

Research Article

A Cross-Cultural Examination of the Sexting Motives and Attitudes: Bosnia and Herzegovina vs. Croatia

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Many sexting studies conducted in the Western cultures have shown that the percentage is higher in less traditional cultures. However, the generalizability of this phenomenon to non-Western cultures has not been extensively researched. The purpose of this study is to examine and explain cross-cultural differences in sexting behavior among subjects from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia. A mixed methods approach was used. The first, qualitative phase included focus groups with two groups of high school students from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia ($N = 57$), aged 15 to 19. In the second, quantitative phase, questionnaires were sent to 440 young adults with an average age of 21 years ($SD = 3.8$). From the interviews with the young people, nonconsensual sexting was perceived as less beneficial. Sexting was viewed as a double standard. The quantitative study revealed gender and country differences in attitudes toward sexting and motives for sexting. Positive attitudes toward sexting were found to predict different forms of sexting motives in both samples. In the sample from Bosnia and Herzegovina, age was found to predict sexting with instrumental motives and body image reinforcement motives. Gender, on the other hand, was found to be predictive of instrumental sexting motives in the Croatian sample and body image reinforcement sexting motives in the Bosnia and Herzegovina sample. This study illustrates the value of cross-cultural approaches combined with mixed methods as a design to study sexting behavior.

1. Introduction

In recent years, with the rapid growth of technology, a particular form of behavior has emerged called sexting—the sharing of self-produced sexual material via electronic devices [1]. Sexting emphasizes relationship context and consent [2] and can have positive consequences, such as strengthening an intimate relationship between partners, especially when partners are separated [3]. Negative consequences of sexting can include emotional difficulties [4], blackmail, and (cyber) bullying [5, 6].

Previous studies have addressed a number of factors that explain why adolescents engage in sexting, including sexual purposes (e.g., flirting, initiation of sexual activity, and sexual attention from the recipient) [7, 8], body image reinforcement [9, 10], being pressured ([11]; Kopecký, 2011),

or harming someone in exchange for favors or money and victimization and perpetration of sexting [8, 12]. Sexual purposes increased with age, while body image reinforcement showed a quadratic trend, increasing from adolescence to early young adulthood and decreasing from early to late young adulthood [10].

In addition to motivation for sexting, an individual's attitude toward sexting is one of the most important predictors of involvement in sexting behavior [13]. Negative attitudes toward sexting include potential humiliation and concern about reputation [14]. Conversely, many individuals have positive expectations of sexting and believe that participating in sexting increases self-confidence and is a way to increase sexual and relationship satisfaction among partners [15–18]. The majority of emerging adults perceive sexual behavior as normative and there is less stigma

associated with sexual activity than among adolescents [19]. In addition, young adults are more likely than adolescents to engage in sexting, and sexting may be a common behavior in established young adult relationships ([11]; Mori et al., 2020).

Gender roles are also an important factor in motivations and attitudes toward sexting. Young men are significantly more likely than young women to view sexting as a way to be popular, have “fun,” and be acceptable after a relationship breakup [20]. In addition, sexting is perceived as riskier and associated with more negative consequences by women than by men [21, 22].

Another factor that influences sexting is cultural background [23]. Some theories currently used to explain sexting (e.g., [23–26]) address how a behavior such as sexting is embedded in a particular culture, but cross-cultural comparisons are rare and research on sexting behavior starts from a Western premise. Existing studies have suggested that socio-cultural factors should be considered to understand differences in the sexting phenomenon across countries. Previous cross-cultural studies [27–32] have found that experiences of sexting vary by country and gender, with higher prevalence in less traditional countries and more pronounced gender differences in countries with more liberal views of sexual behavior appropriate for women than in sexually permissive countries.

Another shortcoming is that many studies of sexting have been conducted in the United States or in Northern and Western Europe and use quantitative approaches, whereas research on sexting in southeastern regions of Europe [27, 32, 33] remains scarce. Although little attention has been paid to this issue, the phenomenon has been found to be evident among adolescents in southeastern European countries.

