



When Sexting Becomes “Sixteen”: Exploring Parental Representations and Regulations of Adolescent Sexting

Elli-Anastasia Lamprianidou¹  · Gaëlle Venard² · Maria del Rio Carral³ · Grégoire Zimmermann² · Stijn Van Petegem^{1,4}

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Abstract

Over the past 20 years, adolescent sexting has attracted popular media and scientific interest, with research showing the growing participation of adolescents in this sexual practice. While most studies on youth sexting have focused on adolescents' perspectives, the few that include parents have primarily examined parenting practices quantitatively as predictors of adolescent sexting behaviors. However, little is known about parents' own representations of youth sexting, particularly in terms of their perspectives and responses. To fill this gap, this qualitative study draws on semi-structured interviews with 13 Belgian parents (10 mothers and 3 fathers, 44–60 years) of adolescents (16–18 years). Interviews with participants were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. We identified three central themes: (1) *Sexting as surrogate love* illustrates how parents see sexting as an act that does not fully reflect “genuine” intimacy and incompatible with “real-life” affection; (2) *The role of an adolescent's parent* highlights parents' efforts to navigate youth sexting by balancing trust, equipping their teens with tools for navigating digital life, and guiding them on matters of online intimacy; and (3) *Gender and sexting: an ambivalence* explores parents' ambivalent views on the gendered dynamics of sexting, emphasizing the gendered consequences of the practice while striving for a more gender-neutral approach when addressing the issue with their teens. Based on our results, parent programs could educate parents in more nuanced ways, emphasizing potential benefits adolescents find in this practice, while avoiding conflation with non-consensual acts such as aggravated sexting.

Keywords Sexting · Adolescence · Parenting · Gender · Reflexive thematic analysis

Extended author information available on the last page of the article

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Introduction

Over the past 20 years, adolescent sexting has attracted growing interest, both in scientific studies (e.g., Anastassiou, 2017; Mori et al., 2019) and in popular media as a contemporary example of societal concern. Its depiction frequently mirrors Cohen's (1972) notion of a "moral panic", eliciting a sensationalized response to an issue that is qualified as morally wrong. Sexting is defined as the electronic sending of self-made explicit sexual or intimate content (e.g., messages, pictures, videos) via mobile phones or internet applications (Walrave et al., 2018). On the one hand, teen sexting can be seen as a new and experimental behavior, creating opportunities for sexual exploration (e.g., Dodaj et al., 2022). On the other hand, it can be considered a risky behavior, particularly when the content is used without consent or as a basis for harassment (Barrense-Dias et al., 2017).

Most psychological research on youth sexting focused on adolescent samples (e.g., Bragard & Fisher, 2022; Bianchi et al., 2017; Cucci et al., 2023; Eleuteri et al., 2017; Rodríguez-García et al., 2023), examining adolescents' motivations to engage in sexting; their sexting-related attitudes and practices; and associations with mental health (for a meta-analysis, see Mori et al., 2019). The limited studies including parents have primarily focused on media-specific parenting, such as parental mediation and monitoring of adolescents' media use (e.g., Beyens et al., 2022; Martinez-Prather & Vandiver, 2014). Nonetheless, the broader context of parental attitudes and regulations regarding adolescent sexting remains largely underexplored. As parents grapple with the frequently undifferentiated and potentially anxiety-inducing discourse surrounding teen sexting, this qualitative study explores their responses in regard to this practice. A first aim is to gain a deeper understanding of parents' perspectives and practices in regard to teen sexting. A second aim is to examine how adolescents' gender may shape these perspectives and practices. This objective is grounded in the frequently gendered narratives in media articles and campaigns about adolescent sexting—where girls are depicted as "victims" of aggravated sexting cases (Barrense-Dias et al., 2018) and boys as "predatory" and "oversexualized" (Harvey & Ringrose, 2015).

Sexting in Adolescence

Developmental Considerations and Prevalence

Sexting has been mainly studied within teen and young adult samples, considering developmental aspects related to their emerging sexuality, the development of intimate relationships, and the extensive engagement with new technologies found in these age groups (Corcoran et al., 2022; Eleuteri et al., 2017; Walrave et al., 2018). In adolescence, sexting can help to initiate, develop, and maintain romantic relationships, and to experience sexual affirmation (Anastassiou, 2017). Although sexting is widely believed to be increasingly common among adolescents, available data on its prevalence remains inconsistent and divergent (Madigan et al., 2018).

The meta-analysis by Kosenko and colleagues (2017) revealed that the prevalence of sexting varies between 2.5% and 24% in the studies reviewed. In Belgium, sexting prevalence rates amongst youngsters also vary, from 18.7% for sending and receiving, to 49% for strict sending and 59% for strict receiving (Glowacz & Goblet, 2019; RTBF, 2022). This variation can be linked mainly to two factors: first, the lack of congruence concerning the definition of sexting and second, the diversity in terms of the methods and samples used in the existing literature (Barrense-Dias et al., 2017). As a recent meta-analysis (Madigan et al., 2018) of 39 studies indicates, a considerable proportion of teenagers engages in sexting: 1 in 7 sends sexts, while 1 in 4 receives them. The prevalence of sexting among adolescents seems to be relatively common (Madigan et al., 2018).

Categories and Discourses

The various ways in which teen sexting is approached can give rise to many interpretations and potential conflicts as to its nature. Numerous authors are advocating for a distinction between two categories of actions, to prevent conflating sexting with its potential extremes: on the one hand, the private exchange of intimate material between consenting persons, and on the other, the dissemination of material to third parties without consent, behavior known as “sexting gone wrong” (e.g., Barrense-Dias et al., 2018). The private and consenting exchange of self-produced sexts (e.g., messages, pictures, videos) between adolescents is often referred to as “primary” (Lievens, 2014), or “experimental” sexting (Confalonieri et al., 2020). The non-consensual form of exchange is called “secondary” (Lievens, 2014), or most frequently “aggravated” sexting (Confalonieri et al., 2020). It can occur as an act of revenge, such as by a former romantic partner, or as a form of bullying, sometimes escalating to “revenge porn”, often in a gendered fashion with female victims (Eleuteri et al., 2017).

In parallel to the distinction between sub-groups of sexting, a dichotomy exists between “normalcy” and “deviance” in the discussions surrounding sexting (Döring, 2014). Research has adopted two types of discourse: a first discourse of normalcy, in which sexting is seen as a new way of communicating intimacy and a second discourse of deviance, in which sexting is defined as a deviant behavior (e.g., Graham Holmes et al., 2021). Studies that normalize sexting highlight potential benefits related to this practice. For instance, sexting has been linked to higher relationship satisfaction amongst young women (Ferguson, 2011), while it has been found to strengthen relationships when done between consenting partners (Spino & Halliwell, 2023). In addition, the exchange of sexts between consenting partners can permit the communication of sexual desires, allowing thus to maintain intimacy (Burkett, 2015). In contrast, in the deviance discourse context, sexting is seen as carrying important dangers and negative consequences (e.g., Eleuteri et al., 2017). These include the risks of sexual objectification or sexual violence (Anastassiou, 2017), as well as peer bullying in the event of unwanted dissemination of private sexting, especially for girls (Döring, 2014). Sexting has been also associated with internalizing problems, smoking and drug use, particularly among younger teenagers (Mori

et al., 2019). These mixed results underscore therefore the need to provide a more nuanced exploration of this practice during adolescence.

