



From Sexting to Sexpreading: Trivialization of Digital Violence, Gender Differences and Collective Responsibilities

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Abstract

This article starts from a pedagogical disambiguation around sexting elaborated from the socio-educational cooperatives edPAC and CANDELA. This nuanced definition understands sexting as the practice of voluntarily and consensually sharing intimate and sexual content through different platforms and devices. In contrast, sexpreading is understood as the practice of disseminating sexual content without consent. We conducted short-term ethnographic research with adolescents in Barcelona with the objective of understanding how they perceive sexting and sexpreading based on their own experiences and social context. The research was carried out in three education centers in Barcelona and its metropolitan area and involved 59 diverse young people from 14 to 18 years old with different gender identifications. Our results point to three main dimensions: 1) the trivialization of violence and the creation of men spaces; 2) the gender differences involved in practicing sexting and preventing sexpreading; and 3) the consequences of sexpreading experienced by young people, including roles of intermediaries and responsibilities associated with them. We provide empirical and ethnographical support for the idea that merging sexting and sexpreading is problematic, especially for educational interventions, as it can detrimentally generalize issues and negatively impact adolescent sexualities, in particular those of girls and women. We believe that it is very important to incorporate discussions about sexting and sexpreading practices into educational contexts and to consider the high degree of media skills young women already have for a pedagogy of sexting and a community intervention against sexpreading.

Keywords Sexting · Sexpreading · Sexual education · Short-term ethnography · Youth · Adolescence

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Introduction

“Why do they call it sexting when they are talking about sexpreading?”¹ was written by EdPAC and CANDELA (2020), two socio-educational feminist intervention cooperatives who work with young people in Catalonia.² They advocate for a terminological differentiation to describe these practices more precisely. This distinction is crucial for providing a more nuanced academic analysis and feminist sex-positive pedagogies about consent and desire. It also helps in detecting and collectively intervening in cases of sexual violence. Understanding a sexual practice (sexting) and the exercise of violence and lack of consent (sexpreading) under the same concept, and mixing up their meanings, make the problem more complex.

Sexting is a term that emerges from the combination of sex and texting (Orchard, 2020). It refers to the sexually explicit exchange of self-produced texts, images, audios or videos through websites, messaging chats or social networks (Döring, 2014; Ringrose et al., 2013) and through devices such as computers and mobile phones (Orchard, 2020). According to the review by Barrense-Dias et al. (2017), it can be defined according to the media type (text, audio, image or video), the actions (active or passive), the transmission mode (posting, sending or face-to-face) and the sexual characteristics (nudity, showing parts of the body or displaying sexual practices). This digital exchange is considered as a form of expression of one’s own sexuality that can serve as a space for consensual erotic and sexual exploration, from flirting, desire, play or excitement between peers (Lee & Crofts, 2015; Perry et al., 2022).

While sexting itself should not imply negative consequences, the academic literature and the media have usually framed it as dangerous or risky (e.g. Barrense-Dias et al., 2017; Cruz Gómez & Soriano Ayala, 2014; Döring, 2014; Lee & Crofts, 2015), even promoting a “sexting panic” that overlooks teen agency (Angelides, 2013). These negative connotations surrounding sexting are due to its terminological ambiguity and association with what we will hereafter refer to as sexpreading (EdPAC/CANDELA, 2020).³

Sexpreading happens when consensual sexting transcends its private context and is shared publicly without consent (EdPAC/CANDELA, 2020). It also includes non-reciprocal instances where sexual content is sent without consent, such as unsolicited dick pics (Wailing & Pym, 2017; Paasonen, Light & Jarrett, 2019; Amundsen, 2021). EdPac/CANDELA (2020) describe *sexpreading* as a triple violence: 1) the invasion of the victim’s privacy and the exposure to a gaze that is not chosen; 2) the

¹ Original text in Catalan: “Per què li diuen sèxting quan parlen de sexpreading?”.

² We find this work particularly valuable since this terminological distinction has emerged from the practice of feminist sexual education in our cultural and geographical context. It is a conceptualization/theory that has emerged from practice, an exercise contrary to what is frequently done in academia, which has a tendency to theorize and create terminologies that are later applied to practice.

³ In previous studies, sexpreading has been presented as “non-consensual sexting” (e.g. Barroso et al., 2023), “unwanted sexting”, “unwanted nude/sexual images” or “unauthorised production and dissemination of nude/sexual images” (Burkett, 2015), “sext dissemination” (Dodaj, Sesar & Novak, 2024) or “non-consensual diffusion of intimate images” (Semenzin & Bainotti, 2020), among others.

violation of trust and a transformation from play and consent to aggression when violence is derived from practicing sexting, and “if the aggression does not come from previous sexual practice, there is also a first person who steals the image, gets it by pressuring or does it without permission” (p. 10); and 3) “punishment, collective violence; the reaction of each person who receives and disseminates the image again to new people” (p. 10).

The ambiguity in defining sexting has been frequently addressed in the literature (e.g. Barrense-Dias et al., 2017; Barroso et al., 2023; Burkett, 2015; Cruz Gómez & Soriano Ayala, 2014; Lee & Crofts, 2015; Madigan et al., 2018). It is problematic because it leads to controversies and a persistent focus on the harms associated with practicing sexting, and it therefore limits preventive strategies for practicing safe sexting beyond abstinence. With their proposal for terminological disambiguation, EdPAC and CANDELA (2020) challenge the adultist and alarmist views of sexting—understood as an “‘everyday’ socio-sexual practice” (Burkett, 2015, p. 858) rather than an a priori dangerous or deviant activity—while presenting sexpreparing as part of a broader structural gender violence—comparable to other forms of digital sexual violence such as grooming, cyberbullying, sexual harassment, cyber dating abuse, cyber stalking or image-based sexual abuse⁴ (Ringrose et al., 2013; Backe et al., 2018)—that needs collective action to be eradicated.

The expansion of information and communication technologies as well as the daily use of personal mobile devices by young people has demarcated a new and important space for the experience of sexual expression and intimacy: the digital world (Attwood et al., 2017; De Ridder et al., 2018). Sexting is a paradigmatic example of a sexual practice typical of digital connectivity. The digitalization and proliferation of the everyday use of social media, digital platforms, dating and instant messaging apps by young people offers an extension to their relational spaces; however, these media also represent a new entry point for cyber-violence such as sexpreparing. The digital sphere therefore becomes a space where the already existent offline violence is extended and a territory of new specific forms of aggression, which are largely gendered (e.g. Backe et al., 2018; Mendes et al., 2019; Semenzin & Bainotti, 2020).

Overall rates obtained in the systematic review by Madigan et al. (2018) of 39 studies published between 2009 and 2015 (with a total of 110,380 participants) indicated prevalence rates of consensual sexting among adolescents of 14.8% in sending sexts (1 in 7 adolescents) and 27.4% in receiving (1 in 4 adolescents). Later, the meta-analytic update of 28 studies, published between January 2016 and March 2020 by Mori et al. (2021), found an increase in this practice among young people. Specifically, 19.3% (1 in 5 young people) sent sexts and 34.8% (1 in 3) received

⁴ Grooming refers to adults approaching minors or vulnerable persons for the purpose of abusing them; cyberbullying, includes sending, posting, or sharing negative, false or harmful content about someone online; sexual harassment is an unwanted sexual behavior online that may involve threats, humiliation, sexualization or discrimination; cyber dating abuse refers to violence perpetrated towards a romantic partner via technology and social media; cyber stalking is a constant and unwanted monitoring and investigation of information about a person; and image-based sexual abuse refers to sexpreparing but also includes sextortion and digitally altered images, also known as “deepfakes”.

them. The systematic review by Barroso et al. (2023), in which they examined 40 articles published between 2012 and 2021, detected an increase in the practice of sexting as young people got older, which is consistent with Mori et al. (2022). In terms of gender, Barroso et al. (2023) could not determine a conclusive pattern on the influence of gender identity on the prevalence of the practice. Regarding ethnicity, there seems to be a slight correlation between young people of minority ethnic identities and a higher sexting practice (Barroso et al., 2023). This is also the case for LGBTIQ+ young people, as sexual orientation has been associated in five studies with sexting (Barroso et al., 2023). In relation to personality, various studies relate the Big Five Personality Traits (e.g., neuroticism or emotional instability, extroversion, openness to new experiences, agreeableness, and conscientiousness) as influential for consensual sexting (Barroso et al., 2023). Other characteristics of young people who engage in sexting were lower sexual inhibition and greater interest in sex, less emotional control, greater stress and anxiety, more intensive use of information and communication technologies, and higher drug and alcohol consumption (Barroso et al., 2023). Peer pressure and exposure to violence are youth experiences that have also been associated with increased consensual sexting. At the relational level, being in a stable romantic relationship has been associated with greater sexting, as well as living with a single parent or within a less cohesive family.

Considering sexpredding, the prevalence of sending sexual content without consent was 12% and receiving content forwarded by third parties without consent was 8.4% (Madigan et al., 2018). This prevalence, involving 1 in 8 young people, is significant, although the authors found no significant prevalence in terms of gender or age (Madigan et al., 2018). The meta-analytic update by Mori et al. (2022) indicates an increase in sexpredding, as 14.5% (1 in 7 adolescents) forwarded images without consent. More recent studies suggest that girls receive more images without consent and from strangers than boys. This coincides with the research by Barroso et al. (2023), which found that boys are the main perpetrators of sexpredding. The age most related to engagement in sexpredding was middle adolescence (between 14 and 16 years).

