

Sexting in Covid-19 times: should we care?

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Abstract

This article aims to reflect on sexting in the context of COVID-19, given its recommendation as a legitimate way of expressing sexuality in times of social distance. A narrative review was carried out, and documents issued by different countries were analyzed, presenting contents that express concern about the avoidance of contagion in affective-sexual expressions and pointing out possible risks of this practice. The strategic guidelines clarify alternative forms for affective relationships that avoid physical contact, pointing to sexting as a viable strategy for sexuality associated with other online experiences. Although sexting is an experience already consolidated in a technological society, information was presented about the stereotypes that permeate it. It also dealt with the risks that these experiences may involve, warning about distinctions between sexting and pornography and actions that encompass the adolescent public. We concluded that sexting needs to be investigated in the cultural context, and future studies are suggested to follow possible resignifications in the post-pandemic period.

Keywords: sexting; COVID-19; sexuality; adults; adolescents.

Resumo

Sexting em tempos de COVID-19: devemos nos preocupar?. O objetivo deste artigo é refletir sobre o *sexting* no contexto da COVID-19, diante de sua recomendação como meio legítimo de expressão da sexualidade em tempos de distanciamento social. Foi realizada uma revisão narrativa e analisados documentos emitidos por diferentes países, apresentando conteúdos que expressam preocupação com a evitação do contágio nas expressões afetivo-sexuais e apontados possíveis riscos dessa prática. As orientações estratégicas esclarecem sobre formas alternativas para o relacionamento afetivo que evitem o contato físico, apontando o *sexting* como estratégia viável para o exercício da sexualidade, associado a outras práticas online. Embora o *sexting* seja uma prática já consolidada na sociedade tecnológica, foram apresentadas informações sobre os estereótipos que o permeiam. Tratou-se ainda dos riscos que podem envolver essas práticas, que alertam sobre distinções entre sexting e pornografia e ações que envolvem o público adolescente. Conclui-se que o *sexting* precisa ser investigado no contexto cultural e sugerem-se estudos futuros para acompanhar resignificações possíveis no período pós-pandemia

Palavras-chave: sexting; COVID-19; sexualidade; adults; adolescents.

Resumen

Sexting en COVID-19: ¿deberíamos preocuparnos?. El propósito de este artículo es reflexionar sobre *sexting* en el contexto de COVID-19, dada su recomendación como una forma legítima para expresar la sexualidad en cuarentena. Se realizó una revisión narrativa. Se analizaron documentos emitidos por diferentes países, presentando contenidos que expresan preocupación por evitar el contagio en expresiones afectivas-sexuales y señalando posibles riesgos de esta práctica. Las pautas estratégicas aclaran formas alternativas para relaciones afectivas que evitan contacto físico, señalando el *sexting* como una estrategia para el ejercicio de la sexualidad, asociada con otras prácticas online. Aunque el *sexting* es una práctica ya consolidada en la sociedad tecnológica, se presentó información sobre los estereotipos que lo impregnan. También fueron abordados los riesgos que pueden implicar estas prácticas, advirtiendo sobre las distinciones entre *sexting* y pornografía y acciones con adolescentes. Se concluye que el *sexting* necesita ser investigado en el contexto cultural y se sugieren estudios futuros para acompañar posibles resignificaciones posteriormente a la pandemia.

Palabras clave: sexting; COVID-19; sexualidad; adultos; adolescentes.

On March 11, 2020, The World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 pandemic given the notification of cases and deaths from the virus in countries on all continents (World Health Organization [WHO], 2020). COVID-19 is present in respiratory secretions and spreads through droplets of saliva, sneezing, coughing, phlegm, accompanied by contact through the mouth, nose, or eyes. Therefore, it should be avoided contact with infected people, contaminated objects, and surfaces. Considering also that many people can be asymptomatic, any proximity can be dangerous. In this scenario, measures related to daily care with hygiene and social distancing have been recommended, and although they are of paramount importance, one cannot deny its impact and interference in people's routines and relationships. Guidance to stay indoors, closing schools and universities, and distance from work activities end up reducing face-to-face interactions and the relevant relationships for maintaining social and affective bonds (Brooks et al., 2020). It is not yet clear how the pandemic affects human sexuality. However, with the advocacy of social distancing as a preventive measure, sexuality was one of the fields of most impact due to its association with physical contact and different expressions that, until then, involved the idea of physical intimacy.

