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SEXTING ON SOCIAL MEDIA: ASSESSMENT OF RESEARCH-BASED PREVENTION STRATEGIES

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ABSTRACT

This study examines sexting from an Information Science perspective through a cognitive–contextual framework that integrates technological, social, and cultural dimensions. Employing a qualitative and interpretive design, it explores the legal, psychological, and gender-related consequences of sexting, emphasizing risks such as cyberbullying, sextortion, and the non-consensual dissemination of intimate content. These practices are linked to moral disengagement and the normalization of digital behaviors among adolescents. The paper reviews legal responses and their limitations and proposes information literacy as a preventive strategy across educational, legal, and community settings to foster critical thinking, ethical awareness, and digital self-protection.

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1. Introduction

Cyberspace promotes the fluid and constant exchange of information, in which a continuous virtual presence implies the disclosure of personal information. A theoretical-methodological proposal is presented that aims to improve interpretation by taking into account the peculiarities of behavior in relation to its context (Vega Almeida, 2009).

For several years now, there is a context related to technologies that has been studied from two paradigms:

The physical paradigm, motivated by debates on concepts, methods, instruments, and the problems and solutions involved in dealing with the reality of information. According to this paradigm, technologies have contributed to change the way information is accessed, transferred and received.

The cognitive paradigm, which focuses on the individual subject who conveys information to an audience that can experience individual change and development. This study supports the cognitivist view, in which information science focuses on the human aspect proposed by Ingwersen (Cruz Gil, 2015). However, it does not forget the importance of the context as a necessary condition for understanding the user, as proposed by Dervin, and for understanding individuals, as Cruz (2022) has also suggested. These paradigms are covered in Saracevic's (1999) concept of information, as cited by Cruz (2021). In this concept, information is treated from a broad perspective involving both the physical (technology) and cognitive (context of the situation, motivations, and intentionality) paradigms. Capurro also emphasized the importance of a social approach involving users, systems and contexts. This transforms information sciences into a means of adapting to and resolving new social needs (Vega Almeida, 2009). These new social needs justify this study, since interpersonal relationships are more frequent in the virtual world than in person, which implicitly leads us to interact in a different way. This transformation takes place in an area of knowledge whose analysis requires studying it in context in which the individual generates information and knowledge. The objective of this study is therefore to propose a perspective of information science linked to the social and cultural aspects of people from a paradigm (understanding paradigm as the model that allows us to see one thing in analogy with another) developed by Thomas Kuhn [cited by Fischer (2008:2) Cruz, (2015)] in a context: virtual relationships.

It cannot go unnoticed that, in this virtual context, the person who stands out the most is the one who shares the most content. This creates a continuous interactive process involving cognitive and emotional representations. One of the new ways of interacting and representing oneself virtually is sexting. This is a neologism composed of the English words 'sex' and 'texting', and it generally refers to the activity of sending intimate content or messages of a sexual nature to another person using a technological device (Rosales, 2021). In Ojeda's study (2020), sexting is defined as the exchange of self-produced sexual content via electronic media. Pérez Díaz (2017), however, defines sexting as the sending of sexual content that the sender produces and stars in via the internet or a mobile device. This definition does not refer to forwarding, which will be mentioned later in the study but which is nevertheless a widespread practice, mainly among adolescents. There is a "high risk of these images being published and going viral, which will have an impact on the victim" (Fajardo, 2022, p:167). Even though this practice is not a crime, the consequences, discussed later in the study, are indeed a crime. Several agencies have decided to implement solutions to this problem. As the study results show, these solutions have not had the desired effect, with the numbers continuing to rise. This justifies the presentation of a new study that puts forward proposals that bring together different contexts and perspectives for the prevention of sexting, cyberbullying, and sexual offences through education, rather than prohibition.

2. Methodology

The study is part of a qualitative interpretive-comprehensive design, aimed at exploring the meanings, perceptions, and practices associated with sexting and information literacy as a strategy for preventing digital risks. This approach is relevant when dealing with complex sociocultural phenomena that involve emotional, ethical, relational, and contextual dimensions that are difficult to capture through exclusively quantitative measurements.