Mori et al. (2022) pointed out an important fact: poorer psychosocial health was related to sexpredding (nonconsensual forms of sexting in their terms) and not to consensual sexting (Lu, Blaumer & Temple, 2021). Similarly, Barroso et al. (2023) found a significant relationship between sexpredding and young people with attitudes of high impulsivity, low empathy, narcissism, aggression, and lack of control, as well as young people who had experienced childhood trauma, childhood neglect or emotional abuse. These experiences condition the young people's deficient emotional resources to have equitable and respectful interpersonal relationships (Barroso et al., 2021). Interestingly, a normalization of the practice of sexpredding, understanding it as a form of sexual expression or socialization, was also an associated characteristic (Barroso et al., 2023). Studies also pointed to the connection of a previous romantic relationship with the practice of sexpredding. In terms of mental health, Barroso et al. (2023) noted that symptoms of anxiety and depression could limit the understanding of the consequences of sexting and were related to the sexpredding experience, as were stress and anxiety. Likewise, sexpredding was strongly related to peer-pressure and even to coercion, extortion and revenge.

In the case of Spain, studies maintain similarities with those conducted in other countries. A study by Gámez-Guadiz, Santiesteban and Resett (2017) found an overall prevalence of 13.5% of participation in sexting from a sample of 3,223 adolescents aged between 12 and 17 years old. The researchers noted a prevalence of 3.4% at 12 years of age that increased to 36.1% at 17 years of age, showing a growing and significant linear trend. The researchers did not highlight significant gender differences, although an extroverted personality and a lower conscientiousness were found to be personality indicators of the young people who participated in sexting (Gámez-Guadiz, Santiesteban, & Resett, 2017). Another study by the same research team in 11 high schools in central Spain included 1,840 adolescents aged 12–16 years and concluded that 10.7% of the young people reported producing and sending sexual photographs, which increased to 19.2% in the period of one year (Gámez-Guadiz & Santiesteban, 2018). Although the study does not clearly distinguish between consensual sexting and sexpreading, some of the characteristics they consider relevant for explaining the increase in the practice are becoming older, an extroverted nature, and the presence of depressive symptoms among young people. The most recent study by Gil-Llario et al. (2020) with 784 Spanish adolescents between 12 and 18 years of age found that 24.4% of them have practiced sexting on some occasion, interacting with an average of 2.32 people. Some of the significant correlations found by the team were the existence of positive attitudes towards sexting, a higher use of information and communication technologies, a higher level of impulsivity, the existence of a previous relationship, gender and age, with males being the ones who perform it more frequently and the practice itself increasing as young people grow up.

Following this overview of the sexting and sexpreading phenomena based on the referenced quantitative studies, our qualitative approach makes a different contribution to the same topic by examining young people's subjective meanings, perceptions and experiences around both sexting and sexpreading. Our ethnographic research with adolescents in Barcelona dialogues with the terminological issue of sexting/sexpreading in relation to an empirical experience. This article is based on the outcomes of the project 'Transmedia Gender & LGBTI+ Literacy (TRANSGELIT)' and it specifically explores the practices and understandings young people make of sexting and sexpreading. Most participants were unfamiliar with these concepts. Sexting was more popular to them in some cases, but sexpreading was completely unknown. In fact, the meanings they attributed to sexting were confusing and intertwined with the non-consensual practices of sexpreading. Despite this, they were aware of the practices and had specific slang for them. All participants were aware of cases involving people they knew or had directly experienced both sexting and sexpreading, despite not conceptualizing them as such.

Our main research objective was to understand how adolescents perceive sexting and sexpreading based on their experiences and social context. To do this, we address the possible gender differences and also their perceptions related to the consequences and responsibilities of sexpreading. Our work aligns with previous qualitative research that understands young people as "sexual beings with rights to communicate in privacy so as to explore their sexuality, intimacy and relationships" (Ringrose et al., 2013, p. 308). Our interest is to provide context and specificity to

the way young people make use of digital technologies and shape youth sexual cultures, as Bukett (2015) points out.

The first specific objective of the research is to explore, based on youth experiences and meanings, how sexting as a sexual practice has been constructed as being associated with and non-separable from sexpreading. The second specific objective is to present the gender differences in the understanding and practices of sexting and sexpreading among the adolescents from Barcelona with whom we have worked and to check whether they coincide with previous literature. The third specific objective is to comprehend how young people understand and verbalize the consequences and responsibilities in cases of sexpreading, based on the structural nature of this digital sexual violence and the collective responsibility to eradicate it.

Methodology

The project proposed an ethnographic approach that followed the precepts of short-term ethnography (Pink & Morgan, 2013). Short-term ethnography is appropriate for creating contexts in which researchers can go deeper into the study interests in a short period of time by implementing more interventional, participative and creative tools (Pink & Morgan, 2013), which, in our case, were participatory, reflective, creative workshops. Given the time limitations of this specific research project and the difficulties related to working in different educational settings for long periods of time, this methodology was particularly suitable since it allowed us to become immersed in the research topic deeply and quickly.

Implementing the workshops made it possible to quickly open the debate with participants about complex topics such as sexual practices in online environments. It should be noted that the fieldwork was carried out in institutionalized educational contexts where these topics and informal media practices normally do not have a place. Therefore, it was important to design tools that helped us to work on these issues and make participants feel comfortable talking about them. This research followed five steps carried out between March 2022 and May 2023:

- a) Contact and consent management with participants and their families (in the case of minors);
- b) Participative and reflection workshops about gender and sexualities and about media uses, practices and perceptions. Different activities were carried out, including conceptual maps about their interests and concerns about sexualities, debates about gender myths and stereotypes and information searches on these topics in the media, among others;
- c) Co-viewing, a practice of joint media content viewing (Pires de Sá, 2018) that we used as a methodological tool for debating and reflecting on specific media representations of gender and sexualities;
- d) Creative workshops for creating audiovisual content in which young people could explore specific topics about sexualities and gender that interested them. The participants made different materials such as podcasts, posters and memes;

- e) In-depth interviews to go deeper into the adolescents' discourses and understandings about the research topics. Interviews explored the participants' daily negotiations with their aspirations, concerns, experiences and possibilities based on their own explanations and reconstructions. The interviews made it possible to construct a space of intimacy necessary for exploring the project topics. They were particularly useful for our research interest on sexting and sexpreparing. It is important to emphasize that the interviews were conducted during the final phase of the fieldwork, after the workshops and co-viewing sessions, with the aim of approaching them only after a thorough process of working with the participants, which helped build trust and comfort with the researchers. This was essential for discussing topics related to their experiences and perceptions around sexualities and media. The interviews were conducted on the facilities of the participating institutions, in spaces specifically arranged to ensure a private and comfortable environment (offices, small classrooms, and library workrooms). They followed semi-structured guidelines that could be adapted to the participants' different interests. The duration of the interviews varied for each participant, but in general lasted over an hour.

This ethnographic research allowed us to approach the object of study in a complex manner. Our goal was to observe and study the particularities and, through this, understand broader social issues. Furthermore, our qualitative findings may be very valuable for designing future quantitative studies about sexting and sexpreparing that stem from observations made through ethnographic fieldwork.

The different research tools designed were adapted and adjusted to the pace, dynamics and activities of each center we worked with. The research was carried out in four education centers in Barcelona and its metropolitan area and included: a group of university students from a major university in Barcelona; two high schools—a public high school in a Barcelona neighborhood that has undergone intense reforms in recent decades, welcoming technological companies and expanding its cultural life (Center 1); and a semi-public high school in a city from the metropolitan area of Barcelona (Center 2)—;and a non-formal education center that serves socially vulnerable young people in one of the more impoverished districts in Barcelona (Center 3). These four centers were selected based on various criteria: high school and non-formal and university education, semi-public and public systems, central urban and peripheral locations, from cultural and ethnic diversity to homogeneity in the demographic composition of participants, and innovative and conventional educational models. Based on these criteria, we contacted different centers and ultimately worked with four institutions that varied in terms of location, cultural context, and income levels. The institutions themselves determined which class-groups could participate in the research, aiming to meet the project's requirements (age, diversity, and plurality of participants). In the case of the university students, we worked with a group of undergraduate students of media studies with whom the team had direct contact through the university. At Center 1, the research involved a group of adolescents organized by the high school itself as part of a "course" designed to carry out this study and address topics related to sexuality and gender. This "course" was offered to all third-grade secondary education

students, and everyone who wished to participate was given the opportunity to do so. At Center 2, the research was conducted with the class group supervised by the center's pedagogical director. The high school considered this approach would streamline the process of obtaining consent from families, as the pedagogical director handled all the project-related arrangements. Lastly, at Center 3, the research was carried out with the only group of regular participants they have. As noted, the selection of participants for the research was shaped by the specific circumstances of each institution. This is a common limitation in studies conducted with educational centers, which must adapt to the availability and needs of the institutions involved.

In this specific paper, we focus on the two high schools and the non-formal education center. In these spaces, we collaborated with 59 young people from 14 to 18 years old with different gender identifications (25 female, 32 male, 2 prefer no gender identification). We conducted 47 hours of workshops and 41 semi-structured in-depth interviews (19 female and 22 male; 28 heterosexual, 4 bisexual, 1 lesbian, 3 don't know or don't define, 1 pansexual, 1 gay, 2 fluid, 1 don't want to share). We decided to exclude the group of university students from this particular article because, during the fieldwork and data analysis, we observed that participant discussions about sexspreading primarily emerged in the high schools and the non-formal education center, where they were more frequent and explicit. In contrast, the university group hardly addressed these topics, which seems to be related to their status as media and communication students and their "supposed" responsibility and training in media usage. Nevertheless, the research team considers that it is important to mention this group in this section since it was also part of the project and it has been very useful for exploring other topics, such as perceptions, experiences, and learning about sexualities through porn (Masanet et al., forthcoming), informal learning experiences through media (Fedele et al., 2024) and attitudes toward LGBTIQ issues in relation to media usage (Blanco-Fernández et al., 2024), among others.

