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Emotional Competence and Sexting among University Students

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to study the relationship between sexting and emotional competence. A total of 440 students from the University of Mostar took part in this research, aged from 18 to 25 years ($M=21.32$, $SD=1.84$). The participants completed the Scale of Sexting Behaviour, and The Emotional Skills and Competence Questionnaire. The results of the study showed that 23.64% students had participated in receiving and sending sexually suggestive or provocative contents, whilst 10.23% had openly publicized such content. Young men participated to a greater extent in sexting in comparison with young women, and were less successful in recognition and understanding emotions, as well as in regulating and managing emotions. The data analysis revealed that the participants with lower results on the scale of emotional competence were involved more often in receiving, sending or publishing sexually suggestive or provocative contents. Sex and the ability to regulate and manage emotions were statistically significant predictors of receiving and sending sexually explicit content. These predictors, alongside the ability to understand emotions, proved to be significant in prediction of publication of sexually explicit contents. The results indicate the importance of emotional competence in explaining and prevention of sexting in young men and women.

Keywords: Sexting, Emotional Competence, Regulation and Management of Emotions, Perceiving and Understanding Emotions, Students.

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Introduction

Sexting has recently become a relatively widespread phenomenon amongst young people. Complex legal, social, emotional and behavioural consequences of sexting are increasingly arousing the interest and concern of scientists and professionals. Originally this concept included recording and sending sexually explicit photographs by mobile phone (Roberts, 2005). In more recent times, a broader definition is being used, according to which this behaviour presumes the exchange of sexually explicit or provocative contents using a mobile phone, the internet or social networks (Chalfen, 2009; Klettke, Hallford & Mellor, 2014).

Data on the frequency of sexting vary from research to research, depending on the sample of subjects covered, the methodological aspects of the research, and the conceptual and operational difficulties related to the term "sexting". Cooper, Quayle, Jonsson and Svedin (2016), in a literature review of 88 research articles (published between 2009 and 2014) found that the frequency of sending and publication of sexually explicit messages amongst adolescents was in a range of 7% to 27%. Barrense-Dias, Berchtold, Surís and Akre (2017) in a literature review of 18 research articles (published between 2012 and 2015) found similar results, where from 2.5% to 27.6% of the adolescents were involved in active sexting, whilst between 7.1% and 60% were involved in passive sexting. Research undertaken amongst students showed that a significant proportion of them participate in this behaviour, whereby from 43% to 80% of them had participated in some form of sexting behaviour at least once (Benotsch, Martin, Snipes, & Bull, 2013; Crimmins & Seigfried-Spellar, 2014; Dir, Cyders, & Coskunpinar, 2013; Gordon-Messer, Bauermeister, Grodzinski, & Zimmerman, 2013; Klettke et al., 2014). In terms of the prevalence of sexting amongst young adults (aged from 18 to 25 years), research has shown that from 20% to 48.5% of young adults had sent or published naked or semi-naked photographs or video recordings of themselves (Hudson, Fetro, & Ogletree, 2014; Reynolds, Burek, Henson, & Fisher, 2013).

However, despite the inconsistent results in terms of the prevalence of sexting, the results of research consistently show that the frequency of sexting rises with age (Klettke et al., 2014; Strassberg, McKinnon, Sustaita, & Rullo, 2013). The results of research into sex differences in sexting have not produced consistent results. Some researchers did not find any differences in terms of participation in sexting between young men and young women (Benotsch et al., 2013; Dir et al., 2013; Drouin & Landgraff, 2012), whilst some found that young men in general engage in sexting more often (Delevi & Weisskirch, 2013; Jonsson, Priebe, Bladh, & Svedin, 2014; Morelli, Bianchi, Baiocco, Pezzuti, & Chirumbolo, 2016; Strassberg et al., 2013). Klettke et al. (2014) state that the results of some research indicate that young women more often send messages with provocative or sexually explicit content (Ybarra, & Mitchell, 2014), whilst young men more often receive them (Dir et al., 2013; Gordon-Messer et al., 2013).