A constructivist perspective has been adopted, understanding that youth digital practices are socially constructed and mediated by cultural norms, gender dynamics, media competencies, and institutional frameworks. Therefore, we present a study from a constructivist perspective, different but linked from the cognitive paradigm of Information Sciences, bearing in mind the context, as mentioned above, which is necessary to understand the study and which has been classified as follows:

Sexting and its consequences
Sexting and the legal context
Sexting and moral disengagement
Sexting and gender
Sexting and contributions made by official bodies

This exhaustive research analysis enables the study to propose education for the prevention of sexting in contexts that were not previously considered. However, these contexts are justified in the study and are directly related to the above classification. This classification is based on information literacy in the legal context, information literacy in moral disengagement and literacy on the impact of sexting with regard to gender in safe spaces for women.

3. Results

3.1. Sexting and its consequences

Nowadays, it has become commonplace to see people recording videos or taking photos in any setting and sharing them on social media. This fact is particularly worrying during adolescence. A study conducted by the National Observatory of Technology and Society Working Group and published in 2024 found that, based on 2023 data, 94.7% of children between the ages of 10 and 15 have internet access and 70.6% have a cell phone. 42% of young people between the ages of 11 and 18 say they have received erotic or sexual content through social media. Additionally, 55.2% have contacted strangers, 83.5% are registered on three or more social media platforms, and 61.5% have more than one profile on the same platform (UNICEF, 2021, cited in: Murcia Orenes, 2025).

Adolescence is a crucial stage in which our identity and autonomy are formed, our first sexual and emotional relationships are established, and sexting behavior is normalized.

Ojeda (2020) considers it important to distinguish between different types of sexting behavior, which he classifies as follows:

> active (sending and receiving) and passive (direct reception from the creator or reception of forwarding from third parties). He also refers to primary sexting (sending and receiving), in which sexual content is exchanged consensually between peers and is not sent to anyone else (except due to peer pressure or sextortion), and secondary sexting (forwarding and receiving forwards), in which someone shares sexual content beyond the intended recipient and often in a non-consensual manner (Ojeda, 2020, p.10)

According to Morillo Puente (2022), sending and receiving this type of information is not a problem in itself, as long as both parties consent to it. However, problems arise when the sender loses control of the information because it falls into the hands of third parties who then harass and blackmail them. These situations make sexting potentially dangerous, as the material can be quickly disseminated without the sender's consent, which carries implicit risks such as cyberbullying.

This is not unrelated to the fact that sexting has been linked to an earlier onset of sexual activity and unprotected sex. It can also lead to various forms of abuse, such as pressure, "sextortion," cyberbullying, and grooming. These consequences are indeed classified as crimes.

Cyberbullying is common in the context of sexting. The aggressor exerts control over the victim by threatening to disclose or disseminate intimate content and using intimidation strategies, such as harassing the victim with threats and humiliating comments about their physical features.

This situation can cause psychological damage to the person, even leading to suicide in some cases. In fact, according to Frankel et al., in their 2018 study cited in Murcia Orenes, 2025, sexting is associated with depressive symptoms and suicide attempts. Other studies have also revealed that sexting is related to cyberbullying and gender-based cyberviolence. Similarly, sextortion can take place with the aim of obtaining sexual gratification. In this case, pressure is exerted on the other person through threats, intimidation, or even violence.

Revenge porn is also considered a cybercrime. It involves sharing sexted material as revenge against the other person (Rosales, 2021).

Spanish Organic Law 10/2022, passed on September 6, also criminalizes revenge porn. This offense involves sharing private sexual material without consent on social media, instant messaging platforms, or other social platforms with the intent to cause harm. The Spanish Supreme Court has previously ruled on sextortion, recognizing that online sexual assault occurs when intimidation is involved (Murcia Orenes, 2025).

3.2. Sexting and the legal context

Technologies are advancing at a dizzying pace. Communication and interaction in the digital environment are moving much faster than the legal environment. This means that essential rights are only protected after an incident occurs with reactive measures (Rosales 2021).

Within sexual relationships, sexting leads to practices such as exhibitionism, provocation, masturbation, and the recording or taking of photos. A fairly large number of people frown upon these behaviors, so disseminating this type of material will not only violate people's right to honor, but also their reputation, and social standing. (Martínez Otero, 2024).