In relation to the treatment and analysis of the data, the interviews and other oral materials such as podcasts were automatically transcribed with OpenAI's Whisper (Boté-Vericard & Lopezosa, 2024), and later reviewed manually by the team. The data were processed during 2023 and 2024 using the software ATLAS.ti in its web version to carry out an inductive and interpretative team analysis in which different researchers could code data at the same time. The analysis consisted of two phases. Firstly, different team members conducted an inductive analysis of the same interviews and observations to define common analysis categories (codes). This phase served to organize both the descriptive and interpretive categories that emerged from the initial data analyzed and were organized as codes. Each code was defined by the team and organized into higher-level categories, named code groups (e.g., the codes 'Instagram', 'TikTok' and 'Tinder' were grouped under the 'social media apps' code group), and these were organized into code families (e.g., 'social media apps' was included in the code family 'media'). In the second phase, the team worked with these predefined categories; however, we also had the opportunity to create new codes inductively throughout the entire analysis process. In this phase, the team also had the opportunity to recode data from one code and create sub-codes to add complexity to the analysis (for example, the code 'Instagram' included different sub-codes such as 'Instant messaging' or 'flirting', which referred to practices

commented on by participants about their use of Instagram). ATLAS.ti allowed us to develop descriptive and interpretive hierarchies through its code system and communicate to each other through the memo tool, which was essential for team dialogue and discussion during the analysis. We also organized monthly team analysis meetings to discuss the new categories created, review their definitions and re-code data if necessary. In the specific case of this article, a code named 'sexting / sexpreading' (referred to the confusion about those concepts and the meaning and experiences of participants about their practices) was included in the code group 'risks and/or unwanted consequences' and in the family group 'media'. A posteriori, the data included in the code 'sexting/sexpreading' was re-coded into different sub-codes, which have served as the basis for the analysis conducted for this article and helped us structure the results sections. The first section of the results about the trivialization of the violences linked to sexpreading and men spaces works with the sub-codes: 'men space, men complicity, contradictions, ethical boundaries, justifications, mediatic cases, slang, humor, dick pictures and normalization'. The section about gender differences and preventive measures is constructed with codes such as: 'genderless (participants reflect on sexpreading as if it had nothing to do with gender), gender roles, girls' privacy, regret, prevention measures, just showing (emphasizing the idea of showing the content and not sharing it), overcome obstacles (participants refer to different strategies to overcome obstacles when doing sexting or sexpreading, e.g., using two phones to take a picture of an image that could not be saved on the phone) and fake profiles'. Finally, the third section on consequences, intermediaries and responsibilities is based on categories such as: 'victim blaming, legal awareness, responsibilities, intermediaries, perpetrator consequences, victim consequences, social consequences, equidistance (referring to the participant's distanced position in front of a sexpreading situation), social support, revenge, sextortion, timing (referring to the temporal implications of the aggression) and victim's un-knowledge'.

Finally, this project followed the ethical and data management protocols approved by the Bioethics Commission of the Universitat de Barcelona (Institutional Review Board IRB00003099). In the case of minors, consent was also managed with their legal guardians. The educational centers facilitated this process by contacting the families to explain the project and obtain their consent. This is one of the advantages of working with educational centers, as they have direct contact with the families of minors. Secondly, all the names and personal data from the participants have been anonymized using aliases, which try to respect and represent the complexities of the identities we worked with during the fieldwork.⁵

⁵ We have also anonymized the neighborhoods of the centers to protect the participants and the people mentioned by them. During the fieldwork, the participants explained to us about cases of sexpreading that went viral in some of these neighborhoods, and the team considers it their responsibility to avoid any possible identification with these cases. That is why we refer to the centers we worked with as Center 1, Center 2, and Center 3.

Results

In the next sections, we focus on the three interconnected areas that stood out most according to the participants' experiences and reflections (See Fig. 1): 1) the trivialization of violence and the creation of men spaces; 2) the gender differences distinguished while practicing sexting and preventing sexpreading; and 3) the experienced consequences of these practices among young people, including the roles of intermediaries and responsibilities associated with them. In the following sections, it is important to state that the participants did not directly connect the practices, characteristics and reflections they discussed with these terminologies (i.e., they do not refer to either of them as such). Hence, it is the authors who associate the participants' reflections with these concepts and their practices.

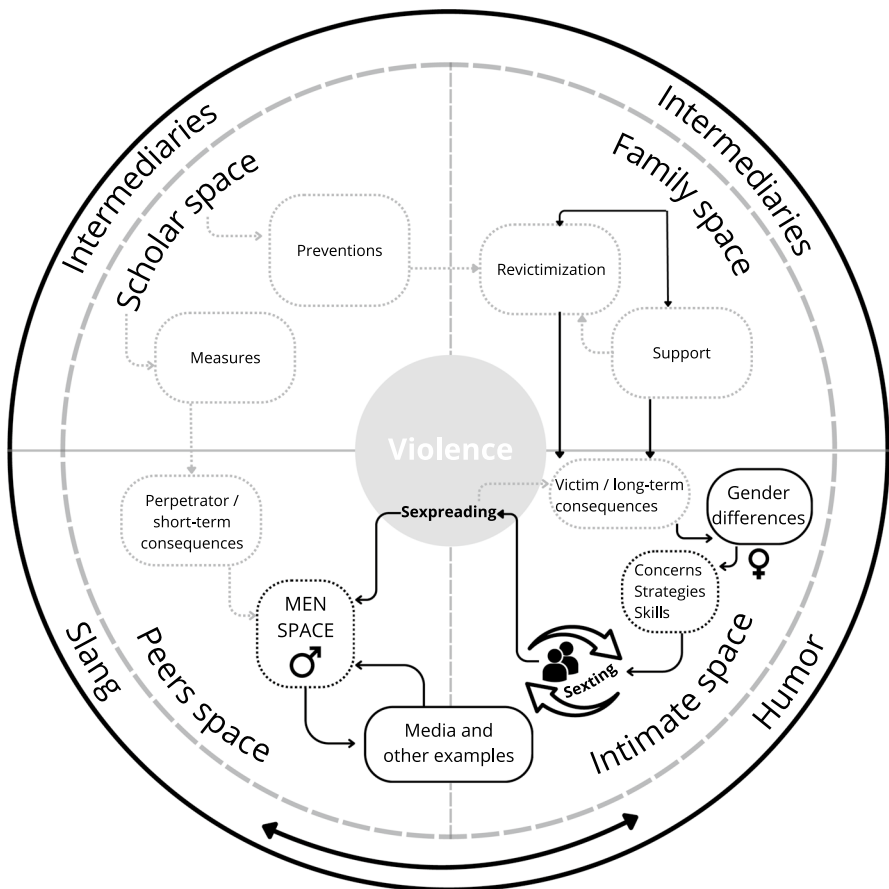


Fig. 1 The most salient features from our analysis about sexting and sexpreading among adolescents and their interconnections. *Source:* own elaboration in Canva

Hidden Violence Due to the Overlapping of Concepts: Trivialization Experiences and the Construction of Men's Spaces

As we mentioned above, the participants recognized practices of sexting and sexpreading without connecting them with these terminologies. The participants largely detailed certain characteristics of sexting and sexpreading as if they were synonymous, which reveals an important overlap when it comes to understanding young people's sexual practices. In this sense, when we ask ourselves why and how these confusions occur and how their conceptions become generalized, the results allow us to identify two main dynamics: the trivialization of sexpreading through slang and humor; and the construction of masculine spaces that promote sexpreading and its violence based on complicity and ethical distancing.

Trivialization of Sexpreading: The Role of Slang and Humor

The testimonies collected reveal a gap between the practice of sexting and sexpreading, which gives rise to the idea that the former leads, in one way or the other, to the latter, even unintentionally. This overlapping was illustrated, for instance, when participants mentioned examples in media production (e.g., TV series such as “Merlí” and “13 reasons why”). Precisely by not differentiating sexting and sexpreading, we observed that several participants interchanged their meanings and confused them. This implies that the negative consequences of sexpreading (e.g., coercion, manipulation) carry over into sexting and thus end up permeating and undermining young people's healthy sexting practices. The interview with Clara (girl, 15 years old, Center 2), shows how she oscillates from sexting to sexpreading practices when answering whether she has ever sent sexual content: “It's dangerous. I think, of course, I mean, you show a picture and you no longer have control of that photograph. The other person can do what he wants with that photograph, show it, save it, send it.”

Clara's comment captures the overlapping and confusion between sexting and sexpreading that is continuous and transversal to the young people in our study. In general, we identify that the overlap of meaning tends to associate sexting with the negative consequences of sexpreading. Precisely, for Clara, sending sexual content is directly assumed to be *dangerous* and, in consequence, her approach to digital practices of sexual experimentation or healthy sexual exploration (Burkett, 2015)—even at an intimate level with sentimental commitment (Beckmeyer, 2024)—may begin with fear and awareness of the risks not of sexting, but rather those linked to sexpreading.

Furthermore, we found different ways that young people, mainly boys, used to dismiss the exchange of girls' sexual content and to make sexpreading invisible. One of the ways young men banalize sexpreading is linked with the use of certain slang among peers (e.g., “fotopolla” to refer to “dickpic”) and combining them with humor in their responses to our questions. In this sense, for instance, when asked about sending sexual pictures, Leo (boy, 15 years old, Center 1) stated: “No, I haven't taken a fotopolla of myself.” Rafa (boy, 14 years old, Center 1) called it “dickpic and things like that.” Beyond associating (and again, confusing) sexting

and sexpreeding practices with slang words, many boys in our study linked these practices with humor and ideas that dismissed the practice itself. Rafa, for instance, also shared that one of his friends has sent this type of content [fotopolla] to “all the girls” because “he is silly and does not stop sending them [the pictures].” This last comment aligns with the response of Sasha (boy, 16 years old, Center 2) by stating that it is “the typical childish joke” when asked about non-consensual sending of sexual pictures. Indeed, Sasha uses humorous intentions, by calling the practice “a joke”. He uses a resource to not only explain the unsolicited dick pictures he sends but also the dissemination of girls’ sexual content among his male friends, thereby justifying it, by saying, “we are in that age.” In this statement lies an assumption of acceptance based on age that somehow justifies sexpreeding among his peers. It is part of the motto “boys will be boys”—that usually alludes to an extended logic of masculine behavior as a somehow natural and unchangeable characteristic of their personality and actions (Weiss, 2009; Murnen, Wright & Kaluzny, 2002). This is aligned with previous research that found that boys said joking was the main reason that they non-consensually disseminated the sexual content of others (Dodaj, Sesar & Navak, 2024).