The few studies investigating sexuality during the pandemic focus on investigating sexual behaviors and practices among couples who experience the pandemic together. Arafat, Alradie-Mohamed, Kar, Sharma, and Kabir (2020) conducted an online cross-sectional study of adults living in three Southeast Asian countries who lived with their spouses in April during the COVID-19 pandemic. The researchers found that although 45% of participants reported changes in their sex lives, no significant differences were found in the frequency of sexual activity before and during the lockdown. They also identified a 3.3% increase in sexual activity, suggesting that more time with the partner may reflect greater intimacy and even safety. On the other hand, the restrictions imposed by social distancing limit the maintenance of affective and sexual relationships, especially outside the home, reducing the opportunities for encounters and casual sex for those who do not have a partner or who do not cohabit. Therefore, it is relevant to discuss the manifestation of sexuality in times of pandemics.

According to the World Health Organization, sexuality is considered a central aspect of human beings which is not limited to sexual intercourse, expressing

itself through thoughts, fantasies, desires, beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviors, experiences, roles, and relationships (WHO, 2006). Although the way each person experiences their sexuality is absolutely idiosyncratic, as it is influenced by many contexts, social distancing has favored the experience of different forms of expression of sexuality, such as the expansion of the experience of sexting, auto-eroticism with different resources, access, and use of sexual accessories in search of pleasure. This article, a narrative review, aims to reflect on the re-signification of sexting in a pandemic context, assuming the status of being recommended as a legitimate means of expressing sexuality. For this, we identified strategic recommendations related to sexting in official documents issued by different countries to strengthen social distancing and health during the COVID-19 pandemics, and we also identified the possible risks from this experience.

Definition of sexting and its resignification in the context of the pandemic

Sexting is currently seen, with the increasing technological accessibility, as a resource present in affective-sexual relationships. The term sexting, which initially referred only to the exchange of messages with sexual content, nowadays encompasses different ways via electronic devices, whether text message, video, photo, or voice. The sexual contents considered sexting are the ones self-produced or produced with consent, without the use of coercion (Silva, Teixeira, Vasconcelos-Raposo, & Bessa, 2016). In Brazil, the phenomenon has become widespread as "nudes", a word referring to images of a naked or semi-naked person, being relevant to highlight that these images are not essential to characterize sexting.

Although there has been a recent increase in discussion on the subject, sexting is still permeated by preconceptions that characterize it as obscene and wrong, arguing that it should be avoided in any situation. There is still a taboo around the practice, which disregards it as a possible cultural phenomenon and builds moralistic stereotypes, associating it with something negative and considering its harmful and risky effects from mythical generalizations. Besides being classified as dangerous, the practice is still a characteristic of inconsequential people in casual relationships. Another common preconception of sexting

is that only young people do it. Online exchanges and interactions can be considered identity in adolescence but are not restricted to young people (Gamez-Guadix, Santisteban, & Resett, 2017; Manoel, Lordello, Souza, & Pessoa, 2020).

There is no fixed pattern of sexting practitioners, and different motivations and dynamics depend on the type of relationship of the people who exchange these messages (Weisskirch, Drouin, & Delevi, 2016). According to Drouin, Vogel, Surbey, and Stills (2013), the most common practice is via mobile phone through chat apps, but social networks can also be used for this purpose. The authors reveal that sexting is more common among couples in established relationships, but this is not an exclusive profile, and texting is the most frequent form of sexting. Motivations for the practice are also varied, but some of the most cited is 'starting a further sexual relationship', 'feeling sexy', 'getting the partner's attention or simply 'having fun' (Drouin et al., 2013; Madigan, Ly, Rash, Ouytsel, & Temple, 2018). Silva et al. (2016) add that sexting can be understood as part of the seduction process in establishing relationships or as a strategy to preserve the romantic connection by capturing the partner's interest or as an expression of the romantic interaction between partners. Thus, positive emotions may be associated with the exchange of messages and would come from the appreciation of people receiving these messages and images with sexual content and, on the other hand, those who produce sexually suggestive content may experience feelings of shame before sending or sharing (Silva et al., 2016). The researchers also point out that when the practice has mutually consented, it may be positively associated with sexual satisfaction and positive attitudes towards sex and is a possible predictor of sexual activity engagement compared to those who do not experience sexting.