Sexting is not a crime. It is a practice, a form of sexual interaction that is becoming increasingly popular. As mentioned in the previous section, disseminating, transmitting, or forwarding to a third party constitutes a crime that violates a person's right to privacy, as protected by the Constitution. More specifically, forwarding or disseminating sext messages without permission violates at least three fundamental rights: the right to personal privacy, the right to one's own image, and the right to honor. It also violates the protection of personal data (Article 18.4 of the Constitution) because images of a person are considered personal data under the Organic Law on Data Protection (LOPD). In his study of the consequences of sexting, Rosales (2021) defines the right to protection of one's own image as the right of every individual to prevent their physical appearance from being reproduced without their consent. Therefore, each individual has the control and authority to decide where, when, by whom, and how their image is captured, reproduced, or disseminated. The same is true from a civil perspective with regard to the provisions of Article 7 of Organic Law 1/1982, May 5, on the Civil Protection of the Right to Honor, Privacy, and Self-Image. According to Article 7.5 of Law 1/1982, it is illegal to "capture, reproduce, or publish the image of a person in places or moments of their private life, or outside of them, by photograph, film, or any other means". On the other hand, the dissemination of other people's sexting content aligns with the provisions of section 4, which punishes the dissemination, disclosure, or transfer of private data or facts to third parties (Martínez Otero, 2024).

With the entry into force of Organic Law 10/2022 of September 6 on the guarantee of sexual freedom, Article 197.7 of the Criminal Code now penalizes third-party recipients who continue to disseminate intimate material. Until now, such conduct was only punishable under civil law. According to the aforementioned Article 197.7, disseminating images or audiovisual recordings of a person taken in their home or any other place not visible to third parties without their consent is punishable by imprisonment of three to 12 months and a fine. It is important to note that the 2022 reform solidifies the fact that disseminating or disclosing images related to others' privacy

without consent is a crime, regardless of whether the individual was involved in filming or obtaining these images. Regardless of the medium, anyone who forwards or reposts messages that affect another person's privacy is committing a crime (Murcia Orenes, 2025).

3.3. Sexting and moral disengagement

The concept of moral disengagement was introduced by Bandura in 1990, 1999, and 2002 to explain the socio-cognitive mechanisms that a person uses to mitigate or change their perception of harmful behavior and its consequences for others. This way, the person can avoid self-censorship and the emotional distress caused by the damage. People use one or more moral disengagement strategies to cognitively reconstruct harmful, unethical, and cruel behavior, making it seem less harmful to themselves and others. This allows them to avoid guilt and justify actions that are immoral and harmful to others. (Gómez Tabares, 2025).

Bandura's moral disengagement theory has become a benchmark for explaining social behavior in childhood and adolescence. As we have seen, since communication and relationships now take place in a virtual environment, moral disengagement will also occur in that same virtual environment.

According to Murcia Orenes (2025), it is insufficient today to refer to Information and Communication Technologies (ICT). Rather, we must refer to the extension of Relationship, Information, and Communication Technologies (RICT), which promote social changes such as the transfer of relationships to the virtual world. While the naturalization of virtual relationships brings benefits, it also brings risks. According to Teba Fernández (2021:80), teenagers think *that "*if it's online, it belongs to everyone,*"* so they have no problem downloading files or copying and pasting. In terms of security, insults are dismissed as "jokes". Regarding privacy, Pope Francis (quoted in Teba Fernández, 2021) called for reflection on the overexposure, spectacle, and surveillance of our lives, which are constantly under the control of a virtual community. There is an invasion of privacy without shame or respect. People not only expose their own lives, but also fail to consider that they may be exposing others' lives as well. The use of technology, social media, and the sharing of personal information, photos, and videos has become so commonplace that it has led to a distortion of privacy, ethics, morals, and the law. People have come to believe that anything on the internet is public and can be used without consent (Rosales, 2021). The fact is that moral disengagement regarding the sharing of intimate matters has led to the widespread practice of sexting (Martínez Otero, 2024). Studies such as that by Olivas Ugarte (2024) observed a direct relationship between moral disengagement and sexting, as well as crimes derived from sexting, such as bullying and cyberbullying.