Previous cross-cultural work on sexting serves as important background for the present study. They offer insights into the cultural meanings underlying sexting and help contextualize understandings of sexting across cultures. However, these studies are still relatively scattered, leaving the picture about nuanced differences somewhat unclear. For this reason, the current study took an exploratory approach to examine attitudes toward sexting in two different cultures: Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The main goal of the study was to increase knowledge about cross-cultural similarities and differences regarding sexting. Conducting a cross-cultural study with young people from two different societies, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia, is planned for several reasons. First, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia share certain similarities in that both countries are in a period of transition in the postwar period, where many social changes have taken place for national and religious reasons, which have certainly affected the cultural context of these areas, but also the development of each individual [34]. Despite the economic similarities and the small geographical distance, there are significant differences between the two countries. Unlike Croatia, the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina is predominantly multiethnic (Croats, Serbs, and Bosniaks) and heterogeneous in religious orientation (Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Muslim). According

to the Bosnia and Herzegovina census, 50.7% of the population is Muslim, 30.7% Orthodox, and 15.2% Roman Catholic. In contrast, the population of the Republic of Croatia is quite homogeneous with 86.3% Roman Catholic, 4.4% Orthodox, 1.5% Muslim, and 0.34% Protestant.

We have a strong theory to make predictions about the differential effects of culture on sexting. The most influential theory of youth development, the socioecological theoretical model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), posits that the culture in which children and adolescents grow up has distal and proximal effects on behavior. Different cultures are characterized by different norms and behavioral expectations, which have been shown to be reflected in different media habits [35]. In traditional culture, more conservative attitudes, unequal gender roles, and restrictive attitudes toward sexual behavior prevail [36, 37], which may reduce the likelihood of engaging in certain forms of online sexual behavior. Rash and Gainsbury [38] point out that focusing on culture and ethnicity is worthless, as studies finding differences between European and non-European ethnicities in the antecedents and consequences of sexting may be due to differences in cultural values and practices—individualistic versus collectivistic concerns. Religious culture also plays an important role in society as one of the factors influencing the expression of sexuality and usually determines the moral rules for good and bad behavior and has a great influence on the perception of sexuality and promotes or restricts sexual behavior [39]. The Catholic Church, for example, holds the basic position that sexual activity should only occur within marriage and that the primary purpose of sex is procreation, while condemning other forms of sexual behavior. Innocence and celibacy are considered virtues, divorce is not possible, the use of all artificial contraceptive methods is forbidden, homosexual intercourse and adultery are considered sins, and masturbation is a moral disorder [39]. In contrast to Christianity, Islam is generally characterized by a more conservative attitude toward sexuality [40]. Social norms are aimed at discouraging people from premarital sex and the importance of premarital innocence. Norms of disapproval of informal communication and sociability between people of the opposite sex, as well as prior contracting and marriages, contribute to premarital relationships being less common than among Christians [40]. Although in the context of religious values, Wéry et al. [41] emphasized that in online sexual activity we need to consider moral incongruence theory, which assumes that users believe online sexual behavior is wrong (e.g., on a religious or moral level) but engage in it anyway, which may lead them to experience more emotional symptoms and lower self-esteem.

Based on this, we hypothesized that in a more traditional society such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, which supports and upholds more sexually restrictive values, attitudes toward sexting would be less positive, contributing to lower sexting motivation. In a less traditional society such as Croatia, the influence of culture likely contributes to more positive attitudes toward sexting as a normal developmental stage for young people and, consequently, higher sexting motivation.

Furthermore, due to the multicultural nature of Bosnia and Herzegovina in terms of ethnic and religious identity, differences in sexting prevalence among young adults from different ethnic and religious backgrounds are to be expected.

To answer the research question, we developed a mixed methods research approach by combining two studies. First, we conducted a qualitative online focus group (Study 1) to examine how two cultures perceive different forms of sexting. Then, a quantitative study (Study 2) was conducted to examine how cultural values relate to attitudes and motivations toward sexting. According to Creswell (2008), this mixed method is very useful in answering research questions not only about the “what” but also about the “how” and “why.”

2. Study 1: Qualitative Survey

Using a qualitative approach, we aimed to obtain empirical information about attitudes toward sexting in a Bosnian-Herzegovinian and a Croatian sample. We examined the extent to which the results obtained in this qualitative study are consistent with the above theoretical and research considerations.

2.1. Methods

2.1.1. Participants. The participants were 27 Bosnian and Herzegovinian students living in Bosnia and Herzegovina and 30 Croatian students living in Croatia, aged between 15 and 19 years. Of the Bosnia and Herzegovina participants, 9 were from the first capital city (Sarajevo), 6 were from the second largest city (Banja Luka), and 12 were from the sixth largest city in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Mostar). Of the Croatian participants, 9 lived in the largest city in the capital (Zagreb), 12 in the third largest city (Rijeka), and 9 in the fifth largest city in Croatia (Zadar). Regarding intimate relationship status, 40.730% ($N = 11$) of high school students from Bosnia and Herzegovina and 20% ($N = 6$) from Croatia reported that they are currently in an intimate relationship. When it comes to participation in sexting, 22.222% of the sample from Bosnia and Herzegovina ($N = 6$) shared their own sexually explicit content, while 26.666% of the Croatian sample shared their own sexually explicit content.