Few studies are concerned with analyzing which psychological characteristics would be associated with individuals who engage in sexting practices. Drouin and Landgraff (2012) evaluated romantic relationships and found that individuals with anxious attachment strategies demonstrated intense desire for closeness, intense fear of abandonment, and a greater likelihood of seeking others approval, which leads one to believe that these individuals could use sexting as a way to elicit a response by seeking to ensure that their partner is emotionally involved, being afraid that they will lose interest.

These characteristics show sexting itself not as a risk but rather as a new way of expressing sexuality. Therefore, it is not intended to deny the associated risks, but it is necessary to differentiate the possibly dangerous aspects of healthy sexting. One of the factors associated with perceived risk in the practice of sexting is gender violence, whether concerning non-consensual exposure of messages or coercion for unwanted messages (Drouin, Ross, & Jenkins, 2015; Morelli, Bianchi, Baiocco, Pezzuti, & Chirumbolo, 2016). This coercion can lead women to experience feelings of violation or victimization, while men could see this type of experience representing their sexual desirability or virility (Drouin et al., 2015).

Age can also be a risk factor, when considering the vulnerability and impulsiveness of adolescents who, due to lack of guidance for safe practice, report more coercion and peer influence (Alonso-Ruido, Rodríguez-Castro, Pérez- André, & Magalhães, 2015). However, the literature on sexting points out that most adults and young adults understand the exchange of intimate messages as harmless and part of the current romantic relationship (Drouin et al., 2013; Hasinoff, 2017; Lee & Crofts, 2015; Mitchell, Finkelhor, Jones, & Wolak, 2012).

When dealing with sexting as an expression of sexuality in times of pandemic, it is also much relevant to differentiate between sexting and pornography, which is erroneously crossed by a mistaken discourse that treats them as synonyms. Pornography consumption has increased worldwide during the social detachment representing a risk for legitimizing in its content, acts of sexism, cultivating contempt, abuse, and violence, naturalizing paedophilic sex involving children and adolescents (Orte, Ballester, & Nevot-Caldentey, 2020). Identified a lot with gender violence, according to Silva et al. (2016), the major criticism is that through pornography women are transformed into sexual artifacts, and their objectification allows them to be dehumanized to the point where their role is to provide sexual pleasure to men. For this author, the most forceful criticism is that pornography represents the most relevant vehicle in the systemic reproduction of gender inequalities. In the case of children and adolescents, the situation is even more crucial. According to Safernet Brasil (2020), child pornography rose 108% compared to April 2019. Although it is classified as a crime, this did not inhibit the registration of 9995 cases in its whistle-blower channel in April 2020 only. The increase of Internet use in times of social distancing, associated

with the nefarious practices of sexual exploitation, can maximize these rates, requiring vigilance from all of society to report and combat this type of crime. Such risks have a worldwide proportion when several manuals and guides from important international agencies start to adopt this warning tone regarding pornography during the pandemic (United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF] et al., 2020; WHO, 2020).

Baumel, Guerra, Silva, Garcia, and Trindade (2019), in their Brazilian study on the subject, point out that pornography has a powerful cultural component and has significant differences between men and women, and for, both it has positive and negative effects on relationships. The negative impacts portrayed in the study are related to excessive use, which can bring as a disadvantage the lower willingness of the partner to interact, use in secret considered as betrayal, excitement exclusive through this way, idealization of the pornographic setting increasing demands in true relationships, among others. Regarding advantages, they ranged from favoring monogamy to the role of resource for the couple's creativity, constituting an instrument to express and experience fantasies and increase the degree of complicity. These results corroborate the international literature (Elder, Morrow, & Brooks 2015; Fahs & Gonzalez, 2014; Grov, Gillespie, Royce, & Lever, 2011).

National literature has contributed to a contextualized look at sexting (Cardoso, Falcke, & Mossman, 2019; Lordello, Souza, & Coelho, 2019; Manoel et al., 2020). National and international authors warn that the phenomenon of sexting should not be seen as a problem to be faced because contextualized in a technological society, it is a practice that favors the constant revitalization of affection expressions as part of the sexuality exercise in a licit and private way (Drouin et al., 2013; Henderson & Morgan, 2011). As mentioned above, for people who experience sexting, the motivations are related to the strengthening of intimacy, excitement, fantasies, and seduction for the sexual act, among others.

