

USING VIGNETTES IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH TO ASSESS YOUNG ADULTS' PERSPECTIVES OF SEXTING BEHAVIOURS

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Abstract: *The purpose of this study was to compare attitudes toward sexting using vignettes. Participants were 49 university students (ages 19-26) who participated in five online focus group discussions and responded to five written vignettes describing sexting. The five vignettes about sexting were composed of five types of sexting experiences: 1) sexting under intimate partner pressure, 2) revenge sexting, 3) consensual sexting with intimate partner, 4) sexting under peer pressure, and 5) sexting to flirt with others. Students gave their opinions on the vignettes presented. Revenge sexting was perceived as a behaviour more negative than any other type of sexting experience. The vignette that depicted sexting with an intimate partner in a long-distance relationship was perceived as the least negative of all types of sexting. The results of this study aim to inspire future studies to use vignettes as a methodological tool to determine youths' attitudes, beliefs, and opinions about sexting.*

Keywords: *college students, attitude, sexting, vignette, qualitative research.*



INTRODUCTION

There has been considerable research conducted on sexting over the last ten years. Researchers have struggled to agree on a definition of sexting, with different emphases placed on particular aspects of sexting. In the most prevalent definitions, sexting is conceptualized as sharing personal sexually suggestive text messages or nude or nearly nude photographs or videos via electronic devices (Mori et al., 2020). Consensual sexting includes voluntary participation in sexting with the absence of pressure and blackmailing or forwarding the sext without the permission of the person who produces sexually explicit content (Döring, 2014; Morelli et al., 2016). Aggravated sexting involves the presence of harmful intention toward someone who shares sexts or forcing someone to share sexts (Wolak & Finkelhor, 2011). According to Morelli et al. (2016), sharing sexts without permission can be called non-consensual sexting, while peer pressuring someone to send sexts can be called pressured sexting. Although the sexting definitions vary considerably, there is consensus that sexting has increased in recent years among youth and increases as people age (Madigan et al., 2018). Sexting has been associated with a major impact on legal, sociological and psychological outcomes for the senders, receivers, and forwarders of sexts (O'Connor & Drouin, 2020).

Researchers have focused on identifying the reasons for participating in sexting. The most common theoretical model to describe a wide range of reasons that young people participate in sexting is a three-factor model for sexting motivations by Bianchi et al. (2018). The model shows that adolescents and young adults may sext for one of the following purposes: sexual purposes (sexting for sexual aims), instrumental/aggravated purposes (sexting for secondary aims – to obtain some benefit), and/or body image reinforcement purposes (sexting in order to obtain social reinforcement about the adequacy of one's own body). The authors noted that instrumental/aggravated purposes have the highest potential for harmful and coercive sexting that has been associated with dating violence (Bianchi et al., 2018). Other motivations to sext are to be fun and flirtatious, as a “joke” or attempt to bond and gain status among peers (Albury & Crawford, 2012; Burkett, 2015; Choi et al., 2016; Drouin et al., 2013; Englander, 2015; Kernsmith et al., 2018; Ringrose et al., 2012).

The present study empirically investigates how young adults differ in their evaluation of sexting behaviors driven by various motives and identifies factors that influence these judgments. Although there is considerable research on sexting attitudes, intentions (e.g. Hudson & Fetro, 2015; Liang & Cheng, 2017; Walrave et al., 2014) and behaviors (e.g. Ferguson, 2011; Strassberg et al., 2013; Wilson et al., 2021), to our knowledge there are no data available regarding the types of attitudes related to different motivational reasons for engaging in sexting. Existing cross-sectional research shows that consensual sexting is positively perceived and often occurs within an intimate relationship (Bianchi et al., 2016; Levine, 2013), while non-consensual sexting is focused on fun and excitement rather than the intimacy (van Oosten & Vandenbosch, 2020) and is a form of sexual harassment (Reed et al., 2016; Walker & Sleath, 2017). Recent qualitative research (e.g. Burkett, 2015; Burén et al., 2021; Harder, 2020; Le, 2016; Ringrose et al., 2012; Roberts & Ravn, 2019; Pérez Domínguez, 2020; Stanley et al., 2016; Van Ouytsel et al., 2017) and mixed methodological approach research (e.g. Currin et al., 2020a; Hasinoff & Shepherd, 2014; McGovern et al., 2016; Setty, 2019; Yeung et al., 2014) show that for young people sexting is not always a