Is Sexting Gendered?

Differences and Similarities

With the growing involvement of both girls and boys in sexting, it is essential to consider the gendered dimensions of this practice to understand how adolescents engage in it (e.g., Anastassiou, 2017) and how parents make sense of it (Fix et al., 2021). Past research has revealed how parents' views on sexting may be influenced by traditional gender norms about girls' and boys' sexualities (Davidson, 2015), which may prescribe different sexual behaviors as more "appropriate" for girls vs boys (Endedijk et al., 2020). Despite previous conflicting evidence about gender differences in youth participation in sexting, a recent meta-analysis showed that boys and girls do not actually differ in the rates of sending or receiving sexting (Madigan et al., 2018). Yet, they seem to differ in *how* the use sexting. Boys, for instance, were found to be more likely than girls to engage in online risky sexual behaviors and to report more aggravated motivations, for instance exploitation of sexual material for relational aggression (Bianchi et al., 2017). Conversely, girls seem to be more likely to sext under pressure from partners and friends (Lippman & Campbell, 2014).

Consequences of Sexting

One feature of adolescent sexting that remains particularly gendered relates to the consequences of aggravated sexting (Draper, 2012). The non-consensual dissemination of sexually suggestive photos tends to have more severe consequences for girls, as most studies emphasize the double standards in sexual behavior norms faced by boys and girls (e.g., Endendijk et al., 2020). While girls' bodies are often more sexualized than boys', their sexual autonomy and desire are frequently less socially accepted (Van Royen et al., 2018, p. 93). Conversely, boys' engagement in sexting often elevates their social status and perceived "coolness" among peers, whereas girls face heightened risks, including coercion to engage in sexting (Roberts & Ravn, 2020). In addition, most of the prevention and media campaigns on teen sexting present girls as the victims of aggravated cases of sexting (Barrense-Dias et al., 2018).

A potential concomitant of this discourse is that it prolongs gender stereotypes concerning adolescent sexting. This can be problematic, as parents of adolescents are confronted with these messages daily, which may in turn fuel a range of stereotyped responses and reactions on their part. For instance, in the study of Fix and colleagues (2021), most participating caregivers actually considered adolescent girls as those initiating sexting for male attention, perceiving them as more sexually aggressive than boys. As girls who engage in sexting may generally encounter more negative judgments than their male counterparts (Barrense-Dias et al., 2017), it is

therefore crucial to consider the gender dimensions of this practice, when examining parents' representations of sexting.

Parents Negotiating Adolescent Sexting

Parental Knowledge

As sexting among young people receives increased attention, adolescents' parents may be interested, worried or affected by this phenomenon. Adolescent sexting can be a source of concern for parents, who may not necessarily know how to tackle this issue with their children (Speno & Halliwell, 2023). One of the difficulties parents face is to strike a balance between respecting adolescents' privacy and autonomy on the one hand, and protecting them from potential risks on the other (Baudat, et al., 2020). Parents may be unaware of sexting-related risks their adolescents encounter online or even of their children's potential engagement with the practice (Symons et al., 2020). In a previous study, a significant number of parents (27%) could not say whether their child had ever received a sext (Haddon et al., 2012).

Past research has shown that parents can influence adolescents' sexual attitudes and behaviors (e.g., Vanwesenbeeck et al., 2018, p. 63–80). Popular media offer solutions to adolescent sexting that emphasize the importance of parental responsibility, by advising for instance parents to monitor adolescents' digital behavior to prevent them from sexting (Draper, 2012). While the literature suggests that parents could play an important role for regulating their adolescents' sexting (e.g., Confalonieri et al., 2020), this might be a rather challenging task to translate into practice. Parents, for example, may be reluctant to talk about sexting with their children for several reasons. These can include the lack of information on the topic, or even the discomfort to discuss with them topics of sexual character (Speno & Halliwell, 2023).

Parental Practices

When referring to parental practices related to sexting, most studies have focused on media-specific parenting practices. Media-specific parenting, that is, parents' efforts to restrict, regulate, and discuss children's media use, can take the form of parental mediation and parental monitoring (Beyens et al., 2022). Parental mediation refers to parent–child interactions about media use (Confalonieri et al., 2020). It can be distinguished into active mediation (i.e., parents' explanation about media usage), restrictive mediation (i.e., parental rules or limits to children's media usage) and co-viewing (i.e., parents viewing media content together with their children; Speno & Halliwell, 2023). Parental monitoring refers to parents' knowledge and supervision of children's media use in a proactive approach, by trying to prevent the onset of problematic media use (e.g., Beyens et al., 2022). Findings on the role of parental mediation and monitoring in relation to sexting are inconsistent. Some authors highlight the positive effects of mediation but the negative effects of monitoring (Corcoran et al., 2022), while others evidence the positive effects of both practices

(Confalonieri et al., 2020; Cucci et al., 2023), or even document a lack of effect (Martinez-Prather & Vandiver, 2014). This variability can be linked to the various ways in which these behaviors are measured, or the interchangeable use of both names to describe the same concept (e.g., Speno & Halliwell, 2023). To our knowledge, only a limited number of studies have explored parents' perspectives on youth sexting. One such study of them focused on the issue of definition, revealing differences between adults' and young people's perceptions of sexting in terms of message content, actions considered sexting, and their potential links with pornography (Barrense-Dias et al., 2017). Another study investigated caregivers' views to refine the definition of sexting, albeit with data from over a decade ago (Fix et al., 2021). A third study focused exclusively on parental mediation practices when discussing sexting (Speno & Halliwell, 2023). Given the media's portrayal of youth sexting as a form of "moral panic" (e.g., Friedersdorf, 2015), it is imperative to delve into parents' views of this phenomenon, as these perspectives are likely to guide their specific parental practices.

The Present Study

Previous research on youth sexting has mainly focused on the adolescents' perspective, with parental practices often assessed through adolescents' reports (e.g., Confalonieri et al., 2020). Such studies typically focus on a specific set of parenting practices as predictors of adolescents' sexting attitudes and behaviors, often relying on quantitative methodologies (e.g., Corcoran et al., 2022). In contrast, a qualitative approach provides the opportunity to generate more contextualised and nuanced insights into parents' views and practices. Furthermore, the role of gender dynamics in sexting and their impact on parents' experiences remains underexplored, with existing research often framing these dynamics negatively, for example by portraying girls as more sexually provocative than boys (e.g., Davidson, 2015). To address these gaps, the present qualitative study had two main objectives: first, to examine parents' perspectives and practices regarding adolescent sexting in depth; and second, to explore how gendered dynamics shape these perspectives and practices, particularly in light of the often-cited double standard regarding girls' and boys' sexuality (Endendijk et al., 2020). The study is anchored in a constructionist framework, according to which experiences and practices are seen as socially co-produced and reproduced through language and social interactions, rather than inherent to individuals (Burr, 2003). In line with our research aim and epistemological background, a qualitative research methodology was adopted, enabling a deeper understanding of participants' experience (Biggerstaff, 2012).