2.1.2. Procedure. The study was approved by the Ethics Committee for Psychology of the University of Zadar, the University of Banja Luka, and the University of Mostar. Participants were recruited through advertisements on the schools' websites. The advertisements described that the study was about sexting experiences. The focus groups were conducted between March and May 2021. The focus groups were conducted online in a synchronous, password-protected forum via Zoom and were digitally recorded in text form. Two experienced researchers with prior qualitative research experience moderated the discussions and had direct online contact with participants throughout the data collection period. Prior to participating in the focus group, participants were asked to provide informed consent and were allowed to ask questions. The focus group schedule (see Appendix) included providing opinions on five short hypothetical vignettes and answering several socio-

demographic questions. The five hypothetical vignettes were created based on five types of sexting experiences: (1) intimate partner pressure sexting, (2) revenge sexting, (3) consensual intimate partner pressure sexting, (4) peer pressure sexting, and (5) flirting sexting. For a detailed description of the development and validation of the hypothetical stories, see the paper by Dodaj et al. [42]. The focus group discussion lasted between 60 and 120 minutes. After the questioning, participants were debriefed and given time to ask additional questions or express concerns. The focus groups were piloted with both Croatian and Bosnian and Herzegovinian students, with slight changes in the wording of the questions. To encourage youth to participate in the study, they were offered a \$6 prize. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, with the names of the participants replaced by pseudonyms.

2.1.3. Data Analysis. Reflexive thematic analysis [43, 44] with an inductive approach (i.e., using data as the ground of analysis) was used to generate themes from participants' responses to focus group questions. In our study, two authors first independently read the transcripts to familiarize themselves with the data and take notes on features of interest in the data. The authors then met to discuss their notes with each other. The first author had read all of the transcripts, while the second author read another third of the transcripts (i.e., one from each cultural group). Next, the first author read the entire dataset multiple times, simultaneously generating initial themes and subthemes through coding. Next, the second author reviewed and commented on the initial themes and subthemes (e.g., suggesting themes that could be combined or removed). Last, the first author revised the themes and subthemes, drawing on the dataset as needed.

2.2. Results. We generated four themes regarding the attitudes that participants expressed in relation to various forms of sexting. Participants' responses were based primarily on reflection of their personal experiences and the experiences of another person they knew. Each theme included subthemes. Table 1 provides an overview of the themes and subthemes with additional sample citations. Unless otherwise noted, the themes and subthemes were expressed by both Bosnian-Herzegovinian and Croatian participants. At the end of this section, we also describe cultural differences in sexting attitudes.

2.2.1. Rejecting Attitude towards Sexting. The first theme reflects participants' perceptions of unfavorable attitudes toward sexting.

Sexting is rejected when there is blackmail or pressure (from peers/partners). Participants emphasized that nonconsensual sexting is generally wrong (e.g., “It's not right for me because it's practically blackmail,” F, Zadar, Croatia) and that those who blackmail or pressure are seen as bad people (e.g., “Ana is a terrible person,” F, Zagreb, Croatia). However, participants emphasized that a person should not engage in nonconsensual sexting (e.g., “She should not have done it; I do not support it,” F, Croatia) or even end the

TABLE 1: Themes generated from the study exploring sexting attitudes.

Themes	Subordinate themes	Example of coded extract
Rejecting attitude towards sexting (234)	Sexting is rejected when there is blackmail or pressure (from peers/partners) (170)	“I think Robert should seek help...”
	Sexting is rejected because of negative consequences (27)	“This will only bring them closer to blackmail if one of them decides to separate.”
	Sexting is rejected when it is used for flirting (20)	“Well, it’s silly of me to send photos like that to flirt.”
	Sexting is rejected when it is used for the purpose of intimacy (9)	“If those photos are the reason they are still together, I think there’s something wrong with their relationship.”
	Sexting is rejected when those involved do not consider the possible consequences (10)	“It’s their own fault because they knew the negative consequences and could not be sure if the photos would be deleted.”
Accepting attitude towards sexting (29)	Sexting is accepted because of the positive consequences (12)	“Sara and Allen have a healthy relationship full of trust. Sexting is a normal thing when you are in a long relationship and trust each other. It brings you closer together.”
	Sexting is accepted when it is voluntary/consensual (11)	“If the other party is okay with receiving such images, that’s fine.”
	Sexting is accepted when those involved are aware of the consequences (6)	“If he’s not interested in his photos being shared, that’s fine too.”
Neutral attitude toward sexting (15)	Sexting is one’s own choice and responsibility (15)	“Everyone is their own person, they can do what they want, even with the opposite sex.”
Double standard on sexting for flirting (7)	Double standard on sexting for flirting (7)	“Comparing boys and girls in this situation is somehow not the same for me.”

relationship (e.g., “If he continues to seek or threaten termination or something like that, you should leave him behind,” F, Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina).