A review of scientific studies and research into the exchange of sexually explicit contents between young people shows that there are a number of studies that aimed to identifying the characteristics that differentiate young people who exchange sexually explicit messages from those who do not participate in these activities (Dake, Price, Maziarz, & Ward, 2012; Kent, Heywood, Pitts, & Mitchell, 2015; Ricketts, Maloney, Marcum, & Higgins, 2015; Van Ouytsel, Walrave, Ponnet, & Heirman, 2015). More recently, some authors have stated that dysfunctional styles of regulating emotions may be

an important predictive factor for behaviour such as sexting (Cooper, Wood, Orcutt, & Albino, 2003).

The ability for emotional regulation, which is an integral part of the concept of emotional intelligence, is defined in various ways. In general it may be said that the capacity for emotional regulation encompasses the capacity to respond to stressful demands and emotional experiences in a socially acceptable, adaptive and flexible way (Morris, Silk, Steinberg, Myers, & Robinson, 2007). Strategies for regulating emotions vary in terms of their nature, effectiveness and implications for the individual psycho-social functioning. Dysfunctional forms of regulation of emotions and behaviour directed by emotions are one of the fundamental predictors of risky or problematic behaviour in adolescence (Cooper et al. 2003; Hessler, & Katz, 2010). Sexting may also relate to difficulties with managing emotions, according to recently conducted researches (Currò, 2017; Houck et al. 2014; Trub & Starks, 2017). Young people who sext have more difficulties with emotional skills and competencies, they have a lower ability to perceive and understand their own emotions and lower ability to manage their own emotions (Houck et al., 2014). These deficits may make it difficult for youth to react to others or may lead to impulsive actions driven by feelings (such as sexting). These characteristics may also lead youth to use sexting as a form of self-expression, instead of more emotionally challenging direct interactions (Houck et al., 2014). In the light of a review of the available research in this field, we established that no research has been conducted so far to examine the relationship between the emotional competence of students of both sex, and various aspects of sexting behaviour. In addition, in previous research examining the relationship between emotional competence and sexting, the ability to express and label emotions was not included, and it seemed important to examine that relationship. Therefore, our aim was to contribute to an understanding of the relationship between emotional skills and competences and sexting in a student population, and to see if the engagement of young people in sexting may be explained by a lower level of emotional competence.

This research endeavoured to examine whether differences exist in engagement in sexting and in emotional skills and competences (perceiving and understanding emotions, expressing and labelling emotions, and regulation and management of emotions) in terms of the sex of the subjects of the research (P1). Significant differences were expected in involvement in sexting between young men and young women, whereby young men more often engaged in sexting than young women. Also, significant differences were expected in emotional skills and competences between young men and young women, whereby young women would have higher results in the measurements of emotional competence in comparison with the young men (H1). The differences were studied in emotional skills and competences between subjects who engage in sexting and those who do not (P2). Here, a statistically significant difference was expected in the emotional skills and competences of subjects who sext and those who do not; it was expected that the subjects who sext would have lower results in emotional competence scores in comparison with participants who do not (H2). The research examined the relationship between emotional skills and competences and engagement in sexting (P3). It was presumed that there would be a negative correlation between the level of emotional skills and competences and sexting; a higher level of emotional competence would be correlated to a lower level of engaging in sexting (H3). Finally, the predictive value was tested of sex, age and emotional skills and competences for engaging in sexting (P4). In view of the results of research conducted so far, it was expected that sex and the level of emotional

skills and competences would have a significant contribution to engagement in sexting (H4).

Methodology

a. Participants

Four hundred and ninety-four under-graduate and graduate students from the University of Mostar took part in the study (from the Faculties of Economics, Civil Engineering, Medicine, Arts, Science, Mathematics and Education, and Law). Fifty-four participants were excluded from further analysis after inconsistencies were found in their replies, or they did not complete the survey fully. We concluded that these cases were missing at random since we did not find differences between these groups and those with completed data on a variable of interest (sexting, and emotional intelligence). The results of 440 students were processed in the research: 41% young men (N=182) and 59% young women (N=258). The age range of the students was from 18 to 25 years, and the average age of the students was 21.32 years (SD=1.84).