Method

Participants and Recruitment

The data analyzed draw on semi-structured individual interviews with 13 Belgian French-speaking parents ($N_{\text{mothers}}=10$, $N_{\text{fathers}}=3$) of adolescents (6 girls, 7 boys) between 16 to 18 years of age ($M_{\text{age}}=16.8$). Parents were aged between 44 and 60 years of age ($M_{\text{age}}=50.91$). None of the participants were partners or parents of the same child. Detailed information on participants' education level, civil status, and employment status is presented in Table 1. While the recruitment of both mothers and fathers was aimed in this study, mothers were overrepresented. From a social constructionist point of view (Burr, 2003), this imbalance may reflect broader gender inequalities in parent-adolescent communication about sexual matters, as such conversations typically occur more frequently with mothers than fathers (Bearman et al., 1997; Mauras et al., 2013). Mothers are generally more familiar with their adolescents' personal and intimate lives (Bearman et al., 1997), making them more likely to engage with and be concerned about topics such as adolescent sexuality, including sexting. Furthermore, this overrepresentation underscores persistent gender inequalities in parenting roles, as women continue to take on the majority of caregiving responsibilities and experience greater societal pressure than fathers to be intensively involved in their children's lives (Lamprianidou et al., 2024; Sullivan et al., 2018). These disparities persist even during adolescence, with mothers dedicating more time than fathers to providing emotional support and guidance to their teenagers (Mastrotheodoros et al., 2019; Phares et al., 2009).

Recruitment followed a snowball procedure and "word of mouth". After distributing the study announcement within our professional and personal network, initial participants who reached out were encouraged to refer other potentially interested participants to the study. Participating parents discussed their opinions and experiences regarding adolescents' virtual intimacy. Eligibility criteria included being a parent of a child between 16 and 18 years and speaking French. Prior to

Table 1 Participating parents' (N=13) educational level, civil and employment status

	N (Count)
<i>Parents' education level</i>	
Bachelor's degree or equivalent	9
Secondary school diploma	1
Master's degree or higher	3
<i>Civil status</i>	
Married/in a relationship	10
Divorced	3
<i>Employment status</i>	
Full-time employment	8
Part-time employment (50%-90%)	4
Less than 50% of time	1

data collection, participants were given time to read and sign an informed consent form, which outlined the study's goals, procedures, interview duration, transcription process, and the voluntary nature of participation. The study and all related materials were approved by the Ethics Committee of Université Libre de Bruxelles. To ensure the protection of sensitive data, the encryption software Cryptomator (2024) was used to fully encrypt all audio and transcription files on the researcher's computer. In addition, all study documents were password-protected and anonymized by replacing the participants' and their adolescents' original names, along with other sensitive information, with pseudonyms. Parents were compensated with €10 for their time and provided with a debriefing at the conclusion of the interview.

Data Collection

Previous to conducting semi-structured interviews, an interview guide was created to enable participants to elaborate meanings around their own experiences on parenting and sexting practices. The interview guide was developed based on insights from the existing literature on sexting as a form of adolescent romantic and sexual expression in the digital age (e.g., Walrave et al., 2018), studies examining adolescent online sexuality (e.g., Eleuteri et al., 2017), reviews addressing the gender dimension of sexting (e.g., Anastassiou, 2017), and developmental psychology research emphasizing parents' roles in discussing teenage sexuality (e.g., Mauras et al., 2013). To ensure its relevance and comprehensiveness, all co-authors reviewed and provided feedback on a preliminary version of the guide. This collaborative process led to a more refined interview guide, designed to encourage rich, nuanced discussions. It consisted of open-ended questions that covered various aspects of adolescent sexting, including young people's virtual intimacy, parents' knowledge and understanding of sexting, contexts in which adolescents might engage in sexting, perceived risks and benefits, the role of gender in sexting practices, and parental strategies related to sexting. Examples of interview questions include: "*What do you think about the practice of sexting?*", "*Can you imagine contexts or situations in which young people engage in sexting?*", "*Does being a girl or a boy play a role in this practice? How, why?*".

A vignette was introduced at the end of the interview as a prompt to facilitate the production of parents' accounts and views on potential regulations and practices related to sexting. Specifically in the context of qualitative studies, vignettes can be used as *clues* to stimulate the interviewees to speak in detail about their practices and their actions, or to evoke their experiences and interpretations (Törrönen, 2018). In this study, the vignette (see Fig. 1) portrayed a hypothetical scenario of a teenager asking for professional help on an online youth forum, where adolescents can anonymously ask questions about sexuality and intimate relationships. In her/his demand, the adolescent describes a situation in which her/his boyfriend/girlfriend asks for a nude picture. In the scenario, the adolescent is unsure on how to respond to this request. Participants of our study were asked to imagine that it was their own child asking for help, and to think of possible ways of dealing with the situation. Each interview lasted one hour on average (ranging from 48 min to 1 h and 5 min)

Here is a question that was asked on an online forum addressed to teenagers. Imagine it was your child who asked this question.

Hello,

So here it goes... My question is short but serious. I'm in a relationship with a boy/girl. My boyfriend/girlfriend has asked me in a polite way to exchange nude photos. I don't know what to do about it. I love him/her a lot but I'm afraid that the photos might be circulated and that I might get a bad reputation. I trust him/her and I don't think he/she would betray me. I don't want to hurt him/her.

What do you think I should do?

Thank you in advance for your help.

Fig. 1 Vignette demonstrating a hypothetical sexting scenario

and was audio recorded. Subsequently, each interview was transcribed verbatim, and any identifiable personal data were removed to ensure confidentiality.

Data Analysis

Interview transcripts were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019), which is a specific variant of a broad thematic analysis technique widely used in psychology (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Particularly, reflexive thematic analysis consists of a rigorous and systematic qualitative approach to coding, where themes are seen as actively produced by the researcher at the “intersection of data, analytic process and subjectivity” (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 594). Coding is guided by the definition of patterns of shared meaning across the transcripts following an iterative theme development or construction (Braun & Clarke, 2021a). Reflexive thematic analysis was chosen over other qualitative methods for its emphasis on the researcher’s subjectivity in producing knowledge (Braun & Clarke, 2021a). In a reflective approach, the researcher engages reflexively with theory, data and interpretation, and the analysis moves beyond summary of codes (Braun & Clarke, 2021b). In our study, reflexivity was both individual and collaborative. The first author maintained a reflexive journal, documenting thoughts and positionality after each interview, namely on how her expertise in family psychology and gender studies shaped her engagement with the data and the knowledge produced. The co-authors’ diverse backgrounds in developmental and health psychology, research on adolescence, qualitative methods and gender studies also informed the analytical lens, contributing to a multidimensional interpretation of the findings.

The first author was responsible for the systematic data coding of all interviews. We followed Braun and Clarke’s recommendations for a *peer data analysis group* in

reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021b, p. 271). Specifically, all interviews were first analyzed by a peer group: two interviews were double-coded by the second author, while the other eleven interviews were double-coded by three master students. The students were trained in reflexive thematic analysis and supervised by the first author during their two-year master's program in psychology. Their training included seminars, theoretical materials, and co-coding for their master's thesis or research internship. Initial coders discussed their analysis of codes and clarified their analytic insights (Braun & Clarke, 2021b, p. 271). Then, the first author progressed the analysis from codes to themes. As a last step, themes and sub-themes were discussed among the five co-authors on several occasions to enhance understanding, interpretation and reflexivity (Braun & Clarke, 2021b, p. 8). Their different perspectives and the collaborative nature ensured a rigorous, comprehensive analysis and led to revisions and refinements of the coding, subthemes and themes.