However, the use of slang and humor is not restricted to the boys in our study. Although with other nuances and implications, girls also participate in this cycle: they use the slang (e.g. fotopolla or fototeta [to refer to pictures of breasts]) and receive this content even shaped in formats that they may not recognize directly as humor. In this regard, the use of stickers plays an interesting role. Yessica (girl, 14 years old, Center 1), when asked about receiving sexual content through WhatsApp, recognized receiving “lots of stickers from my classmates. They say, ‘look at these tits’, and they send a sticker of boobs or of an open pussy.” Nonetheless, when asked about what she thinks of them, Yessica said: “I don’t save them. In fact, most of the time I either erase these stickers because I don’t want them, or I simply leave them.” Precisely, in this case, Yessica does not want this type of content, even though it is usually shaped in a commonly accepted playful format that responds not only to self-expression among young people but also as a way to flaunt to someone (Lee & Lin, 2020). Therefore, a sticker that intends to be a joke among peers can be associated with unwanted content as well. Humor through stickers lowers the tone of the practice even though the recipient has neither asked nor wanted the content in the first place. Building on unsolicited sexual content, Juan (boy, 14 years old, Center 1), recalled one of his friends (a girl) being targeted constantly with sex messages—including dick pictures from strangers. When asked about her reaction, he mentioned that she used to laugh at the messages and show some of them to him before blocking the senders’ profiles. While for Juan this may be an example of a carefree and relaxed reaction regarding the circulation of sexual content, this girl’s reaction to the violence of unsolicited dick pictures can also be seen as a coping mechanism to mitigate the aggression itself. It could be regarded as an attempt to search for support, especially when we consider the girl’s follow-preventive action once she received the dick picture, that is, she blocked the sender. Indeed, humor can occur as a way to avoid harassment (unwanted sexual content) while searching for protection to the extent of playing along and defusing the tensions of being assaulted (Houshmand

& Spanierman, 2021). Amudsen (2021) even refers to “humorous anti-sexist resistance” when girls use humor to cope with sexpreaching. An example of this is found in the statement by Mireia (girl, 17 years old, Center 2) who commented on receiving these types of pictures and said: “They are too intense (...) The typical grandfathers write to me, because they are grandfathers who come to you asking you to be their sugar baby or whatever. Oh my God!”.

Our results show that humor is more likely linked with boys’ responses while slang was more unified within all the participants. The use of both slang and humor accompanies the daily virtual sexual practices and violences. Nonetheless, one common slang term used mainly among boys when asked about sexpreaching practices was the word *pack* to refer to a compilation of sexual images that circulate on the Internet. A particular case in our study referred to a pack of sexual content of female influencers that was circulated non-consensually by their ex-partners when the relationship broke up. Indeed, using the word *pack* (adding the name of the victim e.g., Pack Lucia Correa), some boys participated in the circulation of this content among their circle of peers. A recurrent case mentioned by some participants was “the pack of Lucía Correa.” Hakim (boy, 16 years old, Center 3) explained that Lucía had sent some sexual content to her partner (at that time) and, once they broke up, the guy decided to upload and share the pictures publicly. Hakim added that “normally, women upload [sexual images] and then regret it.” This quote shows an understanding of the dynamics regarding sexual content (and the responsibility added to it), to the extent of perpetuating discourses that linked the idea that relationships (and sex to that extent) can only lead to harm, risk or regret (Attwood & Smith, 2011). The example illustrated by the slang use of *pack* as a sort of commodity *packed* for consumerism undermines the severity of the violence exerted over the victim (Ringrose & Harvey, 2015). Furthermore, it is worth mentioning that these cases of trending sexpreaching (due to the popularity of the girl influencers) are almost taken for granted due to both the availability and anonymity of the internet, especially by specific social platforms like X (former Twitter) or Instagram, which have facilitated the circulation of sexual violence narratives in digital contexts (Mendes et al., 2019; Peterson-Salahuddin, 2022). In this sense, Jorge (boy, 15 years old, Center 2) explained that when he finds out that there are trending cases in social media (“if a dick pic has been filtered”), he searches for it (“out of curiosity”) and easily finds it (in X, previously Twitter) by using the most searched section affordance of the app. Heather Ford and Judy Wacqman state that “infrastructures produce power relations” (2017, p. 517). In this line, platform studies shed light on the ways in which software and technical infrastructures of different applications and programs organize digital relations, drawing on particular sociotechnical epistemologies. Thus, users value and choose different platforms based on their affordances, while these affordances structure both participation and interaction, with a greater tendency or permissibility of functions that can encourage digital exclusion and gender gaps (Ford and Wacqman, 2017), digital gender-based violence (Semenzin & Bainotti, 2020) or, on the contrary, engagement in online feminist participation and activism (Mendes et al., 2019). In this particular case, Twitter (X) is presented as an application with search engines that facilitate and promote the mass dissemination of popular images, including trending cases of sexpreaching.

In general, we see that, among our participants, the distancing of responsibility, as well as the undermining of the intention of harm that both slang and humor offer allow the gendered digital violence associated with sexpreeding to be trivialized. In particular, humor, which is part of the dynamics not only of those who engage in sexpreeding, but also of those who are targets of unsolicited sexual images, can be implemented to downplay the act of violating personal and intimate space.

Sexpreeding Through Online Men Spaces: Between Complicity and Ethical Distancing

During the fieldwork, we detected the existence of *men spaces* that promote, justify or cover up sexpreeding. Sasha (boy, 15 years old, Center 2) has a WhatsApp group with only male friends where they share sexual content of girls. Leo (boy, 14 years old, Center 1) has a similar group through which he receives sexual photos of his friends' partners that have been sent in contexts of intimacy and trust between the couple. Furthermore, these guys do not take any security measures when sending their partners' photos. In fact, Leo explained that the photos are downloaded and saved directly in his phone's gallery, and sometimes he finds them and doesn't even know who they actually belong to. These are not isolated cases, Martí (boy, 15 years old, Center 2) and Hakim (boy, 16 years old, Center 3), among others, have also received this type of content in private groups with only male friends. This is content from both close people and famous personalities, such as the case of the influencer Lucía Correa mentioned in the previous section. Azad (boy, 17 years old, Center 3) explains that this happens "among friends" and Bru (boy, 17 years old, Center 3) talks about the boys who share these intimate photos of their partners with admiration, defining them as "warriors". We observe in these *men spaces* a kind of *male complicity* that justifies and legitimizes not only these spaces, but also the sexpreeding practices that take place in them (Lorca & García-Mingo, 2023; Scarcelli, 2021).

Iñigo, Fernández and Tomasena (2024) study how young boys construct, interiorize, and reproduce anti-feminist and anti-LGBTIQ+ discourses through the media and, more specifically, in the manosphere. The manosphere is organized around a wide range of online spaces and communities where ideologies related to masculinity and gender issues take place, promoting misogynistic and hateful discourses against women and LGBTIQ+ individuals (García-Mingo et al., 2022). The WhatsApp groups of boys identified and presented in the previous paragraph closely align with the conceptions and dynamics of the manosphere. These are spaces restricted to the interactions of boys, where sharing sexualized images of girls without their consent is a constant practice, and creates certain sensations and dynamics of male complicity and protection (Lorca & García-Mingo, 2023). In this regard, it is interesting to observe how most of these boys comment that they think it is wrong to share photos of girls without their consent. However, they have not taken any action on the matter, and their comments reflect an individualistic attitude and lack of responsibility—each person is responsible for their own actions.

Thus, it seems that it is difficult for boys to condemn or report these men spaces among the boys who participate in them, possibly because it has become an

important space for peer socialization (Scarcelli, 2021). There is a certain ambiguity detected in some points when the boys verbalize or explain them, as they understand and articulate that the practices taking place there are neither ethically nor legally correct. For instance, Leo (boy, 14 years old, Center 1) reflects the unexpressed discomfort with this type of behavior: “Because they tell me: look at this, look what they sent to me, what have they sent me and they show me the picture and I say... I give the typical ‘hahahahahaha, wow, that’s cool, right?’ but I really think, uff (with a tone of questioning this behavior).” Leo’s words reflect the use of humor and male complicity in the virtual space—humor is an important ingredient for homosocial bounding (Burkett, 2015)—yet internally he does not approve of his peers’ behavior. Despite this, there is a certain atmosphere of *male brotherhood* that helps not only to normalize these spaces, but also to dissipate the negative aspects and continue participating in them. It is important to highlight that these environments, in one way or another, disseminate capitalist values (through the objectification of girls’ bodies, as argued by Liong & Cheng, 2018), as well as sexist, violent, and heteronormative values, through “collaborative misogyny” (Lorca & García-Mingo, 2023).