positive enjoyable experience and can also be an uncomfortable or problematic activity. Though this qualitative or mixed-approach research contributes greatly to our understanding of the relationship between sexting motivations and the attitudes and beliefs about sexting, they nevertheless are limited to understandings of the perception, beliefs and meaning of sexting. All of the qualitative or mixed-approach studies, apart from one (Currin et al., 2020a), have been conducted using an in-person qualitative approach, where participants responded to open-prompts questions, individual interviews, or group focus interviews. However, insightful views of eliciting perceptions, opinions, beliefs and attitudes about sensitive issues that occur in the digital environment, such as sexting, may not be accessible through an in-person qualitative approach. We should use an internet-based qualitative context when seeking to produce a similar and realistic environment.

Utilizing vignettes is one way of effectively studying sensitive issues, especially when participants may not feel comfortable discussing personal challenges or when their answers may not be socially acceptable (Hess et al., 2016). Vignettes are short stories about hypothetical characters in specified circumstances in which the participant is invited to respond about the situation (Finch, 1987). This can be a less intrusive and non-threatening way of understanding individual cognitions (perceptions, beliefs, attitudes) about specific experiences, which are typically employed in conjunction with other qualitative methods such as interviews and focus groups (Azman & Mahadhir, 2017). With digital technology expansion, using vignettes within online focus groups could be an innovative methodological approach to examine individual cognitions about sexting. Given the limited research on understandings of individual cognitions about sexting in various motivational contexts using digital adaptations of qualitative approaches, this paper investigates the sexting experiences of young adults via online vignettes in combination with focus group discussions. The present qualitative study aims to compare attitudes toward sexting for three theoretically different motivational reasons (sexual purpose, instrumental/aggravated purpose, body image reinforcement purpose) and reasons for sexting for socializing purposes (fun, obtaining status, etc.). We expect that participants will display more positive attitudes toward sexting for sexual purposes and less positive attitudes toward sexting for instrumental/aggravated purposes.

METHODS

Participants

We conducted online synchronous focus groups from March 2021 to September 2021 using a website for online conferences. Participants from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia took part in real-time online group discussion via text in which they were encouraged to express their opinions and comment on five vignettes featuring hypothetical examples of various motivational contexts for sexting behaviour. Ethical approval was obtained from the Department of Psychology in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Banja Luka and Mostar) and Croatia (Zadar). Hence, Croatian Ministry of Education and Science, Ministry of Education, Science and Youth of Sarajevo Canton and Herzegovina-Neretva Canton in Bosnia and Herzegovina approved this study.

Participants were 49 (41 female and 8 male) Croatian, and Bosnia and Herzegovina students who were entered into a drawing for a shopping centre voucher of a nominal value as a recognition for their participation in the study. Sixty-three percent identified themselves as Croat, 23% as Serb, and the remaining 14% as belonging to Bosnian nationality. Participant ages ranged from 19 to 26 years. Participants were recruited via direct advertising on university websites and announcements of the study in lectures at universities.

Designing the Vignettes

The set of five text vignettes (Supplemental Appendix 1) was designed specifically for this study which was part of a larger study project, "Nature and determinants of sexting among adolescents and youth: A cross-national study". When designing the vignettes, we drew upon the most common reasons for sexting noted in academic literature (sexual purpose, body reinforcement and instrumental/aggravated reasons, which is emerging as newest distinct motivational model for sexting; see in detail Bianchi et al., 2016; 2018). The guide was revised and approved by all authors and piloted with three focus groups.

Vignette 1 illustrated expression of instrumental/aggravated sexting that occurs when someone sexts, usually adolescent girls and young women, in response to being pressured by a partner (Drouin & Tobin, 2014; Klettke et al., 2014; Reed et al., 2020; Tobin & Drouin, 2013). This unwanted but "consensual" sexting (see Drouin & Tobin, 2014) occurs at concerning rate among youth probably due to motivation to maintain the relationship (Le, 2021). By Vignette 1 we tried to illustrate gender biases instrumental/aggravated forms of sexting since some studies show that girls are more often exposed to pressure, harassment and threats to sext (Bianchi et al., 2017, 2018; Choi et al., 2016; Englander, 2015; Kernsmith et al., 2018; Klettke et al., 2014; Ringrose et al., 2012, 2013).