Participants' accounts were analyzed inductively, beginning with the generation of semantic codes, and then organized into common sub-themes and themes, based on in-between semantic similarities and differences. For instance, codes such as *“sexting and love as incompatible”*, *“sexting does not allow the creation of relationships”*, *“raw image of sexuality”*, *“lack of the affective part”* were grouped under the theme *“Sexting as surrogate love”*, as they captured the notion that sexting might lack “authentic” real-life affection. Similarly, codes such as *“daughter as an expert”*, *“daughter manages social media well”*, *“no other choice but to trust”*, *“never seen the intimate content of her teenager”*, were clustered into the sub-theme *“Trusting the youth”*, reflecting parents' tendency to trust their adolescents and respect their privacy.

As a second step, codes were organized into candidate themes capturing three key ideas: the “questionable” connection between sexting and genuine affection; the challenge parents face in addressing sexting while acknowledging the adolescent's age and greater technological expertise; and the difficulty of navigating gender inequalities in girls' and boys' sexuality while maintaining an egalitarian approach. This process ultimately resulted in a three-theme structure that best reflected the main patterns in parents' accounts on adolescent sexting. In the final step, we re-evaluated the produced themes in terms of coherence and meaningfulness, going back and forth between analytical steps to achieve a semantic refinement of the themes. This included for instance breaking down the second theme on the role of adolescent parenting into three sub-themes to better capture the nuances of different parental practices.

Results

This article reports on three central themes, two of which comprise several sub-themes. The first theme (1) *“Sexting as surrogate love”* captures parents' views of sexting as a form of intimacy that they consider as not being genuine, but rather “shallow” or “crude”. The second theme (2) *“The role of an adolescent's parent”* involves parents' negotiations of youth sexting, with regard to the developmental phase of adolescence. This theme is comprised of three subthemes: (2.1) *“Trusting*

Table 2 Summary of identified themes and sub-themes

Theme	Sub-theme	Characteristics
Sexing as surrogate love		
The role of an adolescent's parent	Trusting the youth Offering the tools Advising the youth	"Non-genuine" intimacy Incompatible with affectionate relationships Adolescents as "experts" of the virtual world Intention to foster critical thinking skills Parent as advisor, providing guidance, information, and support
Gender and sexting: an ambivalence	Different psychosocial consequences for boys and girls Same parental attitude regardless of the adolescent's gender	Judgments towards teenage girls as fiercer and more destructive "Gender-neutral" approach Parents' stance motivated by other developmental specificities of adolescence

the youth”, (2.2) “Offering the tools” and (2.3) “Advising the youth”. The third theme (3) “Gender and sexting: an ambivalence” explores the ambivalent position of parents regarding the role of gender in sexting behaviors and its consequences. This ambivalence is captured in the two sub-themes: (3.1) “Different psychosocial consequences for boys and girls” and (3.2) “Same parental attitude regardless of the adolescent’s gender”. Table 2 provides a summary of identified themes and sub-themes.

Sexting as Surrogate Love

When discussing the practice of sexting, parents often expressed doubts as to whether this practice corresponds to what they referred to as “real love” and/or “intimacy”. Exchanging sexts was mainly seen as a practice that does not fully reflect “genuine” or “authentic” intimacy among people practicing sexting. For many parents, “real love” was considered incompatible with sexting, which was depicted as “shallow”. Several parents suggested that sexting could be considered a rather “sad act”, and reported having a hard time understanding how it could replace “genuine” romantic affection. Simon, a father of an 18-year-old boy, stated:

Personally, I find it sad, in fact. Especially since, for me, a sexual relationship may be based primarily on the sense of smell, ok? And of course, on the Internet, that’s something we haven’t been able to reproduce. Or touch, of course. Touching the other person. Here again, on the Internet so far, it’s not possible.

His perspective mirrored that of Bernard, a father of a 17-year-old boy. Bernard explained that “reducing” love, admiration, and affection to an exchange of “photos” or “bodies,” as he put it, does not align with his vision of romantic affection or the example he wishes to set for his adolescent. He even explained that if his son was to practice sexting, then he would think: “So, right there, I tell myself, maybe my definition of love didn’t come across well. It wasn’t well understood, so there’s already that”, reflecting a tendency towards self-blaming: sexting not only does not reflect real love, but the teenager’s desire to engage in sexting is viewed as a sign of the parent’s inability to impart the true meaning of love.

Anna also expressed her doubts as a mother of a 17-year-old girl about the emotional valence of sexting. When imagining her daughter potentially practicing sexting, Anna explained:

“I’m just going to find it very, very sad, I can’t help it... Maybe I’m very, very old-fashioned. But for me, intimacy is linked to emotions... It’s not visual.”

In other words, for Anna, the visual practice of sexting cannot represent what she defines as “true intimacy”. Paula, a 44-year-old mother of a son, shared a similar perspective, explaining that true intimacy is meant to be shared between two people in real life, not on social media or “behind screens”. In addition to this construction, some parents viewed sexting as representing rawer or cruder sexual exchanges, which again does not necessarily encompass genuine intimate emotions. In this regard, sexting was understood as incompatible with more serious romantic, loving relationships (Pierre); or even *unromantic* because of its “immediacy” (Anna).

Pierre, a father of a 16-year-old girl, described his view on sexting as “*the fact of having sexual relations or, intimate exchanges without having a relationship of love... at least by displaying no notion of a couple or a love life.*”. Moreover, Anna raised her concerns about the extreme immediacy of sexting, which according to her, might lead teenagers to misunderstand what “real” romantic relationships involve—more time, patience, and, as she put it, “*don’t we lose a bit of the idea of anticipation?*”.

While most parents rejected sexting as a non-genuine way of showing affection or considered sexting as incompatible with real affection, few of them identified scant opportunities, by highlighting however its rather “*limiting*” nature, as Jade explained. This mother of a 17-year-old girl, stated that while sexting can seem thrilling for adolescents, it is “*a gateway*”—or a window—for something “*that could be way richer in real life*”. She referred to “*real-life*” sexuality and “*real relationships*” to define in-person, offline sexuality, and relationships. According to her, these forms of human contact are richer, more complex, and more substantial than sexting. That said, Jade noted that exchanging sexts could potentially offer some opportunities in specific contexts where real-life intimacy may be challenging, such as during the covid-19 lockdowns or in cases of serious disability. These opportunities remained however limited in her view.

In summary, for the majority of parents, sexting was understood as a type of “surrogate” love, which falls far short of capturing the depth and intricacies of what they called “*real-life affection*” and “*intimacy*”, thereby referring to in-person forms of human contact. In the same vein, sexting was often suggested to be rather incompatible with more formal or stable types of affectionate relationships. Indeed, the description of sexting as being “*crude*” in nature was often linked to the idea that true intimacy involves emotions and patience, not just visual or immediate exchanges. These depictions echoed the same underlying fear: sexting may misrepresent or dilute the meaning of intimacy and romantic relationships for their teenagers.