b. Procedure

Having obtained the approval of the Ethics Committee of the Psychology Department of the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities of the University of Mostar, the study was conducted in groups on students at the University of Mostar. In the beginning of the study students were informed about the aim of this study and then completed above mentioned questionnaires. After all the students had completed the questionnaire and placed them in the box provided at the back of the classroom, the authors of the research were available for all their questions related to the subject of the research.

c. Measures

1. The Emotional Skills and Competence Questionnaire (ESCQ, Takšić, 2002)

Emotional intelligence as a personality trait was measured using the Emotional Skills and Competence Questionnaire (ESCQ-45, Takšić, 2002). The questionnaire contains 45 items divided into three subscales. The Perceive and Understand emotions scale has 15 items, with a theoretical range of results from 15 to 75 (e.g., When I see how someone feels, I usually know what has happened to him), The Express and label emotion scale has 14 items with a theoretical range of results from 14 to 70 (e.g., I am able to express my emotion well), and The Manage and regulate emotion scale has 16 items with a theoretical range of results from 16 to 80 (e.g., When I am in a good mood, every problems seems soluble). Subject were asked to rate the items at 5-point scales (1 - never, 2 - seldom, 3 - occasionally, 4 - usually, 5 - always). A higher result indicates a higher level of emotional competence, or, in some scales, a greater capacity to notice and understand emotion, a greater ability to express and label emotions, and a greater ability to manage emotions. The total result of each subject for an individual scale is formed as the linear combination of the items in each scale. Earlier studies have shown that the psychometric characteristics of the ESCQ-45 are mainly satisfactory (Hajnc, Takšić, & Kuprešak, 2008; Takšić, Mohorić, & Munjas, 2006). In this research the greatest reliability was shown by the scale of “perceiving and understanding emotions” (Cronbach

$\alpha=0.86$), which is in line with earlier research (Takšić et al., 2006). The scale "expressing and labelling emotions" in this research had reliability according to Cronbach $\alpha=.84$, whilst "managing and regulating emotions" scale showed Cronbach $\alpha=.82$.

2. Sexting Behaviours Scale (Dir, Coskunpinar, & Cyders, 2011)

For assessment of frequency and prevalence of the engagement in the exchange of sexually suggestive or provocative messages, photographs or videos using electronic media, a modified version of the Sexting Behaviours Scale was used (SBS, Sexting Behaviors Scale, Dir et al, 2011). The original scale consists of 11 items, in which the subjects respond using a Likert scale with five levels from 1 (never) to 5 (often or every day) assessing their personal engagement in sexting. The authors reported good internal consistency expressed by the Cronbach alpha coefficient of reliability (Cronbach $\alpha=0.883$) (Dir et al., 2011). The internal reliability of the scale in this research was .89. For this research the scale was modified in that 18 items were created, which differ in terms of the content young people exchange (text, photos and/or videos),

Three items related to assessment of the frequency of receiving sexually suggestive or provocative text messages, photographs or video recordings (How often have you received sexually suggestive or provocative text messages through an application on your mobile phone or by internet on your computer?). Three items were used to assess the frequency of sending sexually suggestive or provocative text messages, photographs or video recordings (How often have you sent sexually suggestive or provocative photographs, using an application on your mobile phone or by internet on your computer?). Three items related to assessment of the frequency of responding to sexually suggestive or provocative text messages, photographs or video recordings which the subjects received (How often have you responded to sexually suggestive or provocative text messages, through an application on your mobile phone or by internet on your computer?). Assessment of the frequency of responses by the other person to sexually suggestive or provocative text messages, photographs and video recordings which the subjects had sent (How often has some one responded to sexually suggestive or provocative text messages you have sent, using an application on a mobile phone or by internet?) was tested using three items. And finally, for three items the frequency was tested of the publication of sexually suggestive or provocative text messages, photographs or video recordings (How often have you publicised sexually suggestive or provocative photographs, using an application on a mobile phone or by internet on your computer?). As we can see for each type of the sexting items differ in the in terms of the content youth exchange (text, photos and/or videos). Furthermore, the remaining three items related to the number of people with whom the subjects exchange sexually suggestive or provocative content and assessment of the identity of the persons with whom the subjects exchange sexually suggestive or provocative contents (1 - I do not exchange sexually suggestive or provocative text messages, photographs and/or video recordings with anyone, 2 - with friends and people I like, 3 - with the person I am dating, 4 - with the person with whom I am in an intimate relationship (e.g. boyfriend or girlfriend)), where the subjects were able to choose more than one response; and which applications they use most often to exchange sexually suggestive or provocative contents (1 - SMS, 2 - WhatsApp, 3 - Instagram, 4 - Snapchat, 5 - Facebook, 6 - Twitter, 7 - e-mail, 8 - none), where the subjects could also choose more than one response. The original version of the