Vignette 2 was also designed to illustrate form of instrumental/aggravated reasons of sexting but includes more harmful aims such as sexting coercion (Drouin & Tobin, 2014), and revenge toward an ex-partner (Drouin et al., 2015). However, due to findings suggesting that there are no gender differences for non-consensual sexting (see Madigan et al., 2018) we decided to provide more space for ambiguity and present a situation of a woman reporting instrumental/aggravated motivation with elements of harmful intention.

Vignette 3 depicts sexting for a sexual purpose which is the most commonly reported reason for sexting (Bianchi et al., 2016, 2017, 2019). It includes a situation of sexting in long distance relationship in order to improve passion and intimacy. According to the literature, sexting has been reported in relationships, especially in long-distance relationships, as an attempt to maintain or strength intimacy (Albury & Crawford, 2012; Bianchi et al., 2016, 2018; Currin et al., 2020b; Drouin et al., 2013).

Vignette 4 illustrated body reinforcement reasons for sexting which consists of sexting in order to obtain positive feedback and social reinforcement regarding one's own sexual attractiveness or appearance (Bianchi et al., 2016, 2017, 2019, Burkett, 2015; Currin & Hubach, 2019; Currin et al., 2022). As the literature has shown that that sexting motivations may be for fun, a "joke" or attempt to bond and gain status among peers (Burkett, 2015; Ringrose et al., 2012) we decided to incorporate these into these Vignette 4. We suspect that sexting for body image reinforcement involves sexting for social purposes (e.g., fun, peer status etc.). Hence, we wanted to explore young adults' views of sexting with strangers as it

relates to body reinforcement, since sexting with strangers has been perceived to have negative outcomes (Rice et al., 2014; Wolak et al., 2008).

Finally, Vignette 5 illustrated sexting for sexual purposes in an attempt to flirt with a potential partner (Albury & Crawford, 2012; Bianchi et al., 2016; Reed et al., 2020; Ringrose et al., 2013). Because recent findings have confirmed that LGBTQ individuals are more likely to engage in sexts for sexual reasons, e.g., to explore sexuality and meet partners/boyfriends, than heterosexual individuals (Bauermeister et al., 2014; Chong et al., 2015; Rice et al., 2012), we designed Vignette 5 to feature an individual with a gay/lesbian orientation.

Administering the Vignettes

Focus groups were conducted to explore participants' attitudes and opinions about the sexting experience. Each focus group lasted approximately 60 to 120 minutes and consisted of between six and eleven people. In total five groups were conducted in real-time using the web conferencing service by the facilitator and were recorded in digital format as text. After participants accessed the online focus groups via a username that did not indicate their identity, and gave their written informed consent, the facilitator gave the participants five brief hypothetical vignettes to explore. After each vignette was presented, the group was asked to discuss their initial thoughts about it. Prior to reading the vignettes, participants were asked to discuss ten open-ended questions that are not included in the analysis for this study.

Data Analysis

A thematic analysis, a method of qualitative data analysis that aims to describe the thematic categories that emerge from the data obtained (Howitt, 2010), was conducted to analyse the descriptive responses to the vignettes. In conducting the thematic analysis, Braun and Clarke's (2006) iterative approach to familiarising with the data, coding the data, and developing themes was followed. The data from the corresponding main themes developed through the thematic analysis were then quantified (by expressing them as a %) to determine the prevalence of positive, negative, neutral and mixed attitudes towards sexting underlying the different motives. An overview of the themes and codes based on analysis of focus-group data responses is presented in the Table 1. Data analysis was conducted using the qualitative software package QSR NVivo 10.

Table 1. Coding scheme with themes and codes with references in parentheses and examples.