Sexting is rejected because of negative consequences. Participants felt that sexting in general has negative consequences (e.g., “I think she made a big mistake and this will have negative consequences,” F, Rijeka, Croatia), legal consequences (e.g., “Since Allen is underage, this means that he is technically filming child pornography of himself, which would easily land him behind bars,” M, Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina), or consequences related to distribution (e.g., “I do not think she did the right thing, who knows how many people can see the picture and spread it further,” F, Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina) and abuse of such content (e.g., “... but really nothing is private and they need to think about what will happen if they break up,” M, Zagreb, Croatia).

Sexting is rejected when it is used for flirting. Participants described sexting for the purpose of flirting as wrong (e.g., “Saša is also wrong when he flirts like that because it is inappropriate,” M, Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina) or harassing to others (“His way of flirting is harassing/attacking to another person,” F, Zadar, Croatia).

Sexting is rejected when it is used for the purpose of intimacy. Some participants emphasized that sexting for the purpose of intimacy is wrong and inappropriate, without elaborating (e.g., “This is not the right way,” F, Zagreb, Croatia).

Sexting is rejected when those involved do not consider the possible consequences. Some participants believe that those who sexts do not consider the consequences (e.g., “She does not think about the consequences,” F, Mostar, Bosnia and

Herzegovina) and should be held responsible (e.g., “Ana is obviously obsessed with him and it is both their fault that they decided to send such pictures,” M, Zagreb, Croatia).

2.2.2. Accepting Attitude towards Sexting. The second theme reflects participants’ perceptions of how certain characteristics of sexting might relate to more positive attitudes toward sexting.

Sexting is accepted because of the positive consequences. Participants viewed sexting in intimate contexts as something positive, particularly as facilitating intimacy in (long-term) relationships (e.g., “Sara and Alen have a healthy relationship. Sexting is something normal when you are in a long relationship and trust each other. It brings you closer to each other,” F, Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina).

Sexting is accepted when it is voluntary/consensual. Emphasizing voluntariness and/or intimacy between people and setting rules that should not be violated were associated with positive attitudes toward sexting (e.g., “If they are sure that neither Sara nor Alen will share the pictures and if they are really in love, I think it is okay,” F, Rijeka, Croatia).

Sexting is accepted when those involved are aware of the consequences. Participants described the importance of taking responsibility for sexting and the possible consequences (e.g., “I would say that everything we talked about concerns the person who sends the pictures, they have to be aware of the procedures and consequences and that’s it,” F, Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina).

2.2.3. Neutral Attitude toward Sexting. The third theme reflects the perception of participants who take a neutral position towards sexting.

TABLE 2: Percentages of occurrence of (sub)themes of sexting attitudes in each of the two cultural groups.

Sexting attitudes	Sexting attitudes	
	B&H	Croatia
<i>Rejecting attitude towards sexting</i>	21 (77.777%)	30 (100%)
Sexting is rejected when there is blackmail or pressure (from peers/partners)	21 (77.777%)	30 (100%)
Sexting is rejected because of negative consequences	13 (48.148%)	9 (30%)
Sexting is rejected when it is used for flirting	6 (22.222%)	11 (36.666%)
Sexting is rejected when it is used for the purpose of intimacy	1 (3.703%)	4 (13.333%)
Sexting is rejected when those involved do not consider the possible consequences	5 (18.518%)	4 (13.333%)
<i>Accepting attitude towards sexting</i>	10 (37.037%)	12 (40%)
Sexting is accepted because of the positive consequences	5 (18.518%)	6 (20%)
Sexting is accepted when it is voluntary/consensual	5 (18.518%)	6 (20%)
Sexting is accepted when those involved are aware of the consequences	3 (11.111%)	3 (10%)
<i>Neutral attitude toward sexting</i>	8 (29.629%)	7 (23.333%)
Sexting is one's own choice and responsibility	8 (29.629%)	7 (23.333%)

Sexting is one's own choice and responsibility. Some participants described sexting as their own choice and decision (e.g., "If they think it's okay, I do not mind," F, Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina).