scale did not take into account video recordings and popular social and communications networks, which young people use today (Twitter, WhatsApp), and therefore for this research it was modified to include the items mentioned above.

The results of exploratory factor analysis of the Sexting Scale (using the common factor method with the Guttman-Kaiser extraction criterion and a minimum eigenvalue of 1) show the existence of two factors which should be included in the final version, and which do not agree with the author's construction of the existence of three factors. This two factors were named as receiving and sending sexually suggestive or provocative contents (12 items), as well as an publication of sexually suggestive or provocative contents (3 items). According to Worthington and Whittaker (2006) it may contain a factor with a minimum of three items. The reliability indicators (from .81 to .93) and the validity of the Sexting Scale indicate the good metrical characteristics and usefulness of this questionnaire in future research (see Kordić, 2018).

Results

Before the statistical analysis itself, the normality of distribution was tested using the Shapiro-Wilk test, of the results for the scales in the Emotional Skills and Competence Questionnaire and the Sexting Behaviours Scale. It was established that only the results of the scales "perceive and understand emotions" and "express and label emotions" were normally distributed ($p > .05$), whilst the distribution of results on the "regulate and manage emotions" scale, and the Sexting Behaviours Scales of "receiving and sending sexually suggestive or provocative contents" and "publication of sexually suggestive or provocative content" deviated from normal ($p < .05$). The distribution of the results for "receiving and sending" and "publication of sexually suggestive or provocative contents" were positively asymmetrical, which indicates that a larger number of participants reported low levels of engagement in sexting behaviours, which was more expressed for the scale of "publication of sexually suggestive or provocative contents". In line with this, parametric procedures were used for processing the results for the scale "perceiving and understanding emotions" and "expressing and labelling emotions", and non-parametric procedures for the other variables. For testing the correlation between emotional skills and competence and engaging in sexting, we used the Point-biserial correlation analysis. To verify the predictive value of gender, age and level of emotional skills and competences in relation to engagement in sexting we used binary logistic regression. For assessment of the significance of the results obtained, the levels of significance .05, .01 and .001 were used.

1. Categorizing the subjects on the basis of cluster analysis

For categorization of the subjects in groups in relation to the frequency of participation in sexting, we used hierarchical cluster analysis and non-hierarchical k-means analysis. Categorization was undertaken for each factor separately. When testing different solutions, those including two factors were found to be unacceptable. The decision was based on the acceptable number of subjects in clusters and the interpretability of the clusters.

For the factor "sending and receiving" two clusters were formed (non-sexters and sexters), where the first clusters comprised 76.36% of the subjects (a result of less than 2 on the sexting scale), and the other cluster comprised 23.64% of the subjects (a result of 2 or more on the sexting scale). These two groups differed from one another in terms of sex, where there was a higher number of young women in the first cluster in comparison with

young men, and in the second cluster there was a higher number of young men in relation to young women ($\chi^2(1, N=440) = 59.95; p<0.01$).

In the "publication" factor, the first cluster comprised 89.77% of subjects (a result of 1 on the sexting scale), and the second cluster comprised 10.23% of subjects (a score above 1 on the sexting scale). These two groups differed from one another in terms of sex, where there was a higher number of young women in the first cluster in comparison with young men, and in the second cluster there was a higher number of young men in relation to young women ($\chi^2(1, N=440) = 28.83; p<0.01$).