Unveiling Gender Differences in Sexpreading and the Preventive Measures: Beyond the Illusion of Gender Neutrality

The data shows that adolescents have a critical attitude towards both sexting and sexpreading practices, often associating them primarily with risks (Barrense-Dias et al., 2017; Cruz Gómez & Soriano Ayala, 2014; Döring, 2014). They systematically draw on available discourses of risk and danger, taking it as fact that sexting practices have the potential to be negative and, therefore, placing responsibility for their consequences on those who engage in them, as doing so is considered irresponsible and naive (Burkett & Hamilton, 2012). The girls are the most concerned about these practices, as previous studies have already highlighted (Burkett & Hamilton, 2012; Perry et al., 2022; Ringrose et al., 2013; Van Ouytsel et al., 2016). They are the ones who feel compelled to take more preventive measures to protect themselves from the negative consequences associated with sexpreading. Boys also tend to verbalize certain attitudes of concern and, in some cases, like Juan (boy, 14 years old, Center 1) and Mohamed (boy, 14 years old, Center 1), they avoid these practices to protect themselves. Therefore, there is a concern about constant surveillance, monitoring and foresight in this regard, especially as it can negatively impact the sexual agency and representation of sexuality of its participants (Angelides, 2013; Döring, 2014; Liong & Cheng, 2018; Perry et al., 2022).

However, in general, the position of the boys is different from that of the girls, as it is more carefree and does not have the same sense of *danger*. Since the consequences for boys are less severe, as explored in the following results section, their concern and preventive measures are also lower and, in some cases, nonexistent. Bru (boy, 17 years old, Center 3) verbalizes it as follows:

Interviewer: You’ve mentioned that you exchange sexual photos with girls, right?

Bru: Yes.

- Interviewer: Is it something your friends do too?
 Bru: Of course, all my friends do it.
 Interviewer: Do they all send sexual photos?
 Bru: Of course, dick pics and that's it.
 Interviewer: And do girls send sexual photos?
 Bru: Yes [Interviewer asks what kind of photos girls send].
 Bru: Like... legs open, touching themselves, showing everything.
 Interviewer: Also their face?
 Bru: Yes.
 Interviewer: And the boys?
 Bru: Not the guys, but when they ask for it, I show it, I don't mind showing my face.

In this line, Jorge (boy, 15 years old, Center 2) explains: "I have a friend here who has about 800 pictures of different girls, he's taken pictures with them and has screenshots and everything and I don't understand that... and I've seen pictures that he's shown me and everything." Jorge emphasizes that it is not the only case he knows. In fact, several of his friends have shown him photos and videos of girls without their consent. These data coincide with the reflections of Ringrose et al., (2013, p. 305): "some boys accumulated 'ratings' by possessing and exchanging images of girls' breasts, which operated as a form of currency and value." As can be observed, sexpreading, as a mostly masculine practice, can be linked with misogynist social constructions of women's bodies as consumerist goods or "gendered rewards" (Ringrose & Harvey, 2015) that can be used and abused by men, to the point of considering them status markers (Carbone et al., 2024). This non-consensual sending of sexual content does not correspond to the assessments and observations made by the girls participating in the study. They also receive photos of the boys, but in no case did the participants tell us about the accumulation or dissemination of those photos. In fact, from their reflections it emerges that the way boys and girls experience sexting and sexpreading is very different. Perry et al. (2022) illustrate this precisely when they state: "It is not that sexting is unavailable as exciting and emotionally stimulating for female youth—it is that to access the excitement and emotional stimulation (the positive outcomes) females have to navigate a particular, gendered set of risks that males largely do not have to engage with" (p. 413). Aina (girl, 15 years old, Center 2), for example, explains that she also knows cases of boys who send photos of themselves in their underwear, but she believes they do it to get pictures of the girls in a bra or skimpy underwear, and that the girls face the potential risk of the photos being non-consensually shared:

I know from friends, who are more popular, so to speak, in these social connections, well, maybe the guy sends her a photo in his underwear or without a t-shirt, as a provocation. From what I've been taught, and from what I know, there are some guys, well, who would make a screenshot if she sends him a photo of herself in a bra. Or if you send him a photo in skimpy underwear, he should also send a photo. And then it depends on the person, if they are going to share it or not.

Aina is concerned about the possible consequences of these practices, since she feels that sharing intimate photos is giving the boy too much power: “It depends on so many things, but, I mean, like giving that person the power of having intimate photos of you and they have the power to share them or not... to me... I don’t like it”. It is not an isolated case. Most of the girls participating in the study showed similar concerns, which were accompanied by risk prevention mechanisms and gender stereotypes and biases, as we will see below.

From Concern to Prevention Strategies and Skills: The Gender Biases

In general, girls express more concern and outline different prevention measures they take to avoid sexpreparing. These measures range from not sending sexual photos to anyone (known or unknown) to various strategies and dynamics that allow them to have *a certain sense of control* over the shared and received content. As an example of these dynamics, Yessica, a 14-year-old teenager from Center 1, explains she does not feel safe sharing sexual content: “in the end, it is your body and you do what you want, but I personally wouldn’t do it. I don’t feel safe sending photos to a person who I don’t know what he is going to do with them, and he can tell me: yes, yes, I’ll keep them, don’t worry. But he saves the pictures and someone looks at his phone and that’s it.” In fact, some girls commented that they usually receive pressing and insistent requests for photos with sexual content through the networks. Faced with these situations, they explained to us different mechanisms and strategies they have developed to detect these pressures and neutralize them. Lorena’s reflection (girl, 15 years old, Center 1) is very illustrative in this sense.

[talking about social media] We usually think they are a...bad environment. But really with what our parents already told us, that there are people who can ask you for photos and then they post them I don’t know where and they force you to do things so as not to publish them and things like that. And you can see that in a minute. In other words: Lorena, give me a photo... No, no, no, no. I mean, it’s safer because you realize it, I mean... Sure. In the sense that if they ask for photos, you know that you are not going to send them. Obviously not. I mean, it’s like... [She touches her head as if to say: Are you crazy? Do you have any brains?]. No. I mean, if you want, we’ll meet up, I’ll show it to you... but sending them to you... no way. [Interviewer: And how did you know it was obviously not?] Because, well, it’s obvious because they want it so much that you can detect it. That is, in the speech, in what they ask you for, in... Ah, no, you have a very nice body... It’s like, he’s going to ask me for a photo... It’s like... And also in the way he speaks, if he’s older or younger. Because, for example, I have a different way of writing than you [referring to the interviewer, who is 45 years old]. I mean, maybe you put like... Well, yes, more emojis or things like that. And we’re more about abbreviating words and things like that. [Interviewer: And, then, you have had, let’s say, people asking you for photos and you...?] I, block!

In Lorena’s reflection, we observe a recognition and negotiation with different dynamics and practices that take place in social networks that help her detect

potential abuse and violence and take protective measures to avoid them. Not only does she recognize typical situations that can lead to sexpredding, she is also capable of detecting user profiles and their intentions from the way they write and how they use emoticons. Lorena demonstrates interesting skills in relation to risk prevention in social networks, since she is capable of managing the relationships that she establishes in these spaces taking privacy and security into account (Masanet & Establés, 2018).

For her part, Aina (girl, 15 years old, Center 2) has never sent photos with sexual content, but, if she did, she is clear about what the procedure would be like:

Obviously I would do it through WhatsApp because, I don't know if you know, but there's the thing about seeing it only once, and WhatsApp doesn't let you download it or take a screenshot of the picture [...]. And if you try to do a screen recording, it comes out like a black screen, that is, you can't see anything, so, if you send it that way it won't come out of there, so the person can only see it once. Yes, if you have another device nearby, you can take a photo, but that would be overly complicated.

Aina's testimony brings us back to the infrastructures of applications (Ford & Wajcman, 2017; Keller, 2019). In this case, WhatsApp incorporates affordances such as a photo-sending feature with enhanced privacy (that is, a feature that allows the photo to be seen only once, and users are unable to save the photo nor make a screenshot of it from the device it is on), which potentially favors the prevention of sexpredding. For Naseem (girl, 16 years old, Center 3), however, the possibility of taking a photo of the image sent with a second device remains as a concern:

If I send a photo to someone, that person can be with a friend or he can have another cell phone and can take a photo of mine without me knowing. For example, on Instagram, if he takes a screenshot of yours, you notice that. On Snapchat, too. But, what happens? That they can have two cell phones. I have two cell phones and I've taken lots of screenshots, not of people, but of conversations that were important.

Naseem's testimony underlines how Instagram and Snapchat users find loopholes and ways of achieving their goals despite technical constraints. Aina and Naseem both know the different affordances of the social networks they usually use and are able to evaluate which ones may be safer if they wanted to do sexting.

This not only demonstrates their concern, but also certain technological management skills (Scolari et al., 2018) and the recognition of how security and privacy in software and applications work (Masanet & Establés, 2018), which allows them to feel safer using these devices. As observed, it appears that they feel forced not only to recognize the risks, but also to undergo self-training to take preventive measures by developing media literacy skills. Following Burkett and Hamilton's (2012) reflections, girls must engage in active and constant negotiation of potential risks when faced with these practices, and this "inadvertently places responsibility on young females to make the 'right' choices in order to

avoid any negative consequences of their actions, including being blamed and shamed for what are assumed to be their ‘free choices’” (p. 848). Following this line, it seems that the girls must have these skills in order to protect themselves from abuse so as not to end up being found guilty of them.

Furthermore, the preventive measures that girls take are not limited to sending their own sexual content (Lee & Crofts, 2015; Perry, Ricciardelli & Adorian, 2022), unlike boys, they also have to protect themselves from receiving unwanted sexual content (Wailing & Pym, 2017; Paasonen et al., 2019; Amundsen, 2021). During the interview, Claudia (girl, 16 years old, Center 2) explained she has received sexual photos on Instagram without knowing the person who sent them: “Occasionally I have received some photos, but not from anyone I know, rather I’ve received a photo without ever having spoken to the person in question.” This led to changes in the way she manages her Instagram account. The first thing she did was block the person who sent the pictures and, over time, she also ended up changing her Instagram account to private. It used to be public, but lately she has been uploading more personal content and decided to close it. In this same line, Juan (boy, 14 years old, Center 1) explained that he had a friend (girl) who received a lot of dick photos online without any prior interaction. In his own words: “So, suddenly, hello, and a photo.” She also blocked these guys as a preventive measure. Once again, the girls demonstrate technological management and privacy skills that they have to develop to protect themselves from sexual violence in online environments.