For example: “since someone sent me a photo or video, I share it with my friends, nothing happens because they sent it to me”. However, it should be clarified that there is no such thing as “moral disengagement” in the law for minors (except for those under 14) who commit crimes related to sexting, as these are of equal or even greater severity than those committed by adults (Murcia Orenes, 2025). Although people who break the law are aware of their moral obligations, they use various neutralization techniques to justify their actions. These include denying personal responsibility for the damage caused and blaming the victim. Socially reprehensible behaviors can be reinterpreted based on two types of narratives: excuses and justifications. Stories are usually configured as non-dominant discourses that neutralize reprehensible actions or consequences (Gómez Tabares, 2025).

Bandura, in his aforementioned study, refers to eight cognitive mechanisms that make up moral disengagement:

Moral justification, which consists of convincing oneself in order to feel free from self-censorship.

Euphemistic language consists of people giving life to their thoughts and actions. It involves hiding the cruelty of harmful behavior in order to make it appear respectable to others by giving it a more benign and socially acceptable name and meaning.

The advantageous comparison consists of transforming harmful behavior into a more benevolent one. For example: "Of course, since the recording was sent to me, I'm sharing it”. In

this case, the responsibility is transferred to the person who sent the recording, rather than to the person who disseminates it without consent. The following will be similar to this mechanism:

Shifting responsibility, which consists of minimizing blame by directing responsibility to others.

Diffusion of responsibility, which consists of justifying that, when done in a group, as it is a collective behavior, "nothing happens, it is allowed, because since we all do it, it becomes normalized".

Distortion of consequences, which consists of ignoring or minimizing the damage caused.

Dehumanization by considering the victim as a person lacking human qualities.

Finally, there is **the attribution of blame**, which involves the subject victimizing themselves to the point that they convince themselves that their actions are the fault of others (Gómez Tabares, 2025).

Various studies involving adolescents have reported that, with regard to sex, men make greater use of moral disengagement mechanisms than women (Gómez Tabares, 2025). This justifies highlighting sexting and gender as classifications in the study, in addition to other factors.

3.4. Sexting and gender

Consequences of sexting include cyberbullying, sexual crimes, and gender-based violence. Based on the results obtained from scientific literature, this research shows that, although girls send more sexual images, boys are more likely to send, receive, and forward images received from third parties. Nevertheless, boys send more sexual text messages [than images or videos (Ojeda, 2020)]. In studies conducted by Rodríguez Rivera (2022), adolescents between the ages of 14 and 18 "use the internet compulsively, and women suffer more harassment and cyberbullying". "Female adolescents report feeling more pressure to send their own erotic-sexual content, while male adolescents are the ones who most frequently visit pornographic websites, gamble, send their own erotic-sexual content to others, and receive sexual or erotic content from others in their environment"(Rodríguez Rivera, 2022, p: 43).

Along the same lines, there is a manifestation of social customs that relegate women to a position of subordination and inequality, placing them at a disadvantage compared to men. In the context of sexting, this is reflected in the victim's fear that their intimate content will become known in any of the areas of their life (family, social, work) (Rosales, 2021).

One negative consequence of sexting is a new form of violence against women. This concept encompasses any action or behavior based on gender that causes death, harm, or physical, sexual, or psychological suffering in either the public or private sphere.

A woman's body is more sexualized than a man's. Therefore, material created during sexting by a woman will have a greater social impact than material created by a man (Rosales, 2021). Due to the severity of the situation, official bodies have implemented measures, the most recent of which are analyzed below.

3.5. Sexting and contributions made by official bodies

The agreement to create a committee of experts was approved at the Council of Ministers meeting on January 30, 2024. Over a period of six months, these experts would conduct an analysis and make recommendations to be implemented in the short, medium, and long term. These proposals could serve as a roadmap. The Childhood Observatory, the Spanish Data Protection Agency, the National Cybersecurity Institute, and other organizations would participate.

