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Sexting as the mirror on the wall: Body-esteem attribution, media models, and objectified-body consciousness

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ABSTRACT

Sexting motivations during adolescence are related to developmental dimensions—such as sexual identity and body-image development—or harmful intentions—such as aggression among peers and partners. Sociocultural and media models can affect explorations of sexuality and redefinitions of body image, which in turn are related to sexting behaviors and motivations. In this study, we investigated the roles of body-esteem attribution, the internalization of media models, and body objectification as predictors of three sexting motivations: sexual purposes, body-image reinforcement, and instrumental/aggravated reasons. The participants were 190 Italian adolescents aged from 13 to 20 years old (M_{age} = 17.4, SD_{age} = 1.8; 44.7% females). Sexual purposes were predicted by body-esteem attribution and body objectification; body-image reinforcement was predicted by the internalization of media models, and instrumental/aggravated reasons were not predicted by any variable. Thus, only sexual purposes and body-image reinforcement appeared to be affected by body-image concerns due to media models.

1. Sexting behaviors and motivations

During the last decade, new technologies and media-based communications have provided a new way for managing social interactions and intimate relationships. Smartphones, the Internet, and social networks can also be vehicles for exploring and expressing sexuality. Defined by Chalfen (2009) as the exchange of sexually suggestive and provocative contents via smartphones, the Internet, or social networks, sexting appears to be very common among young people (Dir, Coskunpinar, Steiner, & Cyders, 2013; Morelli, Bianchi, Baiocco, Pezzuti, & Chirumbolo, 2016a). The prevalence of sexting behaviors increases with the spread of new technologies. The first surveys on adolescents found the percentages of sexting to be between 20% and 33% (Eurispes & Telefono Azzurro, 2012; National Campaign & Cosmogirl, 2008). A more recent study (Morelli et al., 2016a) found higher percentages—distinguishing between receiving sexts (78%), privately sending sexts (73%), and publicly posting sexts (9%).

We conceived the present study in line with a developmental interpretation proposed by the psychological literature on adolescents' sexting (Levine, 2013). According to this perspective, sexting is now a normal expression of sexuality through new technologies (Bianchi, Morelli, Baiocco, & Chirumbolo, 2016), and it is just one of the new methods that media-based communications have provided for facing some of adolescents' normative and developmental tasks (Šmahel & Subrahmanyam, 2014).

Studies on sexting motivations (Siibak, 2009; Vanden Abeele, Campbell, Eggermont, & Roe, 2014) have revealed the need for acceptance and popularity among peers. This need also has a relevant role in facing adolescent developmental tasks related to identity construction, new interest in sexuality, and the redefinition of body image (Blos, 1979; Erikson, 1970). All of these

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developmental tasks contribute to identity redefinition through social comparisons with peers (Festinger, 1954; Suls, Martin, & Wheeler, 2002). Indeed, the most frequently reported motivation for sexting during adolescence has been related to achieving sexual and social aims (such as flirting, initiating sexual activity, capturing attention, arousing a potential partner as foreplay, having fun, joking, achieving popularity, and imitating friends), which are two key developmental tasks during adolescence (Lenhart, 2009). Furthermore, some recent studies (Bianchi, Morelli, Baiocco, & Chirumbolo, 2017; Bianchi et al., 2016; Chalfen, 2009; Henderson & Morgan, 2011; Siibak, 2009) have found that sexting can work as a form of self-expression underlying body-image redefinition. Thus, all of these sexting motivations relate to important developmental tasks that adolescents have to manage, supporting a normative interpretation of sexting behaviors (Levine, 2013). More specifically, online self-presentations appear to be frequently used by adolescents to express and explore their developing identities (Schmitt, Dayanim, & Matthias, 2008; Walrave, Heirman, & Hallam, 2014; Šmahel & Subrahmanyam, 2014).