2.2.4. Double Standard on Sexting for Flirting. The last theme reflects participants' perceptions of sexual double standards. Participants believed that society and peers apply different standards to boys and girls who engage in sexting for flirting. Girls were believed to be perceived more negatively than boys (e.g., "In our society, a woman who sends such a photo is a "hooker," excuse the expression," F, Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina).

2.2.5. Differences in the Occurrence of the Themes among Two Samples. Table 2 describes the percentage of participants (from each culture) who mentioned each of the themes. There were no statistical differences in the percentage of responses to each of the three themes (rejecting, accepting, and neutral attitudes toward sexting) between the two samples ($\chi^2 = 0.710$, $df = 2$, $p = 0.701$). Approximately 78% of participants from Bosnia and Herzegovina and 100% of participants from Croatia had a rejecting attitude towards sexting, especially in relation to blackmail and peer/partner pressure. 37% of respondents from Bosnia and Herzegovina and 40% of respondents from Croatia indicated a positive attitude towards sexting if it is consensual and/or has positive consequences, while 23% of respondents from Croatia and 29% of respondents from Bosnia and Herzegovina had a neutral attitude towards sexting.

3. Study 2: Quantitative Survey

The next step was to use a quantitative approach to examine whether there are differences in sexting motives and attitudes between two different samples from Bosnia and Herzegovina and a Croatian sample.

3.1. Methods

3.1.1. Participants and Procedure. We collected survey data from 440 participants. The mean age of the entire sam-

ple of young adults was $M = 20.927$ (standard deviation (SD) = 3.802) years. The samples were collected in two countries: Bosnia and Herzegovina (210 participants; 87% female) and Croatia (230 participants; 62% female). The majority of participants from Croatia (97%) were Croats and 53% were single, whereas the sample from Bosnia and Herzegovina was composed of 59% Serbs, 38% Bosnians, and 3% Croats, with 53% being single.

3.1.2. Measures

(1) Sexting Motivation. The 13-item Sexting Motivations Questionnaire (SMQ, [8]) was used to measure motivation for sexting using three subscales: sexual purpose (e.g., "Sometimes I send sexts to increase intimacy in my dating relationship"), instrumental/aggravated purpose (e.g., "Sometimes I send sexts to hurt or damage someone"), and body image reinforcement purpose (e.g., "Sometimes I send sexts to test whether I am attractive enough"). For the subscales, participants had to indicate their agreement with statements about the frequency of sexting on a 5-point Likert scale (never—1 to always—6). Measures of sexting motivation had satisfactory internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha: 0.932 for the sexting purpose subscale, 0.800 for the instrumental/aggravated purpose, and 0.921 for the body image reinforcement).

(2) Attitude toward Sexting. Attitudes toward sexting behavior were measured using 3 items that participants rated on a seven-point semantic differential scale (e.g., from 1—not at all funny to 7—very funny). Items were taken from the study by Walrave et al. [45]. Items were summed such that higher scores indicated more positive attitudes toward sexting ($\alpha = 0.894$). By choosing a basic rating dimension, we minimized potential translation issues and ensured that we were using a universal rating scale that could be applied in any culture [46].

(3) Demographic Variables. A demographic questionnaire was used to assess age, gender, and nationality.

TABLE 3: Descriptive and inferential statistics comparing males and females in sexting variables.

Sexting variables	Females		Males		Mann-Whitney U (Z)	p
	M	SD	M	SD		
<i>Sexting motives</i>						
Sexual purpose	1.636	0.941	1.798	1.078	1.143	0.253
Instrumental purpose	1.076	0.322	1.319	0.806	2.072	0.038
Body image reinforcement	1.220	0.548	1.507	0.974	1.921	0.055
<i>Attitudes toward sexting</i>	2.164	1.481	2.673	1.703	2.997	0.003

TABLE 4: Descriptive and inferential statistics comparing sample from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia in sexting variables.

Sexting variables	Sample from Bosnia and Herzegovina		Sample from Croatia		Mann-Whitney U (Z)	p
	M	SD	M	SD		
<i>Sexting motives</i>						
Sexual purpose	1.611	0.931	1.738	1.019	-1.428	0.153
Instrumental purpose	1.063	0.356	1.208	0.601	-2.064	0.039
Body image reinforcement	1.217	0.574	1.364	0.782	-1.352	0.176
<i>Attitudes toward sexting</i>	2.102	1.408	2.471	1.662	-2.046	0.041

3.1.3. Procedure. Data for this study were collected as part of a large cross-cultural study of sexting behavior. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the institutional review board. After ethical approval, participants were recruited online by placing advertisements about the study on the university and high school websites. Participants completed questionnaires online using Google Forms. All participants were asked to provide informed consent before completing the online questionnaires. Participants were assured that all information would be treated anonymously. Participants were entered into a prize draw to receive a small gift or incentive (depending on the country) for participating in the survey.