The Role of an Adolescent’s Parent

The parents’ narratives and viewpoints regarding youth sexting were strongly shaped by their understanding of their responsibilities as parents of adolescents. This second theme comprised three sub-themes. “**Trusting the youth**” (2.1) describes parents’ general confidence in their teenagers’ abilities to navigate the digital world. This confidence was accompanied by a willingness to provide adolescents with the necessary tools, as described in the sub-theme “**Offering the tools**” (2.2). Finally, “**Advising the youth**” (2.3) describes parents’ wish to guide and advice their teens to help them address potential risks related to sexting. These three sub-themes are developed further below.

Trusting the Youth

“*He has a certain ease when saying ‘But in the end, dad, don’t worry, I know what I’m doing!’*”. This is how Bernard, father to a 17-year-old son, described his son’s

capacity for handling the online realm. Like this father, parents stated that they trusted their teenager to deal with the potential risks associated with new technologies and new ways of expressing virtual intimacy. Interviewees indicated that adolescents are now the “*experts*” of the virtual world, as they have better knowledge of new technologies and online platforms. As Sophie, the mother of a 16-year-old-girl explained: “*They’re much more advanced, much more efficient in this than we are, so we need to have confidence in them because otherwise it’s not going to work*”. Parents’ confidence in their children seems strongly linked to the fact that they felt less familiar with online codes. As articulated by some of them, they feel themselves less armed or with less expertise regarding online dangers than their teenagers. As Bernard accounted: “*They’re not that naive... They are suspicious by nature, perhaps even more so than I am. So, what reassures me is that... they were born into it [technology, virtuality]*”.

However, trusting their teenagers sometimes seems the only option parents say they have, especially considering the differences between parents’ and teenagers’ mastery of new technologies. Jade, a mother of a 17-year-old girl, “*had to learn how to trust*” her adolescent girl, especially as she reported that she herself has “*zero control, zero interaction*” with the media. She explained that for her, online platforms are new tools with which she is rather unfamiliar. Furthermore, reflecting on her knowledge of online dangers, she explained that the younger generations “*have a better grasp of the rules than we do. Certainly, because it’s their tool.*” For these parents, trust in their adolescents coincided with respect for their teenagers’ privacy. As some of them elaborated, they try not to intrude into the intimate content their teenagers share with their friends and partners, to honor their “*secret garden*”, as Bernard for example explained when referring to his son’s privacy and intimacy. Therefore, for the majority of the parents, the idea of exerting strict control over their children’s potential engagement in sexting appeared to be either unfeasible or undesirable. While being aware about the potential risks in sexting, the effort to trust their children seemed more appropriate, especially given the age of their teenagers and their mastery of new technologies. In this respect however, Sophie and Paola were the only parents who took a more vigilant approach stating that they used to periodically check in the past their daughters’ messages and photos for potentially “*dangerous material*”, as they reported, and were in favor of a more controlling stance. However, they explained that they now do so only rarely, as their adolescents grew older.

Offering the Tools

In their capacity as parents of adolescents, parents also deliberated on equipping their teenagers with what they referred to as “*essential tools*” to evaluate potential perils of sexting. Conscious of the threats associated with sexting, they expressed the willingness to provide to their children the means to better navigate online demands and relationships. These testimonies were further illustrated in their responses to the vignette. Lena explained “*So let’s say that I want to assume that I’m not going to control, I don’t want to control and so it’s more a question of giving them the means to properly evaluate*”. Much like Lena, the parents focused on the teenager’s

uncertainties regarding how to deal with the depicted situation. Their primary concern was whether the potential involvement in sexting would be genuinely desired by their adolescents. Parents particularly emphasized the importance of constructive dialogue as a means of teaching adolescents to be more vigilant. In relation to the introduced vignette, they expressed their intention to instill critical thinking skills in their adolescents as the appropriate means to evaluate various situations related to online relationships, intimacy, or sexting scenarios.

I would try to, to get him to think about why the other person wants or needs this photo. And, and in what context does the other ask this, what does it mean to him? And then to deal with this information because it would allow him to, to understand if it makes sense in the context of their relationship or if it's just because the other person needs to have, to possess an image of him. (Mia, mother of a 16-year-old boy)

In sum, these parents stressed the importance of teaching evaluative skills when faced with their children's potential involvement in sexting, as a means of awareness.

Advising the Youth

Parents also thought of themselves as advisors to their adolescents, aiming to assist them in navigating the complexities of sexting and online intimacy. This role of being an advisor involved for them providing guidance, information, and support, especially to avoid potential sexting-related risks. This could be accomplished either by adopting the role of "parent-adviser-coach", like Lena and Jade described, or by specifically advising their adolescents to not share photos that are "too sexual, nude, photos that could be prejudicial to them", like Pauline mentioned. Faced with their children's possible involvement in sexting, they all felt that it is important to take on the role of advisor, to help their adolescents make informed decisions and stay safe in the digital world, while also acknowledging their limits as parents. Pierre, a father of a 16-year-old girl, explained how he would advise his daughter on the subject, by imagining the exact words he would address her:

I would have the tendency to say: (...) "I urge you to be really careful not to, not to exchange photos over which you have no control, and which add nothing to the relationship you may have with your girlfriend, with your boyfriend." I would like to say that, naturally, I'd like to prevent it. But as I know that I don't have the power to do it, it's a matter of advising her not to get involved.

His approach is also mirrored by Anna, a mother of a 17-year-old girl, who admitted that strictly forbidding sexting at 16 years of age is "impossible". Instead, she valorized advising and cautioning her children, to feel that she has "played her role" as a parent.

These parents viewed their role as that of a guide for their teenager. They all expressed wanting to be their adolescent's advisor, whether by imagining "swapping roles" with their teenagers to say what they would do in their place, as Bernard suggested; or simply by "trying not to be judgmental, even though on the inside

you are thinking ‘Oh darn, no!’”, like Sophie admitted. In addition, many of them drew on their personal experiences with their own parents, recalling that they lacked guidance on intimate matters when they were younger. They expressed the desire to be available for their teenagers’ inquiries about intimacy, as counselors and advisors, a role that their own parents had not fulfilled. This feeling is encapsulated in Anna’s concluding words *“I just want to be there, as a counselor, and that’s what I want to be, because I didn’t have that with my own mom and I missed that a lot, a lot”*. While most parents opted for a more advisory role regarding potential risks of sexting, Melanie was the only one to adopt a more restrictive stance. This mother of a 16-year-old boy, declared that she would forbid her teenager to participate in sexting, if she found out that he intended to engage in this practice. She explained that she would disallow this practice, by being strict, knowing however that: *“if I[*she*] forbid him, he’ll probably do it anyway”*.

As a conclusion to this second theme, it is interesting to note how parents seemed to present themselves as involved and caring, showing a general confidence in their adolescents’ mastery of technology. Nevertheless, in conjunction with this trust, parents also discussed more proactive approaches to handling their children’s potential engagement in sexting.

