SEXTING IN BRAZIL: THE PERCEPTION ABOUT SEXUAL MESSAGES

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ABSTRACT. Sexting is an increasingly frequent practice in today's society, but there are still few studies about the perceptions of Brazilians about sexual messages. The aim of this study was to investigate the perception of some Brazilians about sexting and provide an overview of the characteristics of the phenomenon in the Brazilian reality. An online survey was conducted with discursive questions with 41 participants about the dynamics of the practice and content analysis was used for data treatment. The results revealed that some social views are permeated by stereotypes, as observed in research from other countries. Sexting is still often confused with different forms of violence, despite being naturalized around the country and already being part of the daily sexual experience of many people. It became evident that sex education in the digital context is necessary for people to understand their rights and recognize the differences between healthy sexting practice and violence possibly linked to the messages.

Keywords: Sexting; social perception; brazilian reality.

O *SEXTING* NO BRASIL: A PERCEPÇÃO SOBRE MENSAGENS SEXUAIS

RESUMO. O *sexting* é uma prática cada vez mais frequente na sociedade atual, mas ainda há poucos estudos sobre como os brasileiros veem a troca de mensagens sexuais. O objetivo desse estudo foi investigar a percepção de brasileiros acerca do *sexting* e fornecer um panorama de como o fenômeno ocorre na realidade brasileira. Foi realizado um *survey* online com perguntas discursivas com 41 participantes sobre a dinâmica da prática e foi utilizada a análise de conteúdo para tratamento dos dados. Os resultados revelaram que algumas visões sociais são permeadas por estereótipos, como se observa em pesquisas de outros países. O *sexting* ainda é em muitos momentos confundido com diferentes formas de violência, apesar de estar sendo naturalizado no país e de já ser parte da experiência sexual cotidiana de muitas pessoas. Evidenciou-se que a educação sexual no contexto digital se faz necessária para que as pessoas compreendam seus direitos e reconheçam as diferenças entre *sexting* saudável e violências possivelmente atreladas à prática.

Palavras-chave: Sexting; percepção social; realidade brasileira.

SEXTING EN BRASIL: LA PERCEPCIÓN SOBRE LOS MENSAJES SEXUALES.

RESUMEN. El sexting es una práctica cada vez más frecuente en la sociedad actual, pero todavía hay pocos estudios sobre cómo algunos brasileños ven los mensajes sexuales. El objetivo de este estudio fue investigar la percepción de los brasileños sobre el sexting y proporcionar una visión general de cómo se produce el fenómeno en la realidad brasileña.

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Se realizó un *survey online* con preguntas discursivas con 41 participantes sobre la dinámica de la práctica y se utilizó el análisis de contenido para el tratamiento de datos. Los resultados revelaron que algunos puntos de vista sociales están impregnados de estereotipos, como se observó en investigaciones de otros países. El sexting aún se confunde con diferentes formas de violencia, a pesar de estar naturalizado en el país y ya es parte de la experiencia sexual diaria de muchas personas. Se hizo evidente que la educación sexual en el contexto digital es necesaria para que las personas entiendan sus derechos y reconozcan las diferencias entre el sexting saludable y la violencia posiblemente vinculada a la práctica.

Palabras clave: Sexting; percepción social; realidad brasileña.

Introduction

Technology is increasingly present in affective relationships in today's society, modifying relationships and becoming a more frequently used means of interaction between couples, including sexual relations (Madigan, Ly, Rash, Van Ouytsel, & Temple, 2018). Electronic messages with sexual content are called sexting – a combination of the words sex and texting. The term includes all text, audio, or video communication that has sexual, explicit, or suggestive content and is made via electronic devices (Drouin, Vogel, Surbey, & Stills, 2013). Silva, Teixeira, Vasconcelos-Raposo and Bessa (2016) point out that only messages that are self-produced or produced with consent, without the use of coercion, are considered sexting.