3.2. Results

3.2.1. Gender Differences in Sexting Variables. Table 3 shows the results of several Mann-Whitney U tests comparing men and women on sexting motives and sexting attitudes. The results show that males have statistically significantly higher instrumental motives for sexting and more positive attitudes toward sexting than their female peers.

3.2.2. Cultural Differences in Sexting Variables. Descriptive statistics for each of the sexting variables by each individual country are shown in Table 4. Table 4 also displays the results from several Mann-Whitney U tests to compare sample from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia countries on sexting motives and attitudes. Results showed that participants from Croatia sexted more for instrumental purpose and had more favorable attitudes toward sexting than sample from Bosnia and Herzegovina. No differences were observed for sexual purpose and body image reinforcement purpose between these two cultures.

Descriptive statistics for each of the sexting variables for each country can be found in Table 5. Table 5 also shows the results of several Mann-Whitney U tests comparing the

samples from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia on sexting motives and attitudes. The results show that participants from Croatia sext more for instrumental purposes and had more favorable attitudes toward sexting than participants from Bosnia and Herzegovina. No differences were found between these two cultures in terms of sexual purpose and body image reinforcement motives.

3.2.3. Predicting Sexting Motivation among Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia Sample. The results of the regression analyses predicting sexting motivation in the samples from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia are presented in Table 5. The results supported attitudes toward sexting in predicting motives for sexual purposes, explaining 47.284% of the variance in motives for sexual purposes in the Bosnia and Herzegovina sample and 16.492% in the Croatian sample. Age and attitude toward sexting significantly contributed to the prediction of instrumental/aggravated purpose motivation in the Bosnia and Herzegovina sample, accounting for 20.374% of the variance. In contrast, in the Croatian sample, gender and attitude toward sexting were significant predictors of motivation for instrumental/aggravated sexting purposes, accounting for 17.107% of the variance. Finally, in the Bosnian sample, gender and attitude toward sexting were significant predictors of body image reinforcement motives, accounting for substantial variance (27.116%). In the Croatian sample, only attitude toward sexting proved to be a significant predictor of body image reinforcement purpose in sexting, accounting for 13.466% of the variance.

4. Discussion

The qualitative part of this study examined participants' attitudes toward sexting. The results of the qualitative study show that most participants have negative attitudes toward sexting. According to the research findings, sexting is mostly

TABLE 5: Results of regression analyses for sexual, instrumental, and body image reinforcement sexting purpose.

Predictor variable	Sexual purpose			Instrumental purpose			Body image reinforcement purpose			
	B&H β (S.E.)	F	Cro β (S.E.)	B&H β (S.E.)	F	Cro β (S.E.)	B&H β (S.E.)	F	Cro β (S.E.)	
Gender	0.048 (0.051)		0.074 (0.071)	0.087 (0.063)		0.198** (0.071)	0.161** (0.060)		0.119 (0.072)	
Age	-0.023 (0.052)	11.657***	0.143 (0.074)	-0.165** (0.064)	13.114***	0.002 (0.074)	-0.129* (0.061)	19.068***	0.012 (0.075)	8.753***
Intimate relationship	0.084 (0.052)		0.094 (0.069)	0.033 (0.064)		0.113 (0.069)	0.062 (0.061)		0.048 (0.070)	
Attitudes toward sexting	0.658*** (0.053)		0.357*** (0.061)	0.372*** (0.065)		0.347*** (0.061)	0.428*** (0.062)		0.338*** (0.062)	
R ²	0.473		0.165	0.204		0.171	0.271		0.135	

Note: B&H = Bosnia and Herzegovina; Cro = Croatia; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < .001$.