Gender and Sexting: An Ambivalence

Parents discussed the gendered dimension of adolescent sexting by showing ambivalent positions. Specifically, their accounts included two rather conflicting views. On the one hand, they generally supported the existence of differences between girls and boys regarding the dangers and consequences of a sexting “gone wrong”, that is the non-consensual dissemination of sexting material to third parties (3.1). On the other hand, they reported having the same parental attitude and adopting the same parental rules towards their adolescent sexting, regardless of their child’s gender (3.2). The two sub-themes are further elaborated below.

Different Psychosocial Consequences for Boys and Girls

Almost all parents indicated that the implications of sexting can be more complicated for girls, due to social stereotypes and norms regarding the sexual behavior of young boys and girls. In this regard, Lena, a mother of a 17-year-old girl, brought attention to the gender-based double standards in society’s perceptions of young people’s sexuality:

I would spontaneously say to myself that what’s more complicated for girls is the consequences of sexting, like everything else of a sexual nature. A girl who engages in sexual practices is less accepted, so I imagine that the bashing that may take place around this, will perhaps be more violent for girls.

As she explained, in the event of a non-consensual public dissemination of a sext, the social judgment of a teenage girl would be fiercer and potentially more

destructive, than that of a boy. She highlighted the more violent nature of comments and critiques that a girl would receive in this eventuality:

...because people will be more upset with a girl who finds herself naked, or with... in sexual situations, that's it, I think it's perhaps more complicated because the external violence may be stronger for a girl than for a boy.
(Lena, mother of a 17-year-old girl)

Her views on the potentially unequal consequences of an aggravated sexting echoed Simon's representations as well. For this father of both an adolescent son and an older daughter, the double standards about girls' and boys' sexuality are congruent with the gender inequalities inherent in a patriarchal society, as he stated himself. Referring to patriarchy, he explained how boys and girls can be seen differently when following a similar engagement in sexual behavior. For boys, it can be seen as a source of admiration, while for girls, it can be source of embarrassment. Mia, a mother of a 16-year-old boy, also alluded to the patriarchal system when discussing the possible gender-related repercussions of aggravated sexting. According to this mother, the consequences would be socially worse for a girl, as naked male bodies may be seen differently than naked female bodies within the current societal context.

That's it if he, his anatomy is exposed on the public highway, it'll make people laugh rather than, than be the object of mockery... So yes, the consequences are perhaps less serious in a patriarchal society because, well yes, men...for them it's...There's a lot more that's allowed, and if there is a depiction of their intimacy in the public space, we're going to find a way to cherish it, whereas it's going to be a disgrace for a woman.

These double standards surrounding boys' and girls' sexuality were also noted by Paola, a 44-year-old mother of a girl, who referred to "aggravated" sexting in the context of heterosexual relationships: "*I've never seen, I've never heard or seen 'oh this boy sent something and it's a disgrace and he's all over the place because his girlfriend has sent it.' No, I haven't.*" She continued though by underscoring a more stereotypical vision of girls as the victims of sexting, or as "*the easy prey*". Similarly, Valery, also a mother of a daughter, reflected upon these same double standards, but expressed support for the younger generation's fight for gender equality. She noted "*Yeah, that's what girls are defending the most right now. That's why we talk about feminism and so on. We'll always see, it's very stupid, but why can a man walk around with his shirt off and why can't a girl? They're right. They're right.*" Valery's comments suggest an acknowledgement of these gendered judgments, while also highlighting a more optimistic perspective on the efforts to challenge these inequalities.

In summary, when parents discussed gender inequalities in sexting, they unanimously referred to the context of aggravated sexting, particularly involving the dissemination of visual content, primarily photos or videos, featuring a young nude body.

Same Parental Attitude Regardless of the Adolescent's Gender

Even though parents discussed the different consequences that could arise for girls as opposed to boys in the case of sexting going awry, they still argued for a uniform “gender-neutral” approach towards their children’s possible participation in sexting. That is, the parents reported treating their children equally and they indicated not differentiating between girls and boys in their response to sexting. This ambivalence was explored in more detail with the help of the vignette describing a teenager’s dilemma when confronted with their partner’s request to sext. Lena, for instance, a mother of a 17-year-old girl, explained that she would not react differently to her daughter’s potential involvement in sexting, as compared to that of her son:

Oh no, really not at all [whether she would react differently if her child was a boy]. In fact, I would feel concerned in the same way for both, I mean concerned in the “worried” sense, in any case to agree that there is a need to take this seriously as much for the one as for the other.

While few parents acknowledged that they might initially harbor more stereotypical notions about gender, namely being more vigilant with girls, they affirmed that, after reflection, they would not act differently in response to their teenager’s potential sexting behaviors. Jade, for instance, mother of a 17-year-old girl, explained:

My first reaction would be more stereotypical... But then I would have to remember that it doesn't matter whether it's a boy or a girl. It's the sensitivity of that human being that's at stake... And I'll do the same work... Again, it doesn't matter if it's a boy or a girl. It's the human being who's concerned, in their vulnerability. And I'll ask the same questions and do the same work, absolutely.

This was also the case for Pierre, a father of a 16-year-old girl, who reflected on his relationship with his older son to conclude that, in the end, he would have the same desire to discuss and help navigate the situation. Alice, a 48-year-old mother of a son, reinforced this gender-neutral stance by contrasting this approach with the more over-protective stance that some parents may take towards their daughters: “*Whether it's a girl or a boy, for me it's, I don't make a difference, you know. I know that sometimes there are parents who are more protective of their girl than their boy because it's a guy, you know what I mean?*”.

In sum, these parents, when considering their children’s potential engagement in sexting, proposed that their parental regulations and guidelines would not be tied to their children’s gender. Instead, their stance rather was motivated by other specificities related to the developmental phase of adolescence.

Discussion

Past research on youth sexting has primarily focused on adolescents’ perspectives, typically relying upon quantitative methodologies. Although informative, such approaches are limited in their ability to delve into parents’ views and

understandings, and to provide insight into meanings attached to practices related to sexting. Furthermore, the ways in which gender dynamics may orient parents’ sexting-related views and strategies remain largely underexplored. To address these gaps, our qualitative study investigated parents’ perspectives and practices regarding adolescent sexting; also, it sought to explore how these perspectives and practices may be underpinned by gender constructions, considering the prevailing double standards regarding girls’ and boys’ sexuality (Endendijk et al., 2020). Three main themes summarize parents’ perspectives. “[Sexting as surrogate love](#)” depicts parents’ accounts of sexting as an act that does not reflect true intimacy. “[The role of an adolescent’s parent](#)” encapsulates different dimensions of parents’ efforts to navigate sexting. Last, “[Gender and sexting: an ambivalence](#)” explores parents’ ambivalent views and attitudes with regard to gender dynamics involved in sexting.

Participating parents generally viewed sexting in a negative way, in line with past research suggesting that adults typically hold an unfavorable view of this practice (Barrense-Dias et al., 2017). Despite previous findings suggesting that parents see sexting unfavorably because they link it with pornographic material (Barrense-Dias et al., 2019; Fix et al., 2021), the current study proposes that parents’ negative attitudes may be due to different reasons. Our results reveal that parents may regard sexting as a behavior that does not reflect true intimacy or align with romantic, affectionate relationships. This parental perspective seems in contrast with youngsters’ representation of sexting as a rather normalized sexual behavior that can be embraced within a stable, affectionate, consensual relationship, to enhance relationship satisfaction (Dodaj et al., 2022). Therefore, for young people sexting can indeed reflect true intimacy, contrary to our participating parents’ perspectives.