Sexting is a recent phenomenon and is still accompanied by many stereotypes. In general, discussions about the practice focus on its possible negative effects such as situations of non-consensual exposure or the legal consequences in case of image exchanges between adolescents (Albury & Crawford, 2012; Judge, 2012). However, studies indicate that most sexting practitioners see messages as part of the romantic relationship and do not attribute inherent risk to sexual messages (Drouin et al., 2013; Mitchell, Finkelhor, Jones, & Wolak, 2012). This difference between social assumptions and practitioners' perceptions indicates that the phenomenon is permeated by social conservatism about the practice (Lee & Crofts, 2015).

Assumptions about the profile of people who exchange sexual messages are also influenced by social prejudices about the subject. Society often considers this type of message as a practice that occurs mostly among young people and it is perceived that social representations, such as the media and campaigns, also reproduce this view (Albury & Crawford, 2012; Gamez-Guadix, Santisteban, & Resett, 2017). Another common conception is that sexual messages are part of uncommitted or inconsequential relationships (Alonso-Ruido, Rodríguez-Castro, Pérez- André, & Magalhães, 2015). Although these conceptions are widespread in common sense, the international literature reveals that sexting is more common among couples in stable relationships and there are no differences in age, gender, or ethnicity among practitioners (Madigan et al., 2018; Weisskirch, Drouin, & Delevi, 2017).

In Brazil, the phenomenon has become popular and is increasingly discussed in recent years. In the last decade, there has been an increase in cases of exposure of unauthorized intimate images reported in the Brazilian media. Situations such as that of actress Carolina Dieckmann, in 2012, who had photos exposed after having her computer hacked and favored the creation of the first specific law on leaking intimate images, highlighted the need to discuss the social consequences of non-consensual exposure. In addition to the case of the actress, several other people have already gone through similar

situations of exposure on the networks and have become media news, however, the increase in news of suicides of exposed victims drew attention to the importance of understanding the effects and dynamics of sexting in the Brazilian reality.

The phenomenon began to be portrayed in other media, such as television soap operas and movies, to promote more social discussions on the theme. Recently, the feature film Ferrugem (Junior & Muritiba, 2018) demonstrated the different impacts suffered by a young woman who had a video with sexual content released without her consent and generated reflections on the psychosocial consequences. According to the analysis carried out by Lordello, Souza e Coelho (2019), the main consequence is gender differences after exposing images, because while the boy did not suffer any negative impact and was even congratulated by his colleagues, the girl was constantly ridiculed, had her image exposed on pornographic sites and suffered harassment from other men. The situation portrayed in the film corroborates the international literature, which indicates that women are more threatened, blackmailed, and victims of revenge after practicing sexting (Mejía-Soto, 2014; Walker, Sanci, & Temple-Smith, 2013).

According to Ross, Drouin and Coupe (2019), women are also more coerced to send messages with sexual content and practice unwanted sexting more frequently than men. Concerning the trauma resulting from the coercive request for images, studies show that women report it more frequently than men (Drouin, Ross, & Jenkins, 2015; Drouin, Ross, & Tobin, 2015; Ross et al., 2019). Furthermore, among the female audience, the trauma intensifies after they have had time to reflect on the sending, which suggests that the fear of having the messages shared is also greater among women. This concern is probably because women suffer more psychological and social harm when sexting is exposed, such as blame for disclosure, loss of reputation, and isolation in the environments they frequented (Mejía-Soto, 2014). Such a difference in consequences is also observed in other media representations, such as the impact of news and the content of comments made in articles, which tend to blame and penalize women (Hasinoff, 2017).

The growth of the debate in the media reflected changes in the Brazilian macrosystem. For example, it favored the creation of laws that protect victims from exposure to messages with intimate content. As previously mentioned, the case of actress Carolina Dieckmann started the debate on the need for specific laws for the unauthorized exposure of messages with sexual content and resulted in law 12.737 (2012). The law deals with computer crimes by ensuring the intimacy and privacy of electronic communications. Currently, the crime of unauthorized exposure of sexting is characterized by law 13.718 (2018), which determines as a crime any distribution of sexual content without the consent of the victim. The law also establishes an increase in the prison sentence if the person who disclosed the content maintains or has maintained an affective relationship with the victim. The additional penalty also occurs if the propagation of sexual content has the intention of revenge or humiliation of the victim.