rejected because of the negative consequences or when there is blackmail or pressure from peers/partners to participate in sexting. In addition, negative attitudes are related to the context of sexting, e.g., when flirting or intimacy is involved or when participants do not consider the potential consequences. These findings may reflect the negative public discourse about sexting and the fact that sexting poses multiple risks to individuals who participate in sexting behaviors [22, 47–50]. In this study, a small number of participants emphasized positive attitudes toward sexting. According to the results of our study, sexting can have positive consequences and is acceptable if it is consensual and participants are aware of the potential consequences. Positive consequences of sexting that contribute to positive attitudes toward sexting among young men and women include promoting or maintaining intimacy, facilitating sexual desire, arousal, and pleasure, and a form of sexual experimentation within the context of an intimate relationship [21, 51], and this was also the most common context in which sexting was accepted and/or occurred. Perceived positivity toward sexting within a romantic relationship suggests that sexting with an intimate partner is viewed as less risky. Norona et al. [52] found that the central expectation of an intimate partner is trust. Our study is consistent with the study findings of Burén et al. [53], who suggest that consideration of whom to sext with is the most important context for sexting within the peer group and appears to be a strong factor determining when sexting is considered acceptable and when it is not. Mutual consent can be seen as an important way to make sexting safer and thus more likely to gain approval from peers and other members of society (Albury et al., 2012). Few of the participants reported neutral attitudes toward sexting, which is consistent with the findings of Burén et al. [53], who view sexting as an individual's own choice, where it is the individual's responsibility to bear the consequences. Our survey revealed some differences in attitudes related to gender. Some participants reported that there is a gender double standard when using sexting for flirting. This pattern of findings is consistent with previous literature [27, 53, 54]. Given the gendered perception of sexuality in society [55], it is likely that women would experience far more shame and disapproval than men if a sext were made public. This gendered nature of sexting has been discussed in other studies (e.g., [49, 56, 57]; Ringrose & Harvey, 2013; [21, 22]) and may also reflect the reality of female sexting users [27, 48, 58]. The gendered pattern of sexting as presented in the present findings and in the literature is unfortunate, as it clearly shows that female sexuality is still much more restricted than male sexuality, and the online context is no exception.

According to the results of previous studies, the characteristics responsible for gender differences in motivation for sexting seem to vary in the studies conducted. Women are more likely to cite humorous motives [20, 59] and reasons related to gossip [60], while men are more likely to cite motives such as attractiveness, bragging, or social status [20, 59, 60]. Some qualitative data [59] suggest that a small significant group of women report forwarding unwanted or unwelcome images they received as evidence of harassment

to friends or peers. Motives of malice or revenge are relatively rare in both genders, consistent with previous studies [20, 59]. In contrast to previous studies, the present quantitative study found that instrumental motives for sexting were statistically significantly higher among males than females. This may indicate that men, compared to women, use the dissemination of sexual images of women as a way to lower women's social status while reducing the consequences of their activity. This means that while both genders participate in sexting to a similar degree, they are motivated differently. These differences in motivation may also be influenced by gender norms. In traditional society, a man can leave a woman, but she cannot leave him. Clancy et al. [20] found that it is acceptable for men to forward sexts after a relationship has broken down. In future research, it will be important to examine the context of this behavior (relationship failure, revenge, etc.).

Our quantitative results show gender differences in attitudes toward sexting. Young men have more positive attitudes toward sexting than young women. This pattern of results is consistent with previous literature [4, 60] that acknowledges that gender can influence attitudes toward sexting. Gender differences in attitudes toward sexting [4] suggest that a double standard regarding gender is prevalent in society. While male sexting users gain status through sexting by distributing more sexually explicit content of women [48, 61], female sexting users receive little or no social recognition and typically experience rejection from peers and other members of society (Lenhart 2010). The right to declare their sexual agency is largely denied to female sexting users ([62]; Ramussen, 2021). In particular, the sexual double standard has led to women being criticised more harshly when the images they post are shared more widely (Lippman et al., 2014; [48]). In addition, women often face negative social consequences for their sexting behavior—their explicit photos or videos may reach an unintended audience and expose them to humiliation and harassment [63]. In summary, Le et al. (2013) state that sexting is not only a sexual behavior but also, and more importantly, a gendered phenomenon.

Previous research that focused on examining motivations for sexting behavior was mostly limited to samples from single countries [64–66]. Only a few recent studies [31, 32, 60] directly compared countries in terms of motivation for sexting behavior and related factors. Therefore, this study is one of the first studies to examine cross-cultural differences in motivation for sexting, and the results of this study provide supportive evidence that there are cross-cultural differences in motivational patterns. Participants from Croatia sext more for instrumental purposes than participants from Bosnia and Herzegovina. The higher prevalence of instrumental sexting motivations in the Croatian sample can be explained by sexual education, which is gradually becoming more intensive among Croatian youth. Sexual education in Croatia largely focuses on the biological and risky elements of sexual behavior [67], which may increase awareness of sexual risk behaviors, including sexting associated with aggressive tendencies [68], and encourage youth to recognise these motives as salient. The more

positive attitudes toward sexting among Croatians compared to the Bosnian sample can be explained by the fact that Croatian youth come from a less traditional culture. Modern Croatian culture is characterized as liberal and permissive [69], which is also supported by the findings of Štulhofer et al. [70], who found a clear trend towards more sexual permissiveness among young people from Croatia in the period from 1972 to 2005.