As the adoption of social distancing is the principal measure to minimize the contagion of the coronavirus and combat infection by COVID-19, the impacts on the manifestations in affective life and affective-sexual relationships are significant. Even between confined people in the same space, there is concern about infecting the partner or being asymptomatic and passing the disease on to the other. Regarding people who are not

socially distant from their peers, the contact manifestations are exhaustively oriented as not recommended. For those who had no peers, new encounters should not be accompanied by dating or physical contact. In this panorama, an alternative scenario of affective and sexual manifestation that moves into the virtual field emerges. There is a possibility of sexting being revised concerning prejudices since images, photos, and messages may be important vehicles for this new time.

Strategic recommendations in the face of the pandemic

Studies carried out at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic have called attention to interventions that consider sexual health as a protective factor for good physical and mental health during the period of social distance. Rosenberg, Luetke, Hensel, Kianersi, and Herbenick (2020) surveyed data on sexual and reproductive health during COVID-19 for American adults between April 10-20 and found that those who had personal, social, and sexual connections had a lower prevalence of depression and loneliness, indicating that human relationships, when healthy and in person, are related to better results in mental health and well-being. Sexual behavior was also the focus of a study by Jacob et al. (2020). The researchers accessed a sample of adults, aged between 25 and 34, living in the United Kingdom, 17 days after the first case of COVID-19 identified in the country. Among the 868 participants, 39.9% said they were engaged in several sexual activities at least once a week. The authors identified that being male, younger, being married or in a cohabiting relationship, and having longer social distance are some variables associated with sexual activity, highlighting that intervention actions should consider sexual health as a promoter of physical and mental health during the pandemic and need to be focused on women, people living alone and those who are older.

It is in this direction that several initiatives have been identified seeking to mitigate the effects of social distancing on the population well-being and, at the same time, encouraging control of the spread of the virus and keep people within their own homes. A search on the main research platforms was prioritized to find out contents from official guidelines, including guides, protocols, and notes, as well as recommendations for the general population or health professionals. The question that guided the material survey was: what are

the available recommendations regarding the practice of sexting during social distancing? We chose to use the keywords *sexting* and similarly those that referred to other sexual experiences at a distance, as these recommendations do not necessarily appear with this specific descriptor, together with the words *pandemic*, *quarantine/social distancing*, and *COVID-19*. Contents available in full and in Portuguese, English, and Spanish were considered. The documents found are presented in Table 1.

The technical guidelines on sexual health and pandemic published on the World Health Organization's digital platform were used as initial references. After reading the available materials, a manual search was conducted on government websites that used these references to prepare documents

on the topic. It was decided to select all texts that were recommendations of the local Ministry of Health and that were disclosed as guidance for the population. The New York City guide seeks to guide how to minimize contact between people and answer questions about how the virus is spread and what care is needed when relating to other people. Concerning long-distance relationships, they suggest masturbation as a way to explore sexuality safely. In addition, recommendations aimed at people who know their sex partners online or sex workers are to temporarily avoid live dating and try sexting with video dating or chat rooms. The Ministry of Health of Colombia in Latin America released a newsletter with the translation and adaptation of the New York City guide.