On the other hand, the literature (Drouin, Ross, & Tobin, 2015) has also underlined the presence of more harmful motivations that go beyond sexuality itself and seem to hide aggressive aspects—such as being pressured by partners and friends; embarrassing someone, being aggressive, and seeking revenge among partners. There are also secondary aims of sexting, such as to receive gifts or telephone recharges (AP-MTV, 2009; Bianchi et al., 2016; Eurispes & Telefono Azzurro, 2012). These sexting motivations are related to a problematic and deviant facet of sexting behaviors. Several studies (Morelli, Bianchi, Baiocco, Pezzuti, & Chirumbolo, 2016b, 2016a; Vanden Abeele et al., 2014; Walrave et al., 2014) have found that sexting can be a vehicle for relational violence among peers and in dating relationships, becoming a new kind of gendered sexual harassment (Walker, Sanci, & Temple-Smith, 2013). The lack of direct feedback and nonverbal communication—the disinhibition effect, as defined by Suler (2004)—can facilitate young people's expressions of aggression in online environments. Furthermore, the false sense of privacy provided by the online dimension can facilitate the perpetration of violence (Walrave et al., 2014) and can explain the exploitation of sexual contents for the obtainment of some rewards. This instrumental use of sexting as an exchange of favors is based on a power imbalance between partners and peers, representing a source of pressure to engage in sexting. Gibson (2016) suggested that, in line with the social exchange theory (Cook, Cheshire, Rice, & Nakagawa, 2013), this power imbalance leads to a limitation of sexual freedom because providing sexual favors involves a feeling of obligation in spite of spontaneous self-disclosure (Emmers-Sommers et al., 2010).

We have demonstrated in our work that the abovementioned sexting motivations can be summarized in a three-factor model—composed of sexual motivations (related to the expression and exploration of sexuality among peers and between romantic partners), body-image reinforcement (sharing sexts to look for a feedback from peers about body adequacy), and instrumental/aggravated reasons (the exploitation of sexual contents for relational aggression or the obtainment of something else) (Bianchi et al., 2016). These three motivational areas can be conceived in the framework of motivational systems that guide individual behavior, as theorized by Lichtenberg (2013). Thus, instrumental/aggravated motivations are related to *aggravated* (harmful) sexting behaviors whereas the previous motivations (sexual aims and body-image reinforcement) are an expression of *experimental* (developmental and normative) sexting, as suggested by a study on the legal implications of sexting (Wolak, Finkelhor, & Mitchell, 2012).

1.1. Sociocultural correlates of sexting motivations

As suggested by Walrave et al. (2014), the willingness to engage in sexting is influenced by not only intraindividual factors but also extra individual factors—such as perceived social pressure and subjective norms, shaped by peer groups' approval. Recently, the social cognitive theory (SCT; Bandura, 2001) has also been applied to study the effects of media contents on individual cognitive processes. According to the SCT, social behaviors and cognitive processes are shaped in interactions with the social environment. As stated by van Oosten and Vandenbosch (2017) and in line with the SCT (Bandura, 2001), the individuals' observations of peers and media models could influence their attitudes and beliefs on a specific behavior; could shape their thoughts, affects, and actions; and consequently, could affect both behaviors and cognitions.

Within this theoretical framework, sexting behaviors and motivations are closely linked to other social contexts including peers and the media. According to Ringrose, Gill, Livingstone, and Harvey (2012), sexting can be interpreted as an expression of a sexualized culture which implies the sexual objectification of bodies through the sexualized images and models proposed in mainstream media. Moreover, the sexual objectification of bodies also leads to early sexual debut (Lerum & Dworkin, 2009; Pearson, Kholodkov, Henson, & Impett, 2012). Previous studies (Schick et al., 2010; Woertman & van den Brink, 2012) have also found that body satisfaction and body self-esteem, both in general and in sexual contexts, were indexes of normal and adaptive sexual functioning in adolescents.

Literature described body objectification as the internalization of an external gaze on one's body and the evaluation of the body as an object that needs to adapt to sociocultural standards (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; McKinley & Hyde, 1996). Some individuals who are more sensitive to sociocultural and media models perceive higher pressure from these standards, leading to a higher objectified-body consciousness (McKinley & Hyde, 1996). The objectified-body consciousness was defined by McKinley and Hyde (1996) as tendencies to consider one's body as an object under others' evaluation and to believe that one's body should conform to sociocultural standards. According to McKinley and Hyde (1996) this phenomenon is characterized by perceived shame and surveillance about own body, and by beliefs of control about appearance. During adolescence, people are more likely to develop body self-objectification because it arises from pubertal changes and increased peer attention (Lindberg, Grabe, & Hyde, 2007). There are high levels of body objectification in young people with a history of peer sexual harassment, which undermined their value as sexual partners and constituted a first experience of sexual objectification (Lindberg et al., 2007). Girls have been considered more sensitive than boys to body objectification due to sociocultural pressure to adapt to idealized models of beauty and thinness (Grabe, Hyde, & Lindberg, 2007; Tiggemann & Kuring, 2004). However, a recent study (Daniel & Bridges, 2010) found that boys are also