THEMES	CODES	EXAMPLE OF CODED EXTRACT
Vignette 1		
Negative attitudes (66)	A partner's behavior is manipulation or blackmail (21)	„...if she wants to continue dating him indicates Robert's goal from the beginning, sexual gratification with Irene's pictures and/or their publication on the Internet (blackmail is also possible).“
	Content should not be sent under pressure from a partner (16)	„No, if it's something she doesn't want to do then she shouldn't do it.“
	Partner who put pressure is a bad person (or should seek help) (15)	„Robert is stupid and Irene deserves better.“
	End the relationship in case of pressure to sexts (6)	„Irene needs to block him and get him out of his life.“
	The partner should not exert pressure (6)	„If he loved her, he wouldn't ask for it.“
	A person should think before sending content under pressure (2)	„I think Robert is only with Irene to send her photos, but of course we do not see the whole story. We need to pay attention to the situation and then do what we can to make sure he does not do something we can borrow to get revenge.“
Vignette 2		
Negative attitudes (69)	The partner who blackmails is a bad person (should help) (27)	„Ana is trying to gain control over him. He is afraid of being hurt and losing someone. He's afraid of being lonely when he does not need her or feeling like she has a counter over him, so he does not want to be with her. She wants control, she wants to be above him. She might just be a psychopath and need a psychiatrist.“
	End the relationship in case of blackmail (and/or remove the content) (17)	„Took her phone away, forcibly deleted messages, and broke up with her.“
	Trust issues (lack of trust, breach of trust) (13)	„Luke gave Ana his trust, she played with him as seen on many occasions, unfortunately not the only case. He needs to be more careful and she needs to be more realistic because what she is doing is not sustainable.“
	Blaming (5)	„It's their own fault because they knew the negative consequences and could not be sure if the photos would be deleted.“
	Partner's behaviour is blackmail/criminal behaviour (4)	„Blackmail that is difficult to get out of.“
Reporting to the police (3)	„...he would have contacted the police if I were in his shoes..“	
Vignette 3		
Positive attitudes (31)	Consensual sexting in an intimate relationship (with a trusted person) is fine (23)	„Well done, I respect them. That means they are mature and trust each other.“
	Sexting in an intimate relationship can be good for an relationship (8)	„Sara and Allen have a healthy, trusting relationship. Sexting is a normal thing to do when you are in a long-term relationship and trust each other. It brings you closer together.“
Negative attitudes (25)	Sexting in an intimate relationship can be risky (14)	„It just brings them closer to blackmail if one of them decides to break up.“
	Sexting in an intimate relationship is wrong/bad (9)	„It's not the right way.“
Neutral attitudes (2)	Sexting in an intimate relationship with minors is problematic (2)	„The problem here is that Allen is a minor.“
	Sexting in an intimate relationship is own choice (2)	„If that's what they think, then let them.“
Vignette 4		
Negative attitudes (48)	Sexting under peer pressure is wrong/bad (17)	„Social pressure. It's the same as saying to yourself, if everyone jumps off a building, I'll go with them..“

	Sexting under peer pressure can be risky (14)	„Nora was certainly wrong at this point, because this acquaintance is in no way loyal to her, and it is almost certain that he will share her pictures with other people.“
	Content should not be sent under peer pressure (10)	„If you are not 100% sure at first, do not do it.“
	The person who has sext under peer pressure is a bad person (7)	„If she really sent it off, then she has some kind of disorder that needs to be treated.“
Neutral attitudes (8)	Sexting under peer pressure is own choice (8)	„She made her decision. No one told you to take her picture. She fell of her own volition, so let her get back up of her own volition.“
Vignette 5		
Negative attitudes (17)	Sexting for flirting purposes is wrong/bad (17)	„It's stupid of me to send such photos for flirting purposes.“
Neutral attitudes (13)	Sexting for flirting purposes is own choice and responsibility (13)	„I do If it's okay with him, who am I to judge.“
Positive attitudes (4)	A person who engages in sexting for flirting purposes is confident (4)	„Too much confident.“
Mixed attitudes (8)	Sexting for flirting purposes is acceptable if it is voluntary/consensual (5) Sexting for flirting purposes is acceptable if the person is aware of the consequences (3)	„If the other parties are okay with getting those pictures, that's fine.“ „If Sasha has thought through his choices and is aware of the consequences, that's fine, but you should be careful.“
Double standard on sexting for flirting purposes (7)	Double standard on sexting for flirting purposes (7)	„Comparing boys and girls in this situation is somehow not the same for me.“

RESULTS

The following sections present the results of dominant themes that were identified through the thematic analysis of participants' responses. Themes regarding each sexting vignette are presented first and include quotations from participants, then the participants' thoughts about the hypothetical situations in the vignettes are discussed.