Limiting Girls’ Experiences with Sexting vs. the Mirage of Gender Neutrality

The data presented lead us to reflect on gender differences in risk perceptions, prevention measures, and the development of skills for protection and safety in media environments. Previous studies alert us about stereotypes and gender differences detected related to media usage and family control habits among adolescents. Masanet’s study (2016) points out significant differences in parental protection and control of media usage between boys and girls. Families tend to protect girls more than boys and, consequently, to exert more control over their media consumption. This leads girls to take more preventive measures and exercise more self-control. Such practices are associated with gender stereotypes that perceive women as more vulnerable and unprotected, ultimately influencing their media usage and, by default, their potential benefits. The *EU Kids Online* report (Smahel et al., 2020) reveals similar findings, detecting greater parental control over girls and associating it with a higher perception of risk in their media usage. Our observations are in line with the mentioned studies, it is primarily girls who take control measures and who also mention their parents (mostly mothers) as references when negotiating risks, as in the previous reflection from Lorena.

In their study, Pereira et al. (2018) emphasize that schools and society have traditionally addressed media issues from a privacy perspective and have paid little attention to promoting active approaches rather than just *defensive* ones. These precautions can be both a sign of competence and a limiting fear, since they can also lead to immobilization regarding media usages and, therefore, to limiting receiving their benefits. As has been observed, sexting is not an exception in this regard (Döring,

2014), since fears permeate adolescents' conceptions and reflections—without making distinctions with sexpreaching. Furthermore, these fears are primarily observed in girls, promoting their immobilization and, therefore, stifling their potential sexual experiences. It seems that girls continue to be subject to limitations and constraints when it comes to experiencing and living their sexualities freely, also in online environments (Burkett & Hamilton, 2012; Lee & Crofts, 2015; Perry et al., 2022; Ringrose et al., 2013).

Despite the gender differences found throughout the fieldwork regarding sexpreaching and the preventive measures, the perception of some participants is that *gender* is not relevant in these issues. Different adolescents stated that the dissemination of sexual content without consent occurs in the same way for both boys and girls. In this sense, Mireia's reflections (girl, 17 years old, Center 2) are revealing. Mireia appears angry and affected when we talk about it. She recently discovered that a boy showed an intimate photo she sent to him to other people. Mireia has lived sexpreaching firsthand and, reflecting on it, she expresses herself in this way:

There are lots of idiots. Well, I don't know how to say idiot also as a girl [she is speaking in Spanish and wants to make the word in feminine]. So, morons. [Interviewer: Yes, yes. But have you seen, for example, girls who also do this? Girls who share photos of their male partners] No, but I'm sure there are some... Because people are stupid. But no, I've never seen it. Well, maybe they said 'well, we have been sending photos to each other with this person.' But they haven't shown them.

It is interesting to observe how Mireia talks about sexpreaching trying not to make gender differences, on the contrary, she explicitly tries to include girls in the equation as perpetrators, and then admits that she does not know any cases involving girls. We consider that Mireia's narrative aligns with postfeminist discourses circulating among young people. These discourses are based on the neoliberal assumption that feminism is no longer necessary because a more egalitarian horizon has been reached in terms of gender relations (Burkett & Hamilton, 2012; Gill, 2017). In this case, Mireia seems to specifically want to reflect her opposition to injustice "beyond gender," and in her anger and frustration in condemning sexpreaching she overlooks the deep structural inequalities that still persist in its practice. This example is especially intriguing in her case since she has been a victim of sexpreaching herself. It is plausible that, as reflected in other young women's testimonies, Mireia is trying to dissociate herself from the narrative of victimhood (Burkett & Hamilton, 2012). Possibly, by removing gender difference from the equation Mireia is reinterpreting her experience by emphasizing her own agency and opposing abusive practices from a perspective of blindness of gender differences that could be understood as a manifestation of the postfeminist contradictions (Burkett & Hamilton, 2012; Gill, 2017).

On the contrary, Aloma (girl, 15 years old, Center 2) points out that all the cases of sexpreaching that she knows of have involved photos of girls and have been leaked by a boy. Aloma believes that it is more likely for a boy to do it than a girl, in her own words: "In all the cases that I've known that photos of girls have been leaked, they have been leaked by a boy. That is, all the times I've seen it, it's true that it

is more likely to be a boy than a girl. For example, the friends who have received photos like this, I haven't seen anyone send them to someone else... They haven't sent them to anyone." Throughout the fieldwork, we only found two testimonies of boys that explained cases of female friends who showed them photos of boys on their phones. In both cases, the photos were not disseminated, but rather shown on the phone in intimate environments. However, as we describe in the following section, almost all the cases of sexpreading mentioned by the participants during the fieldwork are with girls' pictures, and it is the female victims who end up suffering the most damaging consequences. Furthermore, it is worth highlighting that during the fieldwork the researchers realized that one of the cases of sexpreading that had gone viral in Center 2 was not understood in the same way by the boys and girls at the center. The girls remembered the case and described it as a non-consensual practice with very negative consequences for the victim. It was very present for them, as a kind of proof and warning of the possible consequences of sexpreading. On the contrary, a significant portion of the boys were not aware of this case and, therefore, they did not mention it. To them, it seemed that this situation had not happened or was not important.

Consequences, Intermediaries and Responsibilities in the Face of Sexpreading: Solidarity, Passivity and Victim-Blaming

EdPAC and CANDELA (2020) stress the importance of understanding the collective dimensions of sexpreading. They propose both collective action with educational strategies such as "spaces for joint reflection and repair, importance of consensus, social cohesion, taboo breaking, caring for, respecting waiting times, zero tolerance to violence" (EdPAC/ CANDELA, 2020, p. 17), and individual strategies centered on feminist self-defense. This understanding relies on the need for a feminist pedagogy that considers sexting as a sexual practice that, like other sexual practices, is not exempt from risks or peer-pressure in a heteronormative and patriarchal society (Burkett & Hamilton, 2012; Lee & Crofts, 2015; Liong & Cheng, 2018; Perry et al., 2022; Ringrose et al., 2013). However, preventive strategies that only target women and girls and promote avoidance "not only do not solve the problem, but aggravate it" (EdPAC/CANDELA, 2020, p. 15). In this section, we asked adolescents about the consequences of sexpreading experienced by the victims, the perpetrators and the social environment. We analyzed the temporalities of sexpreading and how this violence can be sustained over time, with the consequences for the victims becoming more acute. We also looked at the gendered distribution of responsibilities and the responsibility of the intermediary agents (peers/friends, family and educational institutions). Our interest was to understand the collective involvement in order to overcome this form of violence.

Victims, Perpetrators and Social Consequences of Sexpreading

When girls explain first-person experiences of sexpreading or describe it based on the experiences of their peers, they reflect on the consequences for those mainly

affected, the girls of their inner circle (the victims). These girls experienced continued suffering and mental health problems in the form of trauma or anxiety, as Camila (girl, 17 years old, Center 3) explained referring to her soccer teammate, who had an anxiety attack on the field when she found out that her intimate photographs were being circulated at her school. Lucía (girl, 15 years old, Center 2) told us about a high school friend who suffered sexpreading and ended up hospitalized for anxiety. She also referred to another girl in her school who was a victim of sexpreading: exposed, recognized publicly and labeled, because the story went all over her city. Ultimately, that girl had to leave her high school and her family house and move to another city as a consequence of the sexpreading aggression: “She moved I think to, super far away, she moved super far away because she could not stand it.”

In Center 3, Shahida (girl, 16 years old) shares the story of her friend who experienced sexpreading. The perpetrator pressured and insisted that she send him sexually explicit photos of herself, and then he took those photos and uploaded them without her consent to a new Instagram account. Shahida’s friend was left badly affected psychologically, because in addition to the aggression, by uploading her photos to a new account where her face was visible, she suffered severe harassment for months by other men. In Shahida’s words: “I was talking to my friend the other day and she is still receiving numbers from people who are calling her because of the photo they sent of her and they are telling her things about these relations and so on.”

Regarding the consequences for the perpetrators, Bru (boy, 17 years old, Center 3) mentioned a sexpreading case in which he was directly involved. Bru told us that he and another friend were the ones receiving the photographs. He then specified that it was his friend who disseminated the sexual content and he was expelled for one day, with no consequences for Bru. Similarly, in the previously mentioned sexpreading case in Center 2, the consequences were almost the same for the perpetrator. Lucía (girl, 15 years old, Center 2) expressed it like this: “It was a one-day expulsion and because he already had a record, but... And the others got off scot-free.” Juan (boy, 14 years old, Center 1), in turn, talks about another type of consequence related to the damage to the perpetrator’s image. In this case, the boy asked for photos of younger girls in his secondary school, one or two years younger than him, and then disseminated them without their consent. For Juan, the issue ended badly, “but nothing legal or anything, but yes, it kind of degraded his image a lot.”

Young girls’ experiences highlight isolation, stigma, and victim-blaming, with a gendered double standard that admires male sexuality while condemning female sexuality, especially when it transcends to the public sphere (Lorca & García-Mingo, 2023; Perry et al., 2022; Ringrose et al., 2013). In contrast, perpetrators face few consequences and less social stigma, even in explicit virtual sexual violence cases like sexpreading. On a social level, certain sexual socialization is considered acceptable for girls and different norms apply to boys according to a binary and heteronormative differential pattern. In no case, when the interviewees explain situations of sexpreading, has the emphasis been placed on the boys or the consequences they have received for this behavior. Participants also refer to potential consequences through complaints or denunciations, but did not know much about them, which gives us the impression that these consequences must not have been notable or large.