In 2018, Law 11340/2006 – Maria da Penha Law, changed by Law 13.772 (2018) – included two articles expressly combating the unauthorized production and dissemination of sexual content, whether explicit or suggestive. Besides the addition of articles, the wording of the law was changed to insert the violation of privacy as a type of violence against women. The modification of this law, which aims to protect women in the context of affective relationships, corroborates the conception defended in the literature that cybercrimes are another form of violence in relationships (Drouin et. al., 2015; Morelli, Bianchi, Baiocco, Pezzuti, & Chirumbolo, 2016; Ross et. al., 2019) and demonstrates that Brazilian legislation already recognizes this new type of violation, considering gender disparity. In addition to

these laws, inappropriate exposure of sexting can also be covered by broader laws, such as defamation and libel (Art. 139 and 140).

Despite the growing presence of sexting in Brazilian relations and legislation, there is still no systematic collection of information about the practice in the country. The NGO SaferNet Brasil, which works with complaints and responds to cases of cybercrime, conducts annual surveys of cases of exposure to sexting. However, the data are restricted to cases in which the victim made a complaint or sought help from the NGO and do not make it possible to understand the dynamics of sexting in cases where there was no exposure. Thus, there is no knowledge about how the practice of sexting occurs in a healthy way – when there is no violation – in Brazil.

In 2018, the exposure of messages with sexual content was the main reason for NGO assistance (SaferNet, 2019). The number of calls for assistance in situations of exposure to sexting was 669, followed by cases of cyberbullying (407) and fraud (242). The number of reports of the crime of exposing messages in 2018 increased considerably compared to the previous year, which accounted for 289 calls (SaferNet, 2018). The growth in the number of complaints reinforces the view that the Brazilian population has become aware of sexting and their rights when practicing virtual sex.

The gender difference observed in the media is also revealed in the survey presented by SaferNet (2019). According to records, 65.8% people who sought help after exposure to intimate messages in 2018 were women. In 2017, the number of female victims was 70.6%. This information highlights the difference in the impact of exposure for men and women, as it suggests that women have their images more frequently exposed or need more help than men when this occurs.

Data provided by SaferNet, together with media representations and changes in legislation in the last decade, show that sexting is a phenomenon present in the daily life of Brazilian society. However, there are no studies on how the practice occurs in the Brazilian reality. There is information about the consequences and the possibilities of assistance when there is a violation of privacy and sexting is exposed. However, there is no information on how sexting is practiced in a healthy way in the country, in situations where there has never been violence linked to the exchange of messages. Therefore, the objective of this study was to investigate the perceptions of some Brazilians about the practice of sexting.

Method

Participants

Participants were 41 people (women = 34, men = 6, and non-binary = 1). The participants are between 21 and 56 years old and live in five different states in Brazil. Most participants declared themselves to be heterosexual (70.7%), followed by bisexual (17.1%) and homosexual (9.8%). Regarding education, 39% have completed graduate studies, 24.4% have completed higher education, 22% have incomplete higher education and 14.6% have incomplete graduate studies. Most participants described themselves as white (n=26), followed by brown (n=10). The family income declared by the largest number of participants was between one and five minimum wages.

Instrument

An online questionnaire was created with seven discursive questions about the individual's perception of sexting (e.g. How would you name and describe sexting). The questionnaire was applied via the Internet to obtain perceptions of Brazilians from different

places. The electronic form also contained sociodemographic data, to enable analyses on the relationship between the profile of the participants and their opinions about the phenomenon.

Procedure

After approval by the Ethics Committee (19378919.6.0000.5540), participants were invited to respond to the questionnaire via social networks. The disclosure of the form contained the purpose of the research, the estimated time for response, the guarantee of confidentiality and voluntary participation, the contact of the responsible researcher in case of doubts, and the link to the questionnaire. Responses were fully electronic and anonymous.

Data analysis

Data were analyzed qualitatively using the analysis method proposed by Bardin (1977). Analysis categories were elaborated from the obtained results.