This contrast between parents’ and young people’s representations suggests that parents may not necessarily “comprehend” sexting, potentially due to generational differences in social media use (Wu, 2022), as these were also underlined by the participants. In that light, parents’ accounts seem to reflect a contrast between teenagers considered as “digital natives”, growing up in a digital world, and parents as “digital immigrants” who had to learn to navigate this world as adults (Prensky, 2001). This contrast becomes further apparent when parents discussed the trust they place in their teenagers to handle digital risks, considering them as “experts”. Indeed, as the present generation of youth is more familiarized with diverse platforms, engaging in the daily sharing of online information, parents may perceive their children as more digitally literate, while they themselves may feel they are falling behind in technology access and use (Wu, 2022). At the same time, digital literacy may also shape attitudes about sexting. In that regard, adolescents may hold more positive views on sexting because of their fluency and familiarity with online platforms and virtuality. Conversely, parents may lean towards more negative views, potentially stemming from lower digital literacy or limited awareness regarding their adolescent’s online activities and associated risks (Symons et al., 2020).

Participating parents also discussed their role in providing their teenagers with what they termed “essential tools” to enhance their adolescents’ abilities in evaluating potential risks of sexting. This finding can be better understood from a developmental point of view by considering the adolescent’s age (between 16 and 18 years of age). While other parental practices, such as parental monitoring of adolescents’

online behavior, may be deemed acceptable when adolescents are younger, this perspective is likely to evolve as adolescents grow older (Symons et al., 2020). This shift was further elucidated by some participating parents, including two mothers who explained that they used to closely monitor their daughters' messages and photos when they were younger, but now they do so only occasionally.

Based on the social domain theory, adolescents are likely to perceive sexting as part of their personal domain, as it typically would happen in the context of a close or intimate relationship (Smetana et al., 2005). Social domain theory proposes that children and adolescents construct social knowledge through their interactions with their social environment, distinguishing these into three distinct *domains* of knowledge: the moral domain, which involves concepts such as justice, fairness, and welfare; the social-conventional domain, which includes norms and traditions; and the personal domain, which pertains to personal choices about relationships, individual preferences, and privacy (Smetana, 1997). The personal domain becomes especially salient during adolescence, as teenagers increasingly assert their autonomy and expand the boundaries of what they consider as part of their personal domain, as they develop relationships with significant others outside the family (Smetana et al., 2009). From this perspective, if parents were to establish stringent rules to regulate or control this domain, using for instance parental control applications or by strictly prohibiting sexting, adolescents are likely to perceive such parenting practices as overly intrusive and illegitimately imposed, potentially even yielding counterproductive effects (Vansteenkiste et al., 2014). Further, adolescents faced with controlling parents could lose trust in their parents, which could lead them to adopt more secretive behaviors about sexting (Baudat et al., 2020). This would ultimately put adolescents more at risk, for instance in the context of a situation where "sexting went wrong". Parents' willingness to trust their adolescents, while equipping them with the "essential tools" to navigate sexting situations, appears from a developmental standpoint more appropriate, especially as adolescents are growing older (Smetana et al., 2005).

Instead of controlling, parents seemed to prefer practices that align more closely with the concept of active mediation, that is, parents' efforts to explain media usage to their children while encouraging their critical thinking (Beyens et al., 2022). In our participants' accounts these efforts were described as a desire to "advise the youth". Interviewed parents expressed a desire to guide and advise their children on the sensitive issue of sexting and online intimacy. This finding is in line with the proposition of Bay-Cheng (2013) on ethical parenting of sexuality in youth. According to this work, by normalizing adolescents' sexuality as opposed to dramatizing it, and by supporting rather than restricting adolescents' sexual behavior, parents can promote the healthy sexual development of young people. In that way, by positioning themselves as "advisors", participating parents may provide the necessary structure to their adolescents, to facilitate competence (Farkas & Grolnick, 2010), specifically on issues related to intimate and romantic relationships. In the context of parent-adolescent interactions, structure involves providing essential guidance, valuable feedback, and employing interventions that are attuned to the adolescent's developmental stage (Farkas & Grolnick, 2010). Previous research on the issue of sexuality has emphasized the pivotal role of parental structure in facilitating

constructive discussions between parents and adolescents about sexual matters (Mauras et al., 2013). Specifically, it was found that parental structure during conversations about sex contributed to adolescent's feeling more engaged, autonomous, related, satisfied, and wanting to have further discussions with their parents (Mauras et al., 2013). From that perspective, advising the youth could be seen as an effective parental behavior in the specific context of sexting, that can help adolescents feel more engaged and comfortable addressing issues related to sexting with their parents.

Concerning the role of gender in sexting, parents often referred to the gendered consequences of this practice, by elaborating on societal taboos on young girls' bodies and sexuality. Parents' accounts seem to refer to the social phenomenon of "slut-shaming", that is, the morally blaming and humiliation of the young female senders of sexts (Lipmann & Cambel, 2014). These parents, despite being aware of the gendered dynamics of sexting, reported having the same parental attitude towards boys and girls concerning their potential engagement to sexting. A first explanation of this finding is that by adopting an unbiased stance, these parents may seek to mitigate the impact of public discourses, media representations, or preventive measures that can perpetuate double standards regarding boys' and girls' sexuality (Mercier, 2022). Further, this parental attitude may echo parents' willingness to "undo gender" (Butler, 2004), that is, to deconstruct gender stereotypes through interactions with their teenagers about their online and offline sexuality. In the context of sexuality and sexting, parents' efforts to "undo gender" could aim to challenge heteronormative sexual stereotypes, such as the notion of "the unrestrained boy and the responsible girl" (Bozon, 2012), often seen in media depictions of sexting. In addition, parents are often aware of prevailing norms, but may not necessarily endorse them (cf. parents' perceptions) or act upon them (cf. parents' practices). Research has shown that parents vary in the degree to which they endorse societal norms and stereotypes about parenting (Lamprianidou et al., 2025). Conversely, awareness of such stereotypes can even inspire some parents to adopt "undoing gender" practices, like our results suggest.

A second explanation of parents' ambivalence regarding gender in sexting may stem from their reluctance to disclose any gendered parenting practices. This hesitation could be attributed to their belief that such practices contradict society's emphasis on gender equality (Mesman & Groeneveld, 2017). While previous work proposes that parents tend to control more carefully their daughters' online lives, as they perceive them as more often exposed and vulnerable to online risks (Confalonieri et al., 2020), our findings seem mostly to contradict this idea. Only two mothers stated openly that in the past they used to control periodically their daughters' phones, while most of them found the idea quite intrusive. Participants' support for more gendered practices may have therefore been suppressed during the interviews. Previous research has emphasized the issue of social desirability when examining sexual double standards, particularly in comparing girls' and women's sexual behaviors to those of boys and men (Endendijk et al., 2020). This consideration becomes particularly pertinent within a constructivist framework (Burr, 2003), given the interviewer's identity as a young female researcher and psychologist, and the potential impact this may have on participants and interview dynamics. Parents might be

more hesitant to openly admit to a female researcher that they would treat their sons' and daughters' potential involvement in sexting differently.