Qualitative Data Analysis of Sexting Vignettes

Vignette 1: For the hypothetical scenario of pressure to sext participants expressed negative attitudes. Respondents perceived the partner's behaviour as manipulative (e.g., *“I think he's manipulating her and he does not really care about her.”*), blackmail (e.g., *“Everything was fine until the last part of the text where he says “If you want to continue with me, send me pictures,” that's blackmail, a red flag.”*), and/or sexual harassment (e.g., *“Irene should leave Robert and report him for sexual harassment.”*). According to one participant, pressuring someone into sexting can be a form of violence (e.g., *“Any further persuasion or pressure can be a form of “violence” and/or manipulation.”*). Respondents felt that the person being pressured into sexting should not participate (e.g. *“NO! I mean it's easy to say when you are not in their position, but that's a typical example of a man who does not need to have anything sent to him.”*) or even end the relationship (e.g. *“I think this relationship should end, toxicity, you can see there's no hope for this relationship in the future after Robert said he has to send photos when Irene goes out with him Robert is rude and does not deserve Irene...run Irene, run.”*). Some of the participants indicated that the partner who exerts pressure is a bad person and/or should seek help (e.g., *“I think Robert should seek*

professional help.”). Another reaction was that a partner who loves and respects the other person in the relationship should not put pressure on them (e.g., *“I think if Robert really likes her, he should not ask for something like that when she's not well.”*). Two participants mentioned that the person should think about it before deciding to sexts (e.g., *“I think she should think and wait because it's too early to ask for something like that.”*)

Vignette 2: Regarding sexting as revenge, participants thought that the person who revenge is a bad person who has serious problems (e.g., *“Ana has major emotional problems, keeping her partner this way requires a little more serious observation.”*) and should seek professional help (e.g., *“Ana needs professional help.”*). In addition, participants noted that the person subjected to such behaviour should end the relationship (e.g., *“I think you should definitely break up with her and try to delete the photos somehow.”*) or seek legal help (e.g., *“I think Luka should contact someone in the legal field and of course face the consequences if these pictures come to light.”*). One participant pointed to the need for professional psychological help, but emphasised the gendered double standard in seeking this type of help, as follows: *“Although I do not think Luka would seek professional help because he is a man, which is absolutely wrong.”* Participants believe that this sexting behaviour is related to a trust issue (e.g., *“In the case of Ana and Luka, I think Ana played trust in the first place and did not do the right thing.”*). Some participants indicated that those who decide to participate in sexting are at fault (e.g., *“Ana is clearly obsessed with him and it is her own fault that she decided to send such a picture.”*). For some participants, such behaviour is blackmail (e.g., *“I do not approve of Ana's opinion; it's blackmail, which is in no way correct or right towards the other side of the relationship, I mean Luka.”*) or criminal behaviour (e.g., *“It should be a criminal offence, certainly a form of rape/excessive consent.”*).

Vignette 3: For the vignette related to sexting within an intimate relationship participants most often expressed positive attitudes. Participants who viewed sexting within an intimate relationship positively most often viewed it as consensual and trusting behaviour (e.g., *“This is the story I can personally relate to the most because there is mutual trust and voluntary consent from both parties here.”*) that is also good for maintaining the relationship (e.g., *“There's nothing wrong with that, I am glad they found a way to be close even though they are physically far apart.”*). Those who viewed sexting in an intimate relationship as dangerous (e.g., *“I do not support it, you should always use a dose of caution and get to know the other person well.”*) and bad (e.g., *“But if the body is the only thing that connects them, then I do not think there's any point to the relationship.”*) were frequently expressed by those who held negative attitudes toward sexting in an intimate relationship. Two participants expressed that sexting in an intimate relationship can be problematic if the individuals are underage (e.g., *“Since Allen is underage, that means he's technically doing child pornography of himself, which would put him behind bars a little bit.”*). Finally, two participants expressed a neutral attitude toward sexting in intimate relationships, which they related to their own decision making, such as, *“Everyone reacts and makes decisions about their lives and is responsible for their behaviour.”*