Results

Participants' responses were categorized according to the questions in the questionnaire. Six categories were elaborated: (1) definitions; (2) personal experience; (3) age group; (4) linked risks; (5) motivations; and (6) guidelines about sexting. Thus, based on these categories, subcategories were established for each theme of the instrument.

Category 1: definitions

When the participants were asked about the definition of the phenomenon, they answered comprehensively, indicating the diversity of definitions of sexting. Five subcategories were listed for this question: (1) naturalization; (2) technical description; (3) negative value; (4) technology and age; (5) motivations as a definition.

The participants, whose answers were assigned to subcategory 1, defined sexting as a common practice. Definitions such as "A natural act. People like sex and it's normal for this to spill over into the realm of the internet". The phenomenon was described as a communication tool between sexual partners and as an interesting practice that can help to understand the partner's tastes. Another participant defined sexting as a pleasurable act that they usually practice. Sexting was also characterized as a form of self-knowledge about sexual aspects.

The second subcategory refers to the answers that presented descriptive definitions, that is, the answers that did not present any value judgment about sexting. This category is made up of definitions such as 'sex by message' or 'the combination of the words sex and texting'. Subcategory 3 is composed of two responses that defined sexting based on a negative value judgment, describing the practice as something bad. One of the participants defined the phenomenon as "[…] attributing negative sexual characteristics and embarrassing another person […]" and another as "[…] sexual offense sent by message".

The fourth subcategory is formed by responses that describe sexting as an act between young people and a "[…] new modernity of the digital world". This category contains the answers that defined the practice as something essentially among young people. Subcategory 5 consists of responses that used possible motivations to define sexting. One of the participants defined sexting as a tool to maintain sexual intercourse when the couple is physically distant, another stated that it is a way to generate excitement in the partner. In addition to the answers given to each category, three participants (7.3%) stated that they did not know what sexting is and two participants (4.9%) expressed dissatisfaction with the

use of the term in English, pointing out that there should be a terminology in Portuguese for the phenomenon.

Category 2: personal experience

This category was constituted by the responses of participants to having already practiced or known someone who practiced sexting. Most participants reported having experienced both situations, with 75.6% claiming to know someone and 60.9% having already practiced. Regarding knowing someone who has practiced, 31.7% participants stated that the own person talked about the experience in informal conversations between friends. Participants also stated that they learned of friends who had engaged in sexting through conversations about sexuality or specific conversations about the practice. It has been reported that it is common for there to be discussions about perceptions of sexual messages and even exchanging photos between friends to ask for opinions. There were also reports of people who learned about the practice of sexting with acquaintances through exposure situations, such as reports on the internet or third-party comments about the photos of the acquaintance that were exposed, but this experience was declared by only 7.3% respondents.

When asked if they had exchanged sexual messages and if they had told anyone, 43.9% participants said they had done so and told. Respondents reported having told friends and said they saw no problem with the practice or saying they already sent sexts. However, some participants stated that they had told only one close person or a few trusted people.

Category 3: age group

When asked if they believe there is a more common age group for sexting, 56.1% stated that the act occurs more among teenagers and young adults, and 19.5% said it is common only among teenagers. Only three participants (7.3%) stated that they believe that the practice is more common in adult life and three respondents (7.3%) said that there is no relationship between age and exchanging messages.

Category 4: linked risks.

All participants stated that there are risks in sexting. Only one of the participants stated that, although there are risks, these are not inherent to the practice, but consequences of coercion or non-consensual actions. From the types of risks pointed out by the respondents, three subcategories were created: (1) gender; (2) violence; and (3) mental health impacts.

Subcategory 1 consisted of responses that indicated that the risks of sexting are only or predominantly for women. The participants stated that the risks are greater for women, as they are afraid of exposing their messages and they "[…] are the victims of humiliation in general". The greater risk for women who have relationships with men has also been indicated. The participants also stated that machismo is a risk of sexting, indicating that the phenomenon is the "[…] macho culture renewed by technology".