Table 1. Official guidelines regarding sexting during the pandemic

Country	Sexting Orientation	Type of orientation	Link
USA- New York	If you usually meet your sex partners online or make a living by having sex, consider taking a break from in-person dates. Video dates, sexting or chat rooms may be options for you.	Guide	https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/doh/downloads/pdf/imm/covid-sex-guidance.pdf
United Kingdom	If you usually meet your sex partners online or make a living by having sex, take a break from in-person dates. Video dates, sexting or chat rooms may be options for you.	Free and confidential counseling service recommendation	https://www.yorsexualhealth.org.uk/coronavirus-corvid-19-information/sexual-health-and-COVID-19-advice/#
Colômbia	Si generalmente conoce a sus parejas sexuales en línea o se gana la vida teniendo relaciones sexuales, considere posponer las citas en persona. Las citas virtuales pueden ser una opción.	Informative report	https://www.minsalud.gov.co/Paginas/ABC-sobre-las-relaciones-sexuales-y-las-enfermedades-por-coronavirus-(COVID-19).aspx
Argentina	“si bien hay un montón de aplicaciones online que usamos para conocer personas y podemos seguir usándolas, la realidad es que por el momento lo mejor es evitar conocer personas cara a cara”.	Health authority recommendation	https://www.argentina.gob.ar/noticias/recomendaciones-para-el-ejercicio-de-una-sexualidad-segura-en-el-contexto-de-COVID-19/ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yZk0r9Yed2l
Ireland	Taking a break from physical and face-to face interactions is worth considering, especially if you usually meet your sex partners online or make a living by having sex. Consider using video dates, sexting or chat rooms. Make sure to disinfect keyboards and touch screens that you share with others.	National Sexual Health and Wellness Program Recommendations.	https://www.sexualwellbeing.ie/sexual-health/sex-and-coronavirus/
Unicef and partners	Online risk-taking behavior. A lack of in-person interaction with friends and partners may lead older children to engage in riskier behaviour online, for example, through sexting or the sharing of self-generated sexualized content, which may expose them to risks of extortion, harassment and humiliation	Technical note	https://www.unicef.org/documents/COVID-19-and-implications-protecting-children-online

The government of Argentina also made similar recommendations in its daily newsletter. Given the lack of unanimity regarding the means of coronavirus transmission, the recommendation is to avoid face-to-face meetings, especially for users of online app used to meet new people. So that the sexual and affective life is maintained, they suggest sexting use through video calls and virtual sex.

The Irish government has a national sexual health program called the Sexual Health and Crisis Pregnancy Program. The program provides a range of information on sexual health, unwanted pregnancy, also content targeted at young people, parents, and professionals. Concerning sex life and COVID-19, as well as previous recommendations, suggests that people temporarily avoid physical or close interactions, especially for those who know their sexual partners online or work as sex workers. They also indicate sexting experiences via video or chat rooms and are concerned with reinforcing the importance of disinfecting keyboards and screens shared with others. Another site concerned with disseminating information regarding sexual practices and COVID-19 was YorSexualHealth (YSH), a website providing free and confidential counseling services for people living in North Yorkshire and York in the UK who want support about different aspects of sexual health. This service is related to York Teaching Hospital NHS Foundation Trust (York School Hospital/York Foundation Trust of the National Health Service) - institutions created to ensure the quality of care and efficiency in hospital expenses.

UNICEF and other partners have produced a technical note with some key points and recommendations to reduce risks and promote a more positive online experience for children understanding that at this time they may be very exposed to cybercrime, sexual exploitation, and with greater access to inappropriate content for their age. Regarding sexting experience, the note is concerned that, with the lack of personal interactions with friends, older children engage in the practice, sharing self-produced sexualized content, which may expose them to various risks. After that, importantly, the note calls for the government, schools, and parents to work together to help children have more positive and safer online experiences, especially in the context of COVID-19.

It cannot be denied that social, affective, and sexual relationships are very relevant for people and, even in the face of a pandemic, such issues cannot be

neglected. There are still no specific data or measures that evidence the use of sexting during the pandemic, but it is already possible to see that people continue to seek alternatives to experience their sexuality with the tools they have at their disposal. In line with what has been suggested in the recommendations of different countries, other internet pages have been responsible for raising information about the use and access to websites and applications. The online dating platform Tinder has reported an increase in messaging, especially among users under 30, reaching 15% in Brazil (Dubey, 2020). A survey of over a thousand users of the Happn application identified that 31% of Brazilian users had sexting since the early social distancing, with 16% involving text messaging, 10% sending photos, and 5% sending videos (Huffpostbrasil, 2020). An interesting fact is that almost half of users said they had engaged in sexting for the first time during the pandemic, indicating people's willingness to use online tools to stay connected, connect and perhaps engage in new relationships. Rosenberg et al. (2020) suggest that remote relationships may not be able to recreate human connections, where touch is a relevant factor; however, in a scenario of restrictions imposed by COVID-19, the search for innovative strategies capable of supporting interpersonal relations at a distance may be positive.