The participants most often exchanged sexually explicit messages with people with whom they were in an intimate relationship (114 participants in the research), and with friends and people they liked (83 participants in the research), and least with people they were dating (38 participants). 229 participants had not exchanged sexually suggestive contents.

For exchanging messages with sexually suggestive or provocative contents, the most frequently used applications were WhatsApp (171 participants), Facebook (59 participants), Instagram (39 participants), Snapchat (37 participants), SMS (11 participants) and four participants each used Twitter and e-mail.

The average number of people with whom the participants exchanged sexually suggestive or provocative contents was: $M=1.78$ ($SD=3.44$, $min=1$, $max=25$).

2. Testing differences in sexting and in emotional skills and competences in relation to sex

The differences in engagement in sexting in relation to sex were tested using the Mann-Whitney U test. The results shown in Table 1 show that young men engage in receiving and sending and in publishing sexually suggestive or provocative contents more often than young women. Major differences were noticed in receiving and sending sexually suggestive or provocative contents.

By examining the significance of the differences in emotional skills and competences between young men and young women using the Mann-Whitney U test (Table 1) it was established that young men and young women differ in the regulation and management of their emotions, where young women have a greater perceived ability to regulate and manage their emotions than young men. Further, using the Student's T-Test, it was established that young men and young women differ significantly in perceiving and understanding emotions, where young women also have higher results. Using the Student's T – Test , no difference was found in expressing and labelling emotions in relation to sex.

3. Testing differences in emotional skills and competences between subjects who sext and those who do not

The differences in emotional skills and competences in relation to the sexting categories (non-sexters and sexters) were tested using the Mann-Whitney U test. The results shown in Table 2 show difference in perceiving and understanding emotions, and in regulation and management of emotions, regarding the sexting category Participants who don't sexts were more successful in perceiving and understanding emotions, and had a greater ability to regulate and manage emotions.

Table 1. Differences in engagement in sexting and emotional skills and competence in relation to sex

	Sex				Z	P
	Young women		Young men			
	Mdn	IQR	Mdn	IQR		
Receiving and sending	1.08	.33	1.75	1.35	-8.36	.00***
Publishing	1.00	.00	1.00	.00	-5.47	.00***
Regulation and management of emotion	59.00	9.00	59.00	13.00	-2.00	.04*
	M	SD	M	SD	t	P
Perceiving and understanding emotions	54.88	6.83	51.29	8.41	-4.94	.00***
Expressing and labelling emotions	48.23	7.41	47.62	7.64	-.84	.39

* p<.05; ***p<.001

A further analysis of the results showed that there were significant differences in all sub-scales of emotional competence in relation to participation in publication of sexually suggestive or provocative contents (Table 3). Young people who were not participate in sexting were more successful at perceiving and understanding emotions, in expressing and labelling emotions, and had a greater ability to regulate and manage emotions in comparison to young people who sexts.

4. Examining the relationship between emotional skills and competences and engagement in sexting

The correlation between emotional skills and competences and sexting categories (non-sexters and sexters) were tested using the Point-biserial correlation analysis. The results shown in Table 4 show statistically significant negative correlation between emotional skills and competences and the sexting categories, and receiving and sending as well as publication of sexually suggestive or provocative contents. The results obtained suggest that the subjects who have higher levels of emotional competence, receive and send sexually suggestive or provocative contents to a lesser extent, and also publicize sexually suggestive or provocative contents to a lesser extent. Medium correlations were noticed in the factor of publication of sexually suggestive or provocative contents.

Table 2. Differences in emotional skills and competences in relation to the sexting categories (non-sexsters and sexsters) for receiving and sending sexually suggestive or provocative contents

Emotional skill and competence	Receiving and sending					
	Non-sexting category		Sexting category		Z	P
	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>IQR</i>	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>IQR</i>		
Perceiving and understanding emotions	54.00	10.00	50.00	11.00	-4.75	.00***
Expressing and labelling emotions	48.00	9.00	46.50	13.00	-1.62	.11
Regulation and management of emotions	59.00	9.00	56.00	14.00	-3.79	.00***

*** $p < .001$

Table 3. Differences in emotional skills and competences in relation to the sexting categories (non-sexsters and sexsters) for publishing sexually suggestive or provocative contents