Subcategory 2 was created based on responses that specified situations of violence as the risks of the practice. Participants stated that the risks of exchanging messages are violations such as revenge porn, invasion of privacy, unauthorized forwarding to third parties, and being identified in exposed images. Risks were also pointed out in the production of messages, for example, blackmail and manipulation so that the person sends intimate images. Some participants mentioned sexual abuse as a risk of the practice, naming unwanted sending and virtual sexual harassment as forms of sexual abuse. Other

forms of violence after exposure were perceived as risks of the phenomenon such as bullying, defamation, embarrassment, and moral lynching.

Responses that cited negative impacts on mental health were assigned to subcategory 3. Participants classified addiction, depression, and negative influence on the sexual development of adolescents as risks of sexting. Suffering, psychological disorders, and difficulties in social interactions were also pointed out as possible risks. In addition to the responses attributed to the elaborated subcategories, three participants responded by suggesting forms of prevention, in explanations such as "[…] it has to be done with a known person, especially if there is sharing of photos. If it's a not-so-known person, it can be just text […]" or not sexting while underage.

Category 5: motivations

When questioned about the motivations for exchanging messages with sexual content, several possibilities were reported, indicating the variety of motivations for the practice. Based on these responses, four subcategories were created: (1) sexual dynamics; (2) compensatory behavior; (3) coercion; and (4) contextual aspects.

Subcategory 1 was composed of answers that pointed to the exchange of messages as part of the sexual dynamics. That is, they suggested that sexting is a new form of conquest, seduction, and flirting. Participants stated that the practice is an expression of sexual desire and a for oneself and one's partner. Breaking routine, intimacy, trust in the partner, and the belief that sexting will lead to the sexual act itself were also indicated as motivations. Furthermore, self-confidence, curiosity, and libido were cited as motivations for sending sexual messages.

Subcategory 2 contains responses that suggested that sexting is an attempt to compensate for something negative. Respondents mentioned insecurity, lack of affection, and need for attention as possible motivations. The lack of attention and family orientation was also classified as motivation. Some participants suggested that sexting is a way of disguising disabilities outside the virtual world, for example, difficulty in face-to-face interaction, shyness, shame, and frustration at not getting the desired sexual satisfaction. In addition, immediacy, and competition were pointed out as motivations for sending messages.

In subcategory 3, responses that mentioned coercion and violence as motivations were included. Participants cited peer and partner pressure as reasons for sending sexual messages. In addition, abusive partner behavior, revenge, and bullying were cited as reasons for the practice. Subcategory 4 consisted of contextual motivations only, such as distance and impossibility of being with the partner or simply the ease of access to technology, and the natural changes resulting from technological advancement.

Category 6: guidelines about sexting

Participants were asked to list what they consider important for people to know about the phenomenon. Responses were divided into two subcategories: (1) educational; and (2) prohibitive.

The responses assigned to subcategory 1 were of a sex education nature, to prevent violence and explain the rights of those who practice sexting. Participants pointed out that the phenomenon must be explained, addressing issues such as motivations, safety, and trust and explaining that this is a new form of sexual expression. The responses focused on aspects of risk prevention, such as exchanging messages with known people in which there is trust in the relationship. Participants also suggested that it is important to disseminate

safety tips about how to avoid identification and which applications are safest for exchanging photos. The responses also highlighted aspects of understanding rights, such as the fact that the person is not obliged to have sexual intercourse before or after sending sexting and the right to decide whether or not to send messages depending on their comfort in the situation. The participants also suggested that the risks and benefits of the practice should be discussed so that the person is aware of the good and possibly bad consequences.

Subcategory 2 was elaborated from responses with prohibitive content, which intend to deny the practice and place it as something wrong and undesirable. Responses assigned to this category focused on risks and possibilities of negative consequences, such as unauthorized exposure of photos. Participants also highlighted that sexting is a dangerous act, which can cause severe damage, trauma, moral lynching, and even cases of pedophilia. Responses in this category indicated that strategies to avoid sexting should be disclosed. One participant suggested that a necessary guideline would be "[…] not to do it during adolescence […]", revealing that there is also a belief that the practice has an age-appropriate range.