Vignette 4: In the vignette about being pressured into sexting from others was viewed by participants as bad behaviour (e.g., *“Nora's ultimate procedure is very careless and reckless.”*). Participants in this vignette also talked about the risk of sexting with strangers/acquaintances. They expressed negative attitudes toward sexting with strangers due to the overall risk of negative consequences (e.g., *“I do not think it's good to send explicit*

photos with strangers, and it does not have any positive consequences, only negative ones.”) or due to the risk of spreading content (e.g., *“Since it is only a superficial relationship (they are acquaintances), I would not advise her to do something like that, because even if she received such content indirectly, it is likely that these pictures will later circulate within and possibly outside this group.”*). In addition to describing the negative risk of sexting, participants also described the person sexting under peer pressure as a bad person, usually described as unstable (e.g., *“Unstable person who does things they do not want to do just to please others.”*) and/or immature (e.g., *“An unstable and immature person who does things just to fit in with their friends.”*). Some participants noted that sexts should not have been sent under peer pressure (e.g., *“I do not support Nora, I think she lets peers influence her, she should not do that.”*). For some participants, sexting in this vignette was not seen as personally acceptable, but was interpreted as their own choice and responsibility (e.g., *“If she did it, she was quite sure of her actions, regardless of the society, then that's fine, but it's not like this“*).

Vignette 5: Participants were most likely to perceive sexting as negative when done by individuals flirting with a same-sex potential partner, labelling it as wrong behaviour (e.g., *“Sasha is flirting in the wrong way.”*). However, some participants pointed out that in the situation where women or men are involved in sexting, double gender standards become visible (e.g., *“In our society, a woman who sends such a photo is a “whore”, I apologise for this expression.”*). The second most common opinion on this vignette was neutral, viewing sexting in this situation as a personal choice (e.g., *“He's an adult and can do what he wants, being aware of the consequences at his age.”*). Finally, some participants held mixed attitudes, stating that it was only acceptable if another person wanted to receive sexts (e.g., *“That's fine if the boys want his photos and they voluntarily share them with each other, if he himself sends them without consent, then it's crazy.”*) or if the person was aware of the consequences (e.g., *“If he's not interested in his photos being circulated, that's fine.”*). One group of participants emphasised the positive qualities of the person participating in sexting to meet a potential same-sex partner, typically describing them as a confident person (e.g., *“I do not think Sasha would mind if his pictures end up showing up, he still says he's a really good looking guy.”*).

Comparison of Attitudes Toward Sexting Depicted by Vignette

After categorization of qualitative data, the frequencies of responses across attitude categories were totaled. Table 2 provides the frequencies and percentages of the responses on attitudes across various sexting behaviors. Overall, more than 70% of students indicated that they had a negative attitude toward revenge sexting or sexting pressured by intimate partner. The majority of the participants expressed negative attitudes about sexting under peer pressure (63.65%) or for flirting with strangers by LGBTQ individuals (53.06%). The descriptive analyses yielded the most positive attitudes toward sexting within an intimate relationship. Due to an insufficient number of frequency responses on categories data have not been statistically tested by chi-square.

Table 2. Frequencies and percentages of positive, neutral, negative and mixed attitudes about various sexting motivational context by student participants.