Temporalities, Intermediaries and Responsibilities Around Sexpreaching

An aspect that caught our attention in the sexpreaching cases narrated during the fieldwork was the temporalities in the sexpreaching experience and how these affected victims and perpetrators unequally. Clara (girl, 15 years old, Center 2) describes it this way: “[sexpreaching] also affects you in the future and in the present as well. You’re going to school thinking, my friends have seen my body and I didn’t want to show it, or... I gave my privacy to a person who let me down. Then I think this is hard.” This quote perfectly captures how sexting is colored with violence when girls’ privacy is harmed by displaying and disseminating their photographs without consent. A relevant aspect in Clara’s explanation is the reference to her environment, the people she trusts, and the negative emotions associated with the idea of the sudden and unwanted access to her intimate content. In addition, the fact that she refers not only to the present but to a future impact, informs us of the extension in time of the exposure, with the consequent implications for the victim.

Lucía (girl, 15 years old, Center 2) is outraged by the temporal contrast of the suffering between the victim and the aggressor, considering that in this particular incident he was expelled for only one day, while the victim and her closest environment experienced a whole year of constant sexpreaching. Another example is that of Mireia (girl, 17 years old, Center 2), who personally experienced sexpreaching and who found out four years later that a large part of her environment had seen her intimate photographs. She discovered it after the perpetrator’s cousin decided it was fair to tell her; however, for Mireia, this information arrived too late. This situation generated a lot of anger and sadness in Mireia, who described her experience with sexting after learning that she was unknowingly experiencing sexpreaching as: “[it is] what I most regret in my whole life.” Mireia’s expression stresses the gendered assumption of responsibility or even guilt as a feminized burden for being a victim of sexpreaching (Ringrose et al., 2013).

In terms of responsibilities, the cases of sexpreaching worked in quite similar ways to other forms of sexual violence: instead of holding the perpetrator responsible, the responsibility fell primarily on the victim (Perry et al., 2022; Ringrose et al., 2013). The responsible actors covered up for the perpetrators, especially through passivity and non-intervention, and thus perpetuated the suffering of the victims and the absence of restorative actions. If we consider the intermediary agents, in the interviews we detected *positive* intermediaries, such as friends and families who supported the victims. However, *negative* intermediaries perpetuated the violence of sexpreaching by inaction or by continuing to expose or disseminate the sexual content instead of promoting restoration for the victims. The *negative* intermediaries were not only classmates and peers but also agents from the adult world who did not intervene appropriately (e.g., teachers or principals).

The victims’ friends are referred to being concerned about their well-being and supporters during the process of experiencing sexpreaching. In the case of Shahida (girl, 16 years old, Center 3) that we have referred to, the friends were the ones who ended up talking to the victim’s family to ask for support in facing the sexpreaching. Young people generally considered families to be active agents in condemning sexpreaching, through emotional support for their daughters, by communicating with

educational institutions and encouraging intervention, or by moving into the legal arena and filing complaints against this form of sexual aggression. However, as in the case of Shahida's friend, families sometimes provide support while continuing to place the responsibility or blame on their daughters. Shahida explains that her friend was afraid of her family's reaction when she explained the situation and that "at first they didn't say anything because she was already in a very bad place. And they didn't say anything, but when the issue was more resolved they did tell her that... They were very angry and said a lot of things."

The interviews also revealed a lack of action and intervention by educational institutions. For example, Bru (boy, 17 years old, Center 3) affirmed that "they said 'it was her fault' [referring to the victim], I don't know... I was asked 'did she send you the picture?' 'yes, I can show that I didn't send it to anyone' and that's it. And they didn't say anything to me at school." Mohamed (boy, 14 years old, Center 1) said regarding his school: "I was informed because they sent an email to my parents and my parents also knew about it, but I think they didn't say anything to us about how they resolved it and everything."

In all cases, when we asked if the educational institutions had openly dealt with the issue of sexpreaching, the participants answered that they had not. Clara (girl, 15 years old, Center 2) critically addressed the lack of sexual education at her school:

I know what should be done because my mother has told me what to do in these cases, but at school they don't tell us because we don't have much sex education. The education they provide is a talk in which they explain how to put on a condom, but they don't explain the consequences of not using one. They only tell us "you have to put this on so you don't get pregnant", but they don't tell you about sexually transmitted diseases, that maybe the penis doesn't become erect, that it has to be put on when it's already erect, that the girl has to be lubricated. They don't tell you that. And nothing about social networks, the consequences of sending photos, how the other person feels, empathy, right?...

Lucía (girl, 15 years old, Center 2) specifically showed her frustration at the slow reaction of the center in the sexpreaching case that happen there:

I think that schools should have a procedure, a more dynamic procedure for the problems and they should be faster, because otherwise it really becomes a mess and it takes time (...) And maybe they don't say it in front of the school, but then at the door downstairs they do say it. Because you can't tell them what they can do outside of class, you can't control it. And well... (sighs).

In general, we detected a very low awareness of collective responsibility in cases of sexpreaching. Teenagers do not tend to define sexpreaching as a form of gendered violence, nor do they tend to feel like they are directly or indirectly involved. Regarding the former, Hakim (boy, 16 years old, Center 3) believes that all the people involved in a consensual exchange of images with sexual content have the same responsibility in the case of dissemination of images without consent, but when he explains what he means he ends up expressing a victim-blaming discourse:

[After being asked about who is responsible in a sexpreparing case] Both. One for sending the photos in the first place and the other for uploading them. Well, it depends... If they trust each other before. That is, if she's been a fool, in the sense that no one has forced her... if he forced her it's another thing, but if she shared photos because she wanted to... That's it. Then... It's wrong, and it's illegal, too. Then you can take all the measures you want, but the photo is already uploaded.

Similarly, Jorge (boy, 15 years old, center 2) thinks that the fact of sending the photo already exposes the person to the possibility of it being spread without consent, "when you send it, you expose yourself to the possibility that they might take a picture, that they might make a video or something. And, well, I wouldn't do that for anything in the world." This type of attributing responsibility is a form of victim-blaming (Burkett, 2015), which, combined with the emotion of fear of becoming a victim of sexpreparing, places all responsibility on individual prevention through abstinence of sexting (Döring, 2014).

Among the testimonies, passivity or inaction in the face of receiving sexual content from a third person also prevailed, and this position was found in both boys and girls, although more abundantly among boys. For example, Yessica (girl, 14 years old, Center 1) refers to a WhatsApp group where her schoolmates share stickers with sexual photos of her peers and says: "if they want to send them, they can (...) I don't want those stickers for anything but if they want to send them, they can." We did not find a culture of understanding sexpreparing as a form of virtual sexual violence nor a condemnation of the dissemination of other people's images, rather it is understood that the responsibility lies only with the person who disseminates it first (perpetrator), or even worse, with the one who sends the photo in an intimate context in the first place (victim).

In the conversations about sexpreparing, we also realized that there is a sense of awareness regarding possible legal consequences for the perpetrator. For example, Mohamed (boy, 14 years old, Center 1) recalls a case in which a victim filed a complaint against the perpetrator. Leo (boy, 14 years old, Center 1) reflects on his own actions: "either I delete it or it stays there and I don't share it with anyone because I don't know... because maybe I'll get into trouble too, I don't know, I prefer to stay away from all this kind of mess." His testimony points to a fear of possible consequences such as being "told off" or being in "trouble". Lucía (girl, 15 years old, center 2) also thinks that the stickers of the girls in her class have been spread for a long time but "nobody sends them anymore because they know that they are under the... still under the threat of being told something and so on." Hakim (boy, 16 years old, Center 3) argues: "Well, I think it's bad, you know? But to each his own. I'm not going to say no, man, don't do those things. Then you can deal with them. It seems wrong to me because of the criminal issue too, because now you get reported."

In summary, these comments illustrate that the attribution of responsibility becomes more relevant in relation to the possibility of personal punishment for the perpetrator than to the recognition of the consequences suffered by the victims. Those involved in the environment see themselves as outsiders to the conflict

and ignore or minimize the possible consequences of not taking a stand when they receive sexual content from third parties circulating without their consent.

Discussion

We analyzed the experiences of young people in three Barcelona educational centers regarding sexting and sexpreading. Initially open to their concerns, we realized the relevance of the topic for teenagers. This led us to the work of EdPAC and CANDELA (2020), two socio-educational cooperatives who highlight the need to distinguish sexpreading as a form of sexual violence, unlike sexting, characterized by reciprocity and consent. In this article we have provided empirical and ethnographical support for their idea that merging these terms is problematic, especially for educational interventions, as it can detrimentally generalize issues and negatively impact adolescent sexualities, in particular those of girls and women.

Our findings are in line with previous scholarship that argues salient gender differences in sexting and sexpreading (e.g. Ringrose et al., 2013; Wailing & Pym, 2017; Amudsen, 2021; Barroso et al., 2023; Dodaj et al., 2024). From our ethnographic exploration, sexpreading affects women and girls disproportionately, affecting their confidence and having serious consequences for their health. As we have argued, sexpreading should be contextualized as a form of digital gendered violence based on the rupture of trust and the unwanted spread of private images. This violence is amplified when the shared sexual content continues to be disseminated beyond control among the victim's immediate or extended circles (Semenzin & Bainotti, 2020) and may be complicated in its intersection with technological infrastructures and the policies and regulations of platforms (Ford and Wacqman, 2017; Mendes et al., 2019; Peterson-Salahuddin, 2022). As revealed by the personal and close experiences of the young women interviewed, the impact of sexpreading affects them emotionally and impacts their self-perception, interpersonal relationships and positive and free experience of their own sexuality. In addition, the negative effects of sexpreading can last for a long time, generating sustained emotional discomfort. As we learned from some of the adolescent's cases, sexpreading aggressions can lead to other violences such as virtual sexual harassment by strangers and social and sexual stigma and victim-blaming, especially in small cities or rural contexts where it is more difficult to go unnoticed (Pavón-Benítez et al., 2021). Sexpreading consequences may be especially sharpened due to the double standards that reward male sexuality while monitoring, regulating and penalizing female sexuality (Burkett & Hamilton, 2015; Ringrose et al., 2013; Lee & Crofts, 2015; Amudsen, 2021; Perry et al., 2022). Moral values and ethical boundaries that surveil and socially judge victims exacerbate the sexpreading aggression and transfer it into a collective dimension. Judgmental attitudes against victims (Perry et al., 2022) do not only revictimize but also limit broader debates of responsibility towards digital intimacy, safety, and sexuality, in particular regarding the perpetrator's role and community intervention.