Emotional skill and competence	Publishing					
	Non-sexting category		Sexting category		Z	P
	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>IQR</i>	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>IQR</i>		
Perceiving and understanding emotions	54.00	10.00	45.00	11.00	-6.08	.00***
Expressing and labelling emotions	48.00	10.00	42.50	15.00	-3.90	.00***
Regulation and management of emotions	60.00	9.00	50.50	14.50	-5.31	.00***

*** $p < .001$

Table 4. Correlation coefficient between emotional skill and competences and sexting categories (non-sexters and sexters)

		Emotional skill and competences				
Non-sexters sexters	and	Perceiving understanding emotions	and	Expressing and labelling emotions	and	Regulation management of emotions
Receiving sending	and	-.24**		-.09*		-.23**
Publishing		-.31**		-.19**		-.31**

*p<.05; **p<.01

Table 5. Result of binary logistic regression analysis

Predictors	Receiving and sending				Publishing			
	B	S.E.	P	OR (95% CI)	B	S.E.	P	OR (95% CI)
Sex	1.63	.26	.00***	5.11 (3.06 – 8.55)	1.38	.40	.00**	3.97 (1.83 – 8.63)
Age	.08	.07	.27	1.08 (.94 – 1.23)	.07	.10	.47	1.07 (.89 – 1.30)
Perceiving and understanding	-.04	.02	.09	.96 (.92 – 1.01)	-.08	.03	.02*	.92 (.87 – .99)
Expressing and labelling	.03	.02	.18	1.03 (.99 – 1.08)	.01	.03	.71	1.01 (.95 – 1.08)
Regulation and management of emotions	-.06	.02	.01**	.95 (.91 – .99)	-.07	.03	.00**	.93 (.88 – .98)
Cox & Snel R2	.04				.02			

*p<.05; **p<.01; ***p<.001

5. Testing the predictive contribution of gender, age and the level of emotional skills and competences to engaging in sexting

The predictive value of gender, age and the level of emotional skills and competences in explaining sexting were tested using binary logistic regression (Table 5). The analysis was conducted whereby the criterion variable was sexting, or sending, receiving and publishing sexually suggestive or provocative contents (0-non-sexters, 1-sexters), and the predictor variables were gender, age and emotional skills and competences.

For receiving and sending, as well as publishing, the most significant predictor was shown to be sex, whereas age was not a predictor of engaging in sexting. In addition, regulation and management of emotions was a significant predictor for receiving and sending and publication of sexually suggestive or provocative contents. Perceiving and understanding emotions was a predictor for publishing sexually suggestive or provocative contents. It should be emphasized that model leaves a lot of variance in sexting behaviors unexplained.

Discussion

The results of this research indicate that a total of 23.64% students received and sent, and 10.23% of them published sexually suggestive or provocative contents. In comparison with data from previous research on a sample of young people aged between 18 and 25, it may be concluded that the frequency of sexting in our research is lower than in previous research. The results of research conducted so far indicate that a significant proportion of young people engage in sexting, whereby between 43% and 80% of them have participated in some form of sexting at least once (Benotsch et al., 2013; Crimmins & Seigfried-Spellar, 2014; Dir et al., 2013; Gordon-Messer et al., 2013; Klettke et al., 2014). However, when comparing the results of this research with the results of other research the criterion must be taken into account that was used to categorize the subjects into groups in terms of the frequency of engaging in sexting (sexters/non-sexters). Whilst in a large amount of previous research participation in sexting was defined as engagement in some form of sexting behaviour at least once, in this research stricter criteria were used for categorizing subjects in terms of participation in sexting. This categorization, reached by cluster analysis, made it possible to separate two categories more clearly (sexters-non-sexters), that is, the sexters' category included people who were more active in this regard, so that people who were rarely involved in this behaviour were not included in the sexters group, which gave a better insight into the relationship of the variables being tested. Use of stricter criteria is also justified by the results of research by some other authors, who used several categories for categorizing the frequency of participation in sexting (Levine, 2013; Morelli et al, 2016), and they established that a high and medium level of participation in sexting was more linked with other problematic behaviour and that sexting practised on a low level cannot be defined as risky behaviour. Although less research into sexting has included an assessment of publication of sexually suggestive or provocative contents, the frequency of publication of that kind of content found in this research is in line with the findings of some previous research (Morelli et al, 2016). Participants most often exchanged sexually suggestive or provocative contents with persons with whom they were in an intimate relationship, which is in line with the results of previous research (Crofts et al., 2014; Weisskirch, & Delevi, 2011). Possible explanation for these results we can try to find in psychological correlates of sexting. One line of research posits that sexting can function as a readdurance seeking behavior and help