Type of sexting behavior	Sexting attitudes			
	Positive <i>n</i> (%)	Neutral <i>n</i> (%)	Negative <i>n</i> (%)	Mixed <i>n</i> (%)
Sexting pressured by partner	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	36 (73.69%)	0 (0%)
Revenge sexting	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	40 (81.63%)	0 (0%)
Sexting within intimate relationship	26 (53.06%)	11 (22.45%)	8 (16.33%)	0 (0%)
Sexting under peer pressure with stranger for body reinforcement	0 (0%)	3 (6.12%)	31 (63.65%)	0 (0%)
Sexting by homosexual person in order to flirt with a potential partner	3(6.12%)	5 (10.20%)	26 (53.06%)	12 (24.48%)

DISCUSSION

The present study represents a first step toward qualitatively understanding beliefs, expectations and attitudes about sexting driven by various motives. Consistent with research focused on deviant sexting, hypothetical experiences of sexting under pressure (partner/peer) or blackmailing as revenge received the most negative reactions. Similar findings have been obtained in other sexting studies which conceptualized peer pressure, blackmailing, or unwanted forwarding of sexting as a risk and harmful behaviour (Benotsch et al., 2013; Gámez-Guadix & Mateos-Pérez, 2019; Houck et al., 2014; Mortì et al., 2019; Rice et al., 2014). While discussing sexting as a risky behavior, some authors (Harris, 2011; O’Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011) have noted non-consensual sharing as the most often mentioned negative outcome of sexting, and have suggested abstinence from sexting as most helpful way to avoid this (Diliberto & Matthey, 2009).

Roberts and Ravn (2019) found that participants put significant emphasis on consent, mutuality, and respect to distinguish “appropriate sexting” practices as distinct from harassment or image-based abuse in their focus group study of undergraduate students. Our results are in line with those findings; participants perceived sexting as normative acceptable behaviour when done with a known and trusted person, preferably a romantic partner (Burén et al., 2021) and when used as a means of sexual gratification for the establishment of a long-term sexual relationship (Roberts & Ravn, 2019). The present study therefore confirmed that sexting within intimate relationships is viewed as a normal expression of sexual behaviour used to increase fun, intimacy or passion among partners (Anastassiou, 2017; Bianchi et al., 2018; Döring & Mohseni, 2018; Kosenko et al., 2017; Levine, 2013; Van Ouytsel et al., 2020; Yeung et al., 2014). Sexting for the purpose of flirting with a stranger (our fifth vignette) has been described as risky and parallels with finding that sexting outside of romantic relationships is associated with risk-taking behaviours (Van Ouytsel et al., 2018), as well as with those of consent and trust as the key to appropriate sexting practice (Roberts & Ravn, 2019). Sexting is separate from flirting as it is characterized by a stepwise build-up, where the next step of person is a reaction to the previous message of the interlocutor (Roberts & Ravn, 2019). Rather than focusing on the risk of sexting in order to flirt with the “potential” partner, future studies could examine how flirting can turn into appropriate

sexting practices. Further, considering the finding of double standard in sexting for flirting purposes, the gendered value on exchanging sexually explicit content comes to the forefront. Much research has found that the experience of sexting is highly gendered (Roberts et al., 2021) and positions boys and young men as sex-crazed and less judged for participating in sexting than girls or young women (Ringrose et al., 2013).

These findings may be of practical importance as they suggest that individual motives for sexting are crucial for understanding sexting behaviour. Specifically, sexting is perceived as more productive and acceptable when it serves sexual purposes, such as in an intimate relationship. However, this is not true for some harmful types of sexting, such as non-consensual sexting, where it may be more appropriate to promote prevention through education. Education should emphasise that any type of non-consensual sexting is wrong, regardless of the relationship with the recipient. Education efforts should emphasise that each partner, regardless of relationship status, should be respected and that it is not acceptable to share someone's sexts without explicit permission. It is clear that sexting is an important topic for young people and that education about this topic should be considered an important part of sexuality and relationship education.