Gender differences tend to have their own emotional correlation. Throughout the analysis, shame and guilt were present when girls talked about their engagement in

sexting and sexpreading. This question remains connected to the patriarchal structure that sustains these judgmental attitudes against victims and women and gender-nonconforming sexualities (Perry et al., 2022; Ringrose & Harvey, 2015). If we refer to sexting, we further elaborate that the understanding of sexting should not overlook possible external factors that influence the gendered characteristics of these practices in the first place, for instance being in a relationship and being asked to do so (e.g., a girl feels forced to send a picture of herself naked to her boyfriend due to his insistence). Therefore, peer-pressure should also be taken into account in order to understand sexting practices. It is not possible to disentangle sexting (or any other sexual practice) from the popular meanings attributed to sex that are based on notions of power, gender, and sociocultural norms (Burkett & Hamilton, 2012). However, when it is truly consensual, sexting should be understood as a sexual practice linked to flirtation, sexual exploration and play, self-knowledge, boundary work, and sexual agency, which, while under constant negotiation in a postfeminist media context (Burkett, 2015; Burkett & Hamilton, 2012; Gill, 2017; Perry et al., 2022; Ringrose & Harvey, 2015;), can enhance the enjoyment of one's own sexuality and also improve communication and trust between sexual partners (e.g., in the case of long-distance relationships).

We found that young men often trivialize or celebrate sexpreading, using humor for masculine bonding (Lorca & García-Mingo, 2023; Scarcelli, 2021) and objectifying bodies as *trophies* of male sexuality (Ringrose & Harvey, 2015; Ringrose et al., 2013). Paasonen, Light and Jarrett (2019) argue that dick pics have to be contextualized as a complex form of sexuality, with “flexibility of their meanings in connection with the dynamics of consent and non-consent, intimacy and distance, and complex circuits of desire” (p. 1). Although we did not explore this specific aspect in depth, interviews mostly revealed unsolicited dick pics as a form of sexpreading (Wayling and Pym, 2017; Paasonen, Light & Jarrett, 2019; Amudsen, 2021). Our interviews suggest that male sexual socialization and its face-to-face and virtual men spaces shape young boys' sexual subjectivities, potentially shaping harmful and sexist masculinities that perpetuate and normalize digital sexual violences like sexpreading (Scarcelli, 2021; Lorca & García-Mingo, 2023; Iñigo, Fernández & Tomasena, 2024). Quantitative studies have shown a correlation between sexpreading aggressions by young boys and having lived through traumatic or neglectful experiences during childhood and youth (Barroso et al., 2021, 2023). We argue that it is essential to offer these boys educational solutions that let them challenge and transform aggressive and harmful behaviors while offering peer-bonding, emotional tools, awareness of consent and boundaries, and relational models of sexuality based on respect and equality. This seems particularly relevant in a context of the rise of the manosphere and online men spaces that organize their sense of belonging around sexual violence, misogyny, racist values and LGBTBIQ+phobia (Lorca & García-Mingo, 2023; Iñigo, Fernández & Tomasena, 2024).

In contrast with previous literature (Burkett, 2015), in our sample we did not find first-person accounts of boys who had experienced sexpreading (e.g. Burkett, 2015), nor were we aware of cases of sexpreading (or sexting) in same-gender or non-heterosexual relationships. However, previous research has found correlations between LGBTIQ+ youth and sexting practices (Barrense et al. 2023) and

discussed sexting's role in female and gender diverse adolescents' body appreciation and body image self-consciousness (Howard et al., 2021; Paquette, 2022). In our work, we did not have any surprising results in terms of ethnic identity, unlike previous studies that point to a correlation between practicing sexting and being part of an ethnic minority (Barrense Dias et al., 2017; Barroso et al., 2023). There are also studies that suggest that a potential reason for engaging in sexting practices may be related to the search for a sense of belonging and cultural adaptation of migrant and racialized youth (Soriano Ayala et al., 2020).

Given the characteristics of our project, which has a broad and open ethnographic approach to sexuality, gender issues and media based on adolescents' personal experiences, our analysis of sexting and sexpreeding has not delved so extensively into an intersectional approach to the experience of sexting or sexpreeding, although we have worked with diverse youth populations. Thus, our approach has considered, but not specifically addressed, the intersections of sexuality, body appearance, ethnicity, social class, geographical location, religion, mental health and abilities, among other characteristics. This is an important opportunity for future research on the subject, which would allow us to unravel the complexities of digital sexual and gendered violence, the resources available to cope with it and also the differential experiences, motivations and negotiations around the practice of sexting. Studies on cyberviolence tend to focus on heterosexual adolescents in high-income countries (Backe et al., 2018), which confirms that more intersectional approaches are needed to bridge this gap in the knowledge.

Furthermore, our study has implications for policies and social practices when other social conventions regarding gender roles are broken down. In particular, this study highlights how the so-called innate masculine aggression remains a cause for sexual abuse, sexual violence and victim blaming (Murnen, Wright & Kaluzny, 2002). Behaviors that should not be tolerated keep occurring under traditional conceptions of men's superiority over the feminine—an important distinction due to the configuration of masculinity in opposition not only to women but femininity overall. Any process of education or policymaking should include this topic to disentangle how cultural norms have perpetuated violence and to start developing the bases for new and more progressive measures for when situations such as sexpreeding take place in education facilities or work spaces.

Nonetheless, particularly considering the digital space, this work highlights the need to find feminist strategies that can be activated against digital violence, especially because many of them are aimed at young women whose integrity is more affected, both personally and over time. Interestingly, young people are already quite aware of the risks and potential consequences of sexpreeding: they use the affordances of several technologies and develop prevention strategies while practicing sexting. However, especially girls, can limit their own digital sexual explorations due to the assumption that abstention is the main strategy to avoid potential aggressions. Nevertheless, educational policies and strategies should consider violence against women and gender non-conforming people as the root of the problem of digital violence and avoid adult-centric approaches (Soler-i-Martí & Ballesté-Isern, 2024) and overprotection that can decrease young people's, and particularly young

women's, sexual agency and their rights to enjoy and to explore sexuality as a whole (Burkett & Hamilton, 2012).

Therefore, as a result of our research, we believe that it is very important to incorporate discussions about sexting and sexpreading practices in educational contexts. Young people are constantly receiving warning and risk messages, a perspective that tends to stigmatize and criminalize sexting (Angelides, 2013; Cruz Gómez & Soriano Ayala, 2014; Döring, 2014). On the contrary, little advice and practical training is provided to be able to engage in sexting in a more conscious and safe way, allowing them to feel responsible through adequate tools to recognize their desires and their boundaries, and to negotiate their consent. In this sense, the terminological differentiation between sexting and sexpreading is key (EdPAC/ CANDELA, 2020). Young women demonstrated a high degree of media skills that have a preventive effect, for example, knowing the affordances of certain applications and technological devices. These young women have acquired these skills on their own through their use of different media. Educational proposals could take these media literacies and transfer them to sexting pedagogies and sexpreading prevention.

Through our ethnographic research, we have also detected that it is important to work integrally with all the agents involved in cases of sexpreading, as this is a form of digital violence that needs collective complicity to be maintained, and collective action to be eradicated. Most research has focused on studying prevalence rates (e.g. Gil-Lario et al., 2020; Mori et al., 2022; Barroso et al., 2023) or the perceptions and experiences of adolescent girls (e.g. Burkett & Hamilton, 2012; Ringrose et al., 2013), which has led to them being understood as the main agents involved in this type of digital violence. Our research shows that there are other agents involved (adult environments, families, educational referents, etc.) and that it is essential that their voices become part of the discussion. The adolescents themselves pointed out to us the lack of intervention mechanisms and educational reflection on these situations that often result in the neglect or revictimization of those who suffer sexpreading first-hand.

In this sense, a limitation of our research is that we have not looked at the first-hand experiences of other co-responsible agents around sexpreading in young people. We have incorporated this learning into our future projects and our research team has started collaborating with teachers and other educational entities in order to address this gap. Future research could also be aimed at exploring their positions and contrasting them with those of the young people. A future line of research could address the phenomenon of sexpreading based on a real case of educational intervention and restoration from the community and feminist self-defense perspectives, working with different actors: young people, families and the educational environment.

Moreover, a limitation of our ethnographic approach is that it does not allow for the generalizability that quantitative approaches offer; however, this was not our intention in the first place. Qualitative and ethnographic research, such as the present study, works with smaller samples that provide other key inputs that can be used later to design and improve quantitative longitudinal and cross-sectional studies based on observations about young people's subjective experiences, their gendered negotiations, their preventive strategies and their terminological understanding

of concepts as they emerge from their own languages, meanings and perspectives. In this sense, we consider that this is a strength that can positively contribute to nourishing the research field of sexting, youth gender sexuality education and LGB-TIQ+ and feminist media studies.

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Declarations

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Consent to Participate Written informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study and from the parents or legal tutors of the participants.

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