Only one participant stated not knowing what should be taught about sexting. Two other participants criticized the use of the term in English and emphasized that explaining the reason for the terminology in another language and the creation of a term in Portuguese are necessary actions to talk about the practice.

Discussion

The results revealed that the practice of sexting incites quite different opinions. Most participants declared having exchanged sexual messages and exposed the normality of the phenomenon, which suggests how the act has become naturalized, being understood as a new modality of sexual expression (Cardoso, Falcke, & Mosmann, 2019; Madigan et al., 2018). Sexting was pointed out as part of the current sexual dynamics, which can be observed from the motivations reported by the participants, such as the perception that messages have the function of exciting the partner, fulfilling fantasies, and initiating the sexual act. The answers exposed the normality with which the act is being treated since the participants reported talking about sexting with friends in casual conversations when the subject is sexuality and even exchanging opinions on personal photos. These results are in line with the international literature, which reveals that sexting is already seen as any sexual behavior and makes up people's sexual experience (Drouin et al., 2015; Gordon-Messer, Bauermeister, Grodzinski, & Zimmerman, 2013).

Despite the naturalization of the phenomenon, the results still reflected many of the stereotypes revealed in studies carried out in other countries. The statement by most participants about sexting being a practice of young people and adolescents highlights the little information about the reality of the phenomenon since there is no exclusive age group for the practice (Manoel, Lordello, Souza, & Pessoa, 2020; Mardigan et al., 2018). Another stereotype observed is the idea that people who exchange sexual messages are trying to fill a need or compensate for some negative aspect of their lives. This reveals the view that sexting is something wrong and that the reason for this act is equally negative, something that could be avoided. However, the main motivations for the practice of sexting are sexual stimuli similar to those of the sexual act itself, that is, people mostly claim that they exchange messages for pleasure and excitement, and not to compensate for problems (Drouin et al., 2013).

Another preconception revealed was the perception that the risks linked to sexting are inherent to the practice, however, the literature indicates that the risks are not related to

sexting itself, but violence possibly linked to the act (Ross et al., 2019; Temple & Choi, 2014). Participants considered some situations of abuse as risks of exchanging sexual messages, such as non-consensual exposure and coercion. This perspective reinforces the blaming of the victim and removes the responsibility of the aggressor, since the authorship of the action is divided between the two involved, and the victim is placed as co-responsible. Importantly, there is a gender difference in this relationship and Hasinoff (2017) points out that women who have their photos displayed are judged as guilty as the people who exposed them. This disparity was observed in the results of this study. Some participants pointed out that women are more concerned about possible exposure and humiliation, indicating that they perceive a difference in treatment between men and women who have intimate messages disclosed and corroborating the results found in other countries (Drouin et al., 2015; Ross et. al., 2019). Walker et al. (2013) point out that women have greater psychosocial damage when sexting is exposed.

Perceived inequality may be due to the patriarchal culture, in which women must be pure and preserve themselves, while men are encouraged to experience their sexuality intensely from a young age (Walker et al., 2013). Thus, when a woman's sexuality is exposed, she is portrayed as inconsequential, and vulgar, and is socially punished (Mejía-Soto, 2014), as she broke the expected social role of her gender. Therefore, women with exposed intimacy suffer doubly: from the invasion of privacy and violence for being women. This form of violence is defined by Gong and Hoffman (2012) as slut-shaming, which is bullying focused on women with the aim of degrading and humiliating women who exhibit sexual behavior.

The man who has images displayed is praised as virile and is often congratulated by his peers (Walker et al., 2013), given that this act is congruent with the expected characteristics of men, who should be conquerors and sexualized. Therefore, the practice is allowed for men and encouraged among them, but has ambiguous value for women, who, at the same time, are required to send messages, and punished if sexts become public (Flach & Deslandes, 2019). It is understood, then, that the social approval of sexting is different for men and women. This elucidates why so many men disclose images they receive since they will have social gain by exposing this achievement.