alleviate relationship or sexual anxiety among anxiously attached individuals (Drouin & Tobin, 2014). This is confirmed in research of Weisskirch and Delevi (2011) conducted among 18–30 year olds. Attachment anxiety, in this research, was related to sending text messages propositioning sexual activity for individuals in relationships

The results of this research showed that young men, in comparison with young women, engage more often in receiving and sending, and in publication of sexually suggestive or provocative contents. Although the results of previous research did not give unanimous findings regarding sex differences, the results of this research as in line with the results of some previous research, which also showed that young men in general engage in sexting more often (Delevi & Weisskirch, 2013; Jonsson et al., 2014; Morelli et al., 2016; Strassberg et al., 2013). These findings may be explained by the existence of double standards related to sex, whereby young women are more often shamed for participating in sexting and they are usually the ones who bear the negative consequences (Albury, Crawford, Byron, & Mathews, 2013; Hasinoff & Shepherd, 2014; Karaian, 2014; Lee, & Crofts, 2015; Ringrose, Harvey, Gill, & Livingstone, 2013), which means that they engage in sexting less often than young men, or they are embarrassed to admit to it. On the other hand, the relative social acceptance of male sexuality leads to the fact that young men come under less pressure and condemnation from society. Moreover, research has shown that young men more often participate in exchanges of messages which were intended for someone else (Gordon-Messer et al., 2013; Lenhart, 2010.)

Further, sex differences have been found in some dimensions of emotional competence. Young women had higher results in perceiving and understanding emotions, and in regulating and management of emotions, but not in expressing and labelling emotions, where no difference was established in terms of sex. The results of previous research have indicated the superiority of the female sex in terms of emotional intelligence, where women have a more developed ability to establish emotional communication with their environment, they are more successful in understanding their own emotions and the emotions of other people, and they act in accordance with their emotions to a greater degree (Van Deursen, Bolle, Hegner, & Kommers, 2015). Sex differences may be explained by the influence of socialization, whereby girls are encouraged from the earliest age to express their emotions, whilst boys learn to be more restrained regarding emotions. In addition, one possible explanation for the sex differences found stems from the results of research which show that some areas of the brain are responsible for processing emotional information are slightly larger in women than in men (Baron-Cohen, 2003).

The results of this research expand the findings of previous research, which established a significant relationship between emotional skills and competence and sexting. The results showed that subjects who participate in exchanges of sexually suggestive or provocative contents are less successful in perceiving and understanding emotions, as well as in regulating and managing emotions. In line with these results, sex differences were found in sexting and emotional competences, that is, an additional reason for the fact that young women engage in sexting less may be that young women are more successful than young men in perceiving and understanding emotions, and in regulating and managing emotions. These results are in line with the results of previous research which found that young people who have a lower ability to perceive and understand emotions (Houck et al., 2014) and difficulties in regulating emotions (Currò, 2017; Houck et al., 2014, Trub,

& Starks, 2017), engage in sexting to a greater extent. Deficits in these competences may hinder an appropriate reaction and lead to impulsive involvement in sexting. These results are in line with the conclusion proposed by Trub and Starks (2017), that sexting may represent an attempt to regulate or avoid negative emotions, acting in a similar way to engagement in other problematic behaviours in order to regulate negative emotions, such as substance abuse (Quinn, & Fromme, 2010), or sexually risky behaviour (Schachner, & Shaver, 2004).