Practical Implications

This article provides important insights for educators and counselors on adolescent sexting. Our findings shed light on parents' negative views on this practice, by underscoring their perception of sexting as *inauthentic* intimacy. We suggest that this perspective may arise from generational differences in social media use. To address this issue, parent programs could educate parents in more nuanced ways, highlighting for instance the potential benefits teens may find in this practice (e.g., relationship-building, self-confidence; Graham-Holmes et al., 2021) while avoiding conflation with non-consensual acts such as aggravated sexting. This becomes particularly important, as conflation between consensual and non-consensual derivatives of sexting is often present in popular media or campaigns, usually in a stereotypically gendered way (e.g., the 2021 French police's campaign "*Sending a nude photo means accepting the risk of it being shared.*"; Rostagnat, 2021). Parental education programs on sexting are especially relevant in a societal context where the pressure on parents to "shield" their children from any potential risks continues to intensify (Lamprianidou et al., 2025).

Parents expressed a desire to guide their teens on sexting and sexuality, contrasting with the limited advice they received from their own parents. School-based interventions, such as focus groups with psychologists, parents, and teenagers, could facilitate these parent-adolescent conversations, focusing on the roles of senders, witnesses, and bystanders in non-consensual sexting. This could help dismantle the victim-blaming discourse, often shaped by gendered double standards, as our findings also show. Last, educational programs could help parents address sexting among LGBTQ teens, as sexting may be more normalized in these communities. For instance, among teen gay boys (Needham, 2020) sexting can be used to create intimacy in the absence of public displays of affection (Ybarra et al., 2014). Parents may struggle to be their adolescents' *advisors* if they lack relevant knowledge. Parent programs could thus include more insights on how sexting may be approached especially in the queer youth culture (Needham, 2020).

Limitations and Future Research

This study has several important strengths, including the qualitative design that allowed us to analyze parents' accounts on adolescent sexting by positioning ourselves as *reflexive researchers* (Braun & Clarke, 2021a), who take into account their assumptions and how these shape and delimit the production of knowledge. Our expertise in adolescent and developmental psychology, health psychology and gender studies informed and deepened our analysis. Even though our social constructionist and qualitative approach enhances our understanding of how parents make sense and regulate adolescent sexting, it also comprises limitations.

A first limitation relates to the nature of the study and the snowball sampling method, as this may have attracted parents who are already eager to discuss and reflect on how to discuss these topics with adolescents. A second limitation concerns the specificity of the sample, and in particular the relatively high educational attainment of the participants. Past research found no link between parents' educational level and how they communicate about sex with their adolescents (Mauras et al., 2013). However, parents' education may play a significant role in how they navigate gender issues in the specific context of adolescent sexuality and sexting, as higher levels of education are generally associated with more gender-egalitarian attitudes (e.g., Begall et al., 2023). Additionally, the study was conducted in the specific sociocultural context of Belgium, which is a relatively liberal country regarding sexual rights, ranking third in the World Index of Moral Freedom (2022), where sexuality is a key factor, and second in the 2023 Rainbow Index (ILGA-Europe, 2023), which tracks the rights of non-heterosexual individuals. Therefore, future research should examine parental representations of sexting in different sociocultural contexts, where parents may hold more conservative views on parent-adolescent conversations about sexual matters (Lefkowitz et al., 2003), on girls' and boys' sexuality and their involvement in sexting (Cucci et al., 2023), as well as on gender roles more broadly (e.g., Kosakowska-Berezecka et al., 2023).

A last consideration regarding our sample is the overrepresentation of mothers. Some studies indicate that fathers tend to perceive fewer online risks for their adolescents, while mothers are more likely to impose restrictions, particularly on their daughters' online behavior (Symons et al., 2020). Others suggest that mothers' internet parenting style tends to be warmer, offering more support and communication compared to fathers (Valcke et al., 2010). These findings may reflect mothers' generally greater involvement in their teenagers' online activities, which could explain their tendency to be more communicative or restrictive. Future research should thus examine more in-depth fathers' perspectives and practices related to teen sexting.

Most existing studies on sexting are quantitative, with the present study contributing to the limited qualitative literature on this issue. Further qualitative studies could shed light into other emerging phenomena related to the online sexuality of youngsters. Future designs could explore the impact of “deep nudes”—nude photos generated by artificial intelligence using an image of a clothed person—or the newly resurfaced “sext chats”, where unknown individuals can engage in sexting under anonymity. Including the parent's viewpoint in the study of these new phenomena can illuminate how parents comprehend and negotiate these practices with their adolescents. Finally, adopting qualitative longitudinal research designs to explore parents' views on sexting—such as the child's developmental trajectory into adolescence—could enhance our understanding of how parental attitudes and behaviors develop throughout adolescence, as teenagers mature and their relationships with sexuality change. For example, the impact of the structure parents provide in conversations about sex may vary depending on the adolescent's age, as their sexual activity tends to evolve across this developmental period (Mauras et al., 2013).

Conclusion

With the phenomenon of youth sexting receiving increasing attention, parents of adolescents may become interested, concerned, or even alarmed by this phenomenon. By adopting a qualitative approach, we examined parents' attitudes and practices on teen sexting. The generated themes resulted in a thorough comprehension of how parents interpret and navigate digital media usage and sexting among adolescents.

Author Contributions The study's conception and design were led by Elli-Anastasia Lamprianidou and Stijn Van Petegem. The interview guide was developed by Elli-Anastasia Lamprianidou and Stijn Van Petegem, and reviewed by Maria Del Rio Carral and Grégoire Zimmermann. Data collection and analysis were conducted by Elli-Anastasia Lamprianidou. Gaëlle Venard contributed to the initial analysis of the interviews, while all authors collaborated on the final analysis of themes. Elli-Anastasia Lamprianidou drafted the initial manuscript, and all authors provided feedback on previous versions. All authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest We have no conflicts of interests to disclose.

Ethics Approval The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of Université Libre de Bruxelles. Special attention was paid to the handling of participants' sensitive data, through the encryption of audio and transcription files on the researcher's computer.

Consent to Participate Informed written consent was obtained from all parents participating in the study.

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Authors and Affiliations

Elli-Anastasia Lampranidou¹  · Gaëlle Venard² · Maria del Rio Carral³ · Grégoire Zimmermann² · Stijn Van Petegem^{1,4}

✉ Elli-Anastasia Lampranidou
elli-anastasia.lampranidou@ulb.be

- ¹ Center for Research on Development, Family and Human Systems (Défasy), Faculty of Psychology, Educational Sciences and Speech and Language Therapy, Université Libre de Bruxelles, Av. Franklin Roosevelt 50, CP122, 1050 Brussels, Belgium
- ² Family and Development Research Center (FADO), Institute of Psychology, Université de Lausanne, Lausanne, Switzerland
- ³ Psychology of Health Ageing and Sport Examination Research Center (PHASE), Institute of Psychology, Université de Lausanne, Lausanne, Switzerland
- ⁴ F.R.S.-FNRS Research Associate, Brussels, Belgium