Despite the strength of the results, there are some limitations with this study. First, the study population is limited to a single group, the majority of which is female. Therefore, young adults' attitudes, beliefs, and opinions about sexting were only validated in this female population. Moreover, due to the limitation of the study to the higher number of participants of Croatian nationality, the results cannot be generalized to all Serbian and Bosnian samples. Therefore, it is recommended that the results be replicated in future studies with different groups of girls and boys from different cultures, nationalities, religions, and regions. Another limitation is that the gender and sexual identity has not been evaluated in the study. Researchers should examine sexting behaviors in lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) populations as well. Although research on LGBTQ youth and sexting is sparse, it appears that identifying as LGBTQ is related to increased participation in sending sexts (Rice et al., 2012) and that LGBT women are more likely to send and receive sexting than heterosexual women (Wysocki & Childers, 2011). It could be that LGBTQ relationships do not operate according to a heterosexual script in which men are the sexual aggressors and women objectify themselves to gain some power in a romantic relationship (Kim et al., 2007). The third limitation is that while we attempted with the vignette scenarios to allow respondents to express their opinions in a non-threatening manner, the data collected and analysed were about hypothetical scenarios and may not accurately reflect or predict participant behaviour. A final limitation may be that by placing the vignette scenarios at the end of the survey we increased measurement error because the vignettes are particularly susceptible to fatigue effects (Sauer et al., 2011). Future studies will benefit from placing the vignettes in mixed order between questions.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, we can say that sexting within intimate relationships is perceived as the most positive type of sexting behaviour in our study. Sexting pressured by a partner and revenge sexting are perceived as the most negative types of sexting behaviours. Furthermore, participants expressed negative attitudes toward sexting under pressure with strangers for the purpose of body reinforcement and sexting by LGBTQ individuals in order to flirt with a potential partner. In summary, sexting is perceived as acceptable only if it shared consensually between heterosexual young people, according to results of this research. The findings of this study suggest that professionals working with young people who sext should be aware of the nature of sexting motives and how these motives may influence behaviors.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

To our knowledge, the present study is one of the first to use vignettes to examine the relationship between attitudes toward sexting and the decision to participate in a particular sexting situation. Although vignettes cannot fully represent real-world situations and may be limited in their applicability to real-world situations, the use of case vignettes may be a good way to reconstruct sexting decision making in a controlled settings. By using vignettes, the study provides a nuanced understanding of how different types of sexting behaviors are perceived by university students.

Furthermore, the results of our study can explain not only why attitudes toward sexting are an important preventive target to reduce the risky aspects of sexting, but also why such a target is not always successful. Understanding how the different types of sexting are perceived can help professionals promote safe and responsible use of technology among youth. Future research should focus more on examining not only cognitive but also emotional and implicit attitudes toward sexting.

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Appendix 1

Vignettes about sexting

Vignette 1: Irena (24) has been dating Robert (25) for a couple of months. She really likes him, and she thinks he really likes her too. Lately Robert has been asking Irena to send him some of Irena's sexy pictures (sexts), but she has not done it. Irena is nervous about others finding out about the pictures or even possibly seeing them. Robert assured Irena that no one else would know about the pictures and explained that if she really liked him and wanted to keep dating him then she should send the pictures.

Vignette 2: Ana (23) and Luka (23) are in a relationship and have decided to share a few sexually explicit photos, but on the condition that both of them would delete the pictures upon their receipt and viewing. After viewing the sexy photos (sexts) from Ana, Luka immediately deleted them. Ana convinced Luka that she also deleted her 'sexy' pictures. After a while, Luka accidentally found his photos on Ana's cell phone. Clearly, she did not delete the pictures and lied to Luka! When Luka confronted Ana, she still refused to delete Luka's photos. She said she would forward the photos to others if Luka broke up with her.

Vignette 3: Sara (22) and Alen (21) have been in a relationship for more than 9 months. They are currently separated due to college attendance in different cities. They are really in love and talking about the future together. They both regularly exchange their sexually explicit photos and/or videos. In their opinion, the exchange of sexually explicit content (sexting) brings them closer to each other.

Vignette 4: Nora (23) has heard that some of her friends often receive nude/ half-nude photos and/or videos from other people. For some friends, this is funning, so they decide to reciprocate with their own nude/ half-nude photos and/or videos. She also received "sexy" photos from acquaintances several times with a request to forward her photos. So far, she has not responded to such messages and requests. Last night she again received from an acquaintance his sexually explicit photo with a request to send hers. She is standing naked in front of the mirror inspecting her body and wondering should she take own nude photo and sent to him. Although she is not very sure, she decides to have fun and send him her photo.

Vignette 5: Saša (24) is quite confident in his physical appearance and has a lot of his "sexy" photos in his mobile phone. He usually exchanges his photos with guys he likes. He sees this as a way to flirt with them.