In previous research examining the relationship between emotional competence and sexting, the ability to express and label emotions was not tested, which made it important to examine that relationship. However, a difference in the ability to express and label emotions in relation to participation in sexting was found in the publication of sexually suggestive or provocative contents, but not in receiving and sending that kind of content. As Houck et al. (2014) state, the relationship between sexting and a series of emotional difficulties indicates that young people with a deficit of emotional competence may have difficulties in communication, and therefore also in expressing their feelings about sexuality, which would lead them to use electronic forms of communication, such as sexting, in order to express themselves. The examination of the correlation between emotional competences and participation in sexting revealed a statistically significant negative correlation between all dimensions of emotional competence and participation in sexting, whereby greater reliability was found for publication of sexually suggestive or provocative contents.

Furthermore, a significant negative predictor of engagement in receiving and sending, as well as publication of sexually suggestive or provocative contents, was shown to be the ability to regulate and manage emotions, whilst the ability to perceive and understand emotions was shown to be a significant, although weak, negative predictor for publishing sexually suggestive or provocative contents. The difference between sending sexually suggestive or provocative contents and publishing that kind of content is that young people more often believe sending to be a relatively harmless form of communication (Strassberg et al., 2013), and they use it as a form of intimate communication with their partner. Therefore, the greater correlation found between emotional competences and publication may be explained by the fact that publication of that kind of content is more risky behaviour, which includes a broader audience, but also greater consequences.

Conclusion

On the basis of the results of this research it may be concluded that young men engage more often in sexting, and that young women are more successful in perceiving and understanding emotions, and in regulation and management of emotions. The participants who took part in exchanging (receiving, sending and publicising) sexually suggestive or provocative contents were less successful in perceiving and understanding emotions, as well as in regulating and managing emotions, in comparison to the subjects who did not engage in exchanging that kind of content. Further, participants who took part in publication of sexually suggestive or provocative contents were less successful in expressing and labelling emotions in comparison to subjects who did not participate in that behaviour. Participation in sexting was statistically significantly negatively correlated to all dimensions of emotional competence. Finally, sex was shown to be a significant predictor for participation in sexting. The ability to regulate and manage emotions was a significant negative predictor for engaging in receiving and sending, as well as publishing sexually

suggestive or provocative contents. The ability to perceive and understand emotions was shown to be a significant negative predictor for publicising sexually suggestive or provocative contents.

In conclusion, it may be said that the results of this research indicate that sexting is not necessarily just another form of sexual expression in young people, but it is linked to difficulties in processing emotional information, which leads to young people engaging in sexting. The results obtained to a certain extent confirm the hypotheses and are in line with the understanding of sexting as risky behaviour which may be prevented by developing emotional skills and competences.

Limitations of the Study

This research had several limitations. One of the weaknesses of this research is related to the unclear definition of sexting. We did not clearly define "sexually suggestive or provocative" content, so subjects could have had different interpretations of what this content consists of. Also, whilst in some research it was clearly defined that the picture only contained people or a person they knew, in this test there was no emphasis on who was included in the content, so it is possible that some participants understood sexting to be the exchange of sexually explicit contents containing famous people, or sexually explicit contents they had taken from the internet or social networks, containing people they did not know personally.

Further, the sample of participants in this research does not represent the general population, which limits the possibility of generalization of the results obtained. Moreover, all the data were collected only by reporting, which has its own weaknesses, including the difficulties involved in perceiving one's own behaviour, and the need to give socially acceptable responses. Although the participants were guaranteed anonymity, due to the sensitivity of the subject it is possible that they did not respond completely honestly, which could have distorted the true relationship of the variables tested. Perhaps the results would have been different if emotional competence was measured by performance tests and not by self-assessment, which would certainly be good to verify in future research. In future research it would also be useful to test the circumstances of the exchange of sexually explicit contents, but also the attitudes of young people about sexting, to be able to understand better the gender differences found.

Furthermore, the results could not reflect the actual relationship between emotional intelligence and sexting. There may be also other factors that are associated with the emotional intelligence and sexting such as a social control. It can be possible that an influence of social control leads to both low emotional intelligence and high sexting among young men and high emotional intelligence and low sexting among young women. Future studies should test this.

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