The main sexual content sites have identified an increase in searches during the pandemic, indicating that social distancing may have increased the use of social networks time used to experience sexuality. Pornhub, one of the most accessed pornography websites, reported higher access compared to accesses before the pandemic, reaching up to a 25% increase at its peak (Pornhub, 2020). Twitter has reported a rise in the hashtags use - when the use of a specific keyword preceded by the “#” symbol directs to all the people who are also talking about that subject and have used the same terms - with sexual content (Lapin, 2020). A study by Cocci et al. (2020) with adults during quarantine in Italy identified that more than 40% of the participants reported an increase in sexual desire in this period when compared to the pre-pandemic moment; however, it did not reflect a higher frequency of sexual intercourse, but a self-report of self-eroticism and use of pornography. The authors emphasize that pornography use may be associated with decreased sexual satisfaction, a fact that is widely accepted and discussed in the literature on the subject.

Mestre-Bach, Blycker, and Potenza (2020) bring an interesting discussion about the use of pornography during the pandemic. Researchers suggest that pornographic materials can help with the distraction, loneliness, anguish, and other negative emotions inherent in confinement and diminishing opportunities for dating and sex casual. At the same time, they draw attention to the need to assess whether behavioral changes reflect adaptations or indicate long-term patterns, considering the impact of this experience, especially in people with problematic use of pornography.

A site that became a *trend*, that is, that had an increase in searches and became a trend, in a short period, is OnlyFans (Google Trends, 2020), which is a platform similar to a social network used for users to buy material from those that follow. However, the site became known for being used for self-produced images sales, i.e., people produce their nude or semi-nude images, the so-called *nudes*, and are responsible for selling the material. It is an element that may be present in the practice of sexting, which suggests a possible growth of this experience.

Risks for teens: online life in the pandemic

Alonso-Ruido et al. (2015) point out that one should not assume an alarmist perspective concerning risks; but adolescents are still more vulnerable because most of them do not recognize that they are involved in sexting practices and indicate motivations that are based on peer influence, such as jokes, pressure from friends and partners or the desire to take risks. Teenagers were already using sexting even before COVID-19; after all, the exchange of text messages, internet communication, and the intense use of technology are characteristic of digital native teenagers. However, even though it is part of adolescents' daily lives, many are still unaware of the implications of sexting, especially considering the impacts of exposure for girls (Leal et al., 2017). Lenhart (2009) highlights that digital natives are more likely to send or receive sexually suggestive messages, considering this type of interaction is common in contemporary relationships. During the pandemic, with the fact that they are entirely at home and with little parental supervision online, behaviors associated with sexting that may pose risks can be exemplified by unauthorized exposures of images and scenes, reproduction of scenes or images sent by others, and excessive consumption of pornography, with risk for harmful approaches such

as grooming that trigger in abusive, harmful and fake virtual relationships.

When dealing with the risks, it is necessary to return to the difference between sexting and pornography and the damages that the latter can cause in the objectification of relationships. In Baumel et al.'s (2019) study, pornography seems to be the first source of sexual information, which promotes learning about the body and pleasure, parallel to the sexual accessories use, which stimulate sensory exploration and expand the universe of sexual practices. At the same time, it is relevant to pay attention to the content exposed in pornography. Orte et al. (2020) show an increase in access to pornographic material during the pandemic in Spain accounting for the highest growth in international Pornhub traffic reaches a peak of 61%, fifty points more than the highest peaks in other countries. The researchers draw attention to the categories with the highest number of videos, which are *amateur*, followed by *teenagers*, which may indicate a preference for those who use this material. Thus, the search for pornographic content with this matter needs to be seen as a real cause for concern, given that pornography mostly legitimizes gender violence and erotic models linked to a childish and pedophilic image, increasing the risks for adolescents. Furthermore, they highlight that this is a problem that can have repercussions on sex education since the content exposed in pornography can naturalize violent and misogynistic behavior. For researchers, adolescents may learn and believe that their bodies can constitute a highly valuable currency, exposing them to risky situations and even sexual exploitation.

