participants who share the same characteristics and opinions. Thirdly, using negative vignettes as icebreakers could have been a limitation and biased the discussion in only one negative direction; nonetheless, it was not the case in this study.

Despite these limitations, this study highlights the different components (terms, mediums, characteristics, participants and actions) that have to be considered in the establishment of a clear definition of sexting. Indeed, including the youth's perspective in this study highlighted the need for a precise definition of sexting that would take into account a specific vocabulary and interpretation as the conception of most youths seems to be very subtle and quite different from

the one of most reference adults. Such a definition could also enable an accurate measurement of the phenomenon and determine when harm could appear.

We also recommend that prevention and educative policies aim to reduce the risks by combating the problems of lack of consent, pressure, blackmailing, harassment and dissemination rather than prohibiting sexting per se, mostly defined, in this study, as a positive, consensual and normative activity between two persons who know each other. In the same line, sexting should be apprehended as a sexual behavior with possible risks but not as a harmful activity per se. A clear definition of sexting and its possible abuses could also lead to a better understanding for reference adults such as parents and educators.

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Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

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

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