The high frequency of non-consensual exposure makes it common for people to have their first contact with the phenomenon from exposure situations, as pointed out by some participants. Thus, many people know the practice through situations in which there was violence, either through reports from acquaintances or through media representation. The role of the media and campaigns on the subject is important to understand the construction of society's opinion on the phenomenon. Most campaigns still treat messages with sexual content as wrong and risky. The media is divided between a view of sexting as a behavior to be avoided and a stereotyped perception, restricted to naive teenagers or inconsequential adults (Albury & Crawford, 2012; Judge, 2012). The exchange of sexual messages as part of healthy, stable, or trusting relationships is not usually portrayed in the media.

This form of limited representation encourages prohibitionism, which makes people defend not practicing as a way to prevent adversities in sexting. Subcategory 2 of category 6 evidenced this impact, based on the prohibitive guidelines of the participants, in which sexting is not separated from violence and is treated only as situations in which something wrong or abusive has occurred. The understanding that the exchange of messages should be avoided undermines the possibility of promoting healthy sexting because while the practice is seen as wrong and dangerous, dialogue on the subject is inhibited, which makes it difficult to discuss how to prevent risks linked.

Madigan et al. (2018) point out that, given the popularization of the phenomenon and the increasing frequency of the practice, the resources spent on criminalizing sexting should be redirected to digital education programs and healthy relationships. This position is corroborated by the results of subcategory 1 of category 6, which indicated the need for sex education in the digital context. Participants communicated the importance of people knowing their rights, understanding the particularities of sexting, and distinguishing what abuse is. The provision of information is a way of empowerment, it allows practitioners to perceive the limits and particularities of sexting and know how to recognize that they can deny themselves to certain situations if they want and that they should not be held responsible if their privacy is violated. Empowerment also favors the use of protective strategies. Mastery of this information is a way to avoid situations of coercion, blame, and unwanted sexting, since if people do not gain knowledge about what healthy sex is – whether online or not – it is more likely that they will not know how to recognize abuse for seeing abuse as something natural in the practice. Sex education for technological practices is a new form of empowerment that can prevent violence and suffering, based on differentiating what healthy sexting is and what goes beyond the limits of the act and must be fought.

Final considerations

The growing practice of sexting and the lack of studies on the phenomenon in the country highlight the need to better understand the particularities of the practice in Brazil. Our results made it possible to know some perceptions of Brazilians about sexting and demonstrated that there is still little known about the subject for society in general since many stereotypes were reproduced in the reports. Nevertheless, it was also possible to observe the naturalization of the act in the answers that treated sexting as another form of sexual expression. This polarization makes it more urgent that we know the peculiarities of sexting in Brazilian culture since the practice seems to be treated as something natural or wrong, without the development of sexual education and prevention policies in the digital context.

This study provides notions about the views of Brazilians about sexting that can contribute to other research and public policies on the subject, to generate positive social impacts, such as policies to prevent sexting exposures. New studies are required to favor the structuring of these policies, which should consider the naturalization of the act and enable the deconstruction of preconceived ideas that sexting is something negative to be prohibited. With the current reality that most young people are digital natives, it is important to understand that there are new forms of social interactions and that technology can permeate them without this being seen as a bad thing. On the contrary, technology has become an alternative to experience and practice different situations. Therefore, the sexual aspect can also be experienced differently from this new aspect. The need for more Brazilian studies on the subject was also evidenced by criticisms of the use of the term in English. Currently, in Brazil, we do not have adequate terminology for the phenomenon, since the commonly used word – 'nudes' - does not cover the entire scope of sexting, but only messages with images.

The main limitation of this study is that it was carried out entirely online. The online method restricts the type of information accessed, as there is no possibility of explaining the answers in more detail. Furthermore, the sample is limited to a profile of people with greater access to information and the internet, making the study more elite. Therefore, face-to-face qualitative research is suggested to provide a diversity of the respondent public and a greater exploration of the data constructed in the study. Despite this, online research also

has potential that should be highlighted, since the method allows the participation of people from different states, and the use of technological tools has proven to be relevant to gather a greater amount of information more quickly than is possible in person.

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