In preparing this report, they draw attention to the need for self-protection and also to the difficulty of obtaining quality information and the lack of capacity for critical analysis. They also highlighted the importance of the role of parents and the dissemination of information about their children that they often carry out. The shortcomings that parents may have in many cases when it comes to providing "digital education" at home are also mentioned. In short, the committee's analysis yielded alarming results that underscore the role of education in ensuring equity. The analysis also references the media and information literacy proposed by UNESCO. The suggested measures include educational programs for schools and families, but are homes and schools

prepared to implement these proposals? These measures involving talks and training in educational centers have been implemented before, but the growing and increasingly alarming data justify presenting this study based on an educational proposal and implementing it in contexts where it has not been previously done.

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4. Conclusions: education, not prohibition. IL

It is crucial to highlight these facts as an educational issue. According to the RAE (Royal Spanish Language Academy), education is the action and effect of educating, while information is the knowledge acquired or communicated through information. Therefore, information education is the process by which a person acquires knowledge through information. Information education, also referred to as information literacy, is addressed internationally by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL). It was proposed as a necessary skill in the 2018 Common Framework for Digital Competence in Teaching by the Ministry of Education, Culture, and Sport. Both information education and information literacy are considered necessary to avoid conflicts in virtual environments (Fajardo, 2022) since the use of technology does not imply that "instructional design, digital health, or literacy" have been acquired (Teba Fernández 2021:74).

Information literacy (IL) is part of multiliteracy, or constellation literacy. It began developing conceptually with proposals for models and their application through various programs aimed at developing information skills. These programs position IL as a form of multiliteracy—that is, a set of cross-cutting skills mobilized cooperatively to solve problems (Cruz Gil, 2018).

Cyberbullying data highlight the importance of educating young people about data protection and digital identity (Rodríguez, 2022). It is important to note that before new technologies, "bullying among young people existed only in physical form. There were spaces where young people could feel safe and secure, but cyberbullying eliminates all such spaces" (Rodríguez, 2022: 68).

Studies show that viewing and sharing sexual content is becoming increasingly normalized. Sexting, in particular, has become a widespread behavior that is not gender neutral. Therefore, information literacy must be approached from the perspectives of gender equality and healthy relationships (Ojeda, 2020).

Literacy is both a right of citizens and a duty of states. According to Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, everyone has the right to education. The purpose of education is to foster the full development of the human personality and strengthen respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms (Siurana and Cruz, 2023). Studies show that education is necessary to address these issues and that fear-based messages are not effective, just as warnings or prohibitions do not prevent consequences (Ojeda, 2020). But in what context? According to the Royal Spanish Language Academy, context is "the physical or situational, political, historical, cultural, or other environment in which an event occurs". The context in which we find ourselves matters (Cruz Gil, 2014). This is why education is currently being implemented in a wide range of contexts, as discussed in the study below.

4. Proposals

4.1. Regarding sexting and gender. IL in safe spaces for women

Rodríguez Castro (2021) also points out that research shows girls face the most pressure from male partners, including current and potential ones. This ultimately leads to sexual violence, which justifies the proposal to implement information literacy in safe spaces for women. As stated on the Government of Aragon's website, information literacy is "a tool in the fight against gender-based violence, providing the necessary information to know how to act in situations of violence against women" (Government of Aragon, 2025). The study by Giménez Gualdo (2023) also draws attention to gender differences in cyberbullying and sexting, proposing educational interventions as a solution.

4.2. Regarding sexting and moral disengagement. IL IN MORAL DISENGAGEMENT

During the study, it was observed that society generally downplays the importance of these situations. This is why education on the theory of moral disengagement is also considered necessary. Moral disengagement is a framework used in social psychology to explain why people justify morally unacceptable or harmful behaviors (Bandura, 1999). This type of behavior is negatively associated with empathy, so ultimately, in the context of sexting, forwarding a photo is assumed to be a trivial act. Photos and videos are constantly being sent, yet nothing ever seems to happen. However, studies show that something does happen. Therefore, we must educate people about moral disengagement so that society recognizes the facts and actions that are continually justified and the injustices with serious consequences that are minimized.

As of the first quarter of 2024, a total of 122,428 cybercrimes had already been recorded (SEC, 2024), as cited in Murcia Orenes (2025). The number of cybercrimes committed by minors has also increased, with the sentences handed down rising from 1,204 in 2018 to 2,347 in 2022. It should be noted that when the purpose of capturing or recording images is for dissemination, the person must not only give their consent, but also provide express authorization for the action.

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