At least one reflection is appropriate here. We have always lived with a society that educates its citizens based on differentiations built on the gender perspective. It is important to problematize this in the pandemic period because according to Petersen and Hyde (2010), in their research on gender differences in the exercise of sexuality, it was found that the biggest differences are related to autoerotic behaviors, such as masturbation and pornography use, and to casual sex and attitudes about it, in which men differ from women. Therefore, it is urgent to reflect on sexuality in adolescence and its repercussions not only in periods of crisis, as in COVID-19. Orte et al. (2020) recommend that pornography consumption should not be encouraged among adolescents; however, they suggest that sexuality is experienced through intrapersonal relationships and imagination. Personal satisfaction appears articulated and not limited to masturbation but as a tool for diversifying sexual practices (Chi, Yu,

& Winter 2012; Olmstead, Negash, Pasley, & Fincham, 2013), normalizing, and validating sexual desires and fantasies (Elder et al., 2015).

Amid the suspension of school activities due to COVID-19, Brazilian adolescents, especially those enrolled in private institutions, are receiving a range of distance learning activities. It implies greater exposure of this group to the Internet. The intensive use of networks, which is not always supervised by those responsible, can favor the action of online criminals. Europol (European Police Service) presented a report on noticing an increase in cybercrimes due to the pandemic, in which it shows data and elucidates different points. One of them was the increase in attempts by adults to contact children through social networks, which suggests, together with other indicators, a possible increase in sexual exploitation. Safernet Brazil (2020), in its whistle-blower channel, has been making these risks public through impressive data, such as the significant increase in child pornography during the pandemic period and offering educational approaches that are very necessary to warn about protective legislation, among several other actions.

However, Hasinoff (2017) warns that although technological resources are often blamed for the risks, adolescents have the total cognitive capacity to assess situations in the virtual environment. But for this, it would be necessary to insert this theme into the school and family, removing the taboo that prevents topics such as sexting and the exposure of intimate images from being discussed in contexts where they occur. This silencing collaborates so that violent sexualized behaviors are naturalized and socially accepted. There was no previous guidance or work regarding the unplanned confinement, which increases the risk of such conduct that differs from the healthy form of sexting being detected early and discussed or addressed with their potential harm.

Sexting itself is not considered a risky behavior or is necessarily risk-related. (Silva et al., 2016). However, it is relevant to be aware of adolescents engaging in non-consensual sexting. This type of sexting appears to be more prevalent with women, suggesting that they would be particularly susceptible to coercion for the practice even when it occurs within a relationship.

Final considerations

When analyzing recommendations from official documents and reports from different countries, we noted that distancing measures should not hinder the

complete exercise of sexuality. The WHO guidelines are implicitly inserted in the devices when two constant elements are observed: excessive hygiene with the environments, body, and objects that make up the apparatus of online sex and the possibility of replacing physical contact with caresses and touches mediated by the virtual context through sexting. The substitutive aspect present in this stimulation of a new form of interaction shows itself as a possibility of creating a post-pandemic culture. Physical contact, so revered by Brazilians, needs to be creatively expressed by ways in which affection is not suppressed, but gesturing should be re-signified.

Warnings about risks should not be ignored. When teenagers have more free time and are more immersed in the Internet, family supervision is essential. Orte et al. (2020) suggest active parental involvement in their children's sexual and affective education, including responding to problems that may emerge from online interactions. The warning during and after the pandemic is to monitor attitudes that may represent vulnerability on the part of those who do not know or understand the dangers that involve the Internet. Although sexting is a licit and recommended experience to nurture relationships, differentiating it from the production of pornographic material, the traps for exposing unauthorized intimate material and the different forms of violence against women, masked by the strategic grooming of exploiters, will be the great challenge so that the healthy expression of sexuality does not become a pathological disorder with indelible consequences for those who practice it.

In this sense, future studies are recommended, aiming to investigate the phenomenon of sexting after the pandemic, suggesting designs that contemplate different age groups and genders, bringing greater robustness to the understanding of the practices, their advantages, and possible risks. Studies that favor school interventions that deal with sexting and the cultivation of sexuality online are also recommended since before COVID-19. They were already necessary and scarce, and in the future, such initiatives will constitute relevant opportunities for clarifying and preventing violence and other problems that the lack of dialogue can provide.

The uncertainties surrounding COVID-19 promote impacts that are still unknown to us, which unequivocally confirms the provisional nature of knowledge. Given this panorama, we believe that the social relevance of this study lies in gathering consistent information to act in the current reality and that the analysis of the consulted material may help review concepts, prejudices, and

mainly, new postures that emerge in this context and its resignification processes in the future.

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