The present quantitative study showed that male gender was a significant predictor of instrumental/aggravated purpose motivation for the Croatian sample and of body image reinforcement purpose for the sample from Bosnia and Herzegovina. The pattern of results is consistent with the findings of previous studies [71–73], which showed that males (compared to females) reported more instrumental/aggravated reasons for sexting. In addition, pressure to achieve the perfect standard of masculinity may also impact men's motivations, as sexting may be a way to affirm their masculinity and attractiveness. The results of the present study support the hypothesis that motivations for sexting vary not only from gender to gender but also from country to country. In the Croatian sample, male sexting culture is expressed through instrumental motives, while the male sample in Bosnia and Herzegovina is contextualized through body reinforcement. These findings are plausible because culture is a surface medium through which youth express their beliefs, social norms, values, and collective identity [74]. Therefore, examining individual and contextual factors across countries may provide a more comprehensive picture of the motivations for sexting behavior among youth. In future research, considering country specifics may help explain why sexting is more likely to occur in certain countries and less likely in others.

While previous researchers [8, 75] found that sexting for body image reinforcement appears to increase with age, the present study found that younger age made a significant contribution to the prediction of instrumental/aggravated purpose and body image reinforcement purpose. Significant contributions were found for the Bosnia and Herzegovina sample, but not for the Croatian sample. These results are consistent with the findings of Bianchi et al. [10], who found that body image reinforcement has a quadratic trend, increasing from adolescence to early young adulthood and decreasing from early to late young adulthood. This pattern of results is consistent with previous claims in the literature that adolescent development is characterized by new interests in self-expression and identity construction that are reinforced by approval from online peers [76]. Social reinforcement through feedback and affirmation from others is very important for body image redefinition and acceptance during adolescence [77–79]. Online self-expression during adolescence helps adolescents explore and express their forming identities [80] and supports identity construction in adulthood [80]. New media communication can facilitate these developmental tasks [81]. Moreover, the instrumental purpose of sexting motivations may be an expression of dysfunctional dynamics related to either individual or dyadic functioning. We can assume that sexting can be used as a means to gain power and control over the partner [82] and

can be a form of dating violence. This is consistent with the findings of Bianchi et al.'s [68] study that instrumental/aggravated reasons are an index of aggressive/exploitative tendencies that also lead to dating violence. We can assume that adolescent romantic relationships at younger ages are mostly maintained via cell phones and social networks. Therefore, violent behavior in the context of intimate relationships and the need for control are more likely to be transferred to the virtual world and to exhibit sexting behavior in some situations. In addition, a low number of preventive activities in Bosnia and Herzegovina on sexting and violence in adolescent relationships, as well as the traditional environment where gender roles are strong, could be one of the most important predictors of the differences in instrumental/aggravated intention between the two countries.

Finally, attitude toward sexting was a significant predictor of all assessed aspects of motivation for sexting in both samples, according to the results of our study. Sexting is a common behavior and is perceived as acceptable behavior by the majority of young people (Fleek et al., 2012). Furthermore, Hudson and Fetro [13] found that individual attitudes toward sexting are one of the most important predictors of young adults' sexting behavior. Sexting expectancies influence the decision to engage in sexting, with positive attitudes leading to higher motivation and participation in sexting [83]. Alternatively, those who sext may be selective about attitudes that approve of this behavior. Finally, adolescents who have positive attitudes toward sexting are more motivated to participate in sexting, regardless of what the primary purpose of the sexting behavior is.

5. Limitation and Recommendation for Future Research

This study was cross-sectional and based on a convenience sample and was not nationally representative for either country. Participants were asked to self-report their behavior, and socially undesirable behaviors may be underrepresented because we did not include a social desirability scale. Finally, this study did not distinguish whether involvement in sexting was consensual or nonconsensual, which is important to explore in the future.

Further investigation of different cohorts including cross-national comparisons, experiences of different sexual and gender cohorts, and a focus on consensual versus non-consensual sexting would contribute to a better understanding of attitudes and motivations for sexting behavior. However, future research and meta-analytic reviews are needed to account for this heterogeneity and context that contribute to differences in motivation and attitudes toward sexting. Future prevention strategies could take into account the observed gender differences and may need to be tailored to males and females to address the different motivational factors.

Future studies should also examine whether those who are prone to sexting are at increased risk for cyberbullying, as there is some evidence that adolescents are at the highest risk of participating in cyberbullying or even being the target of cyberstalks or other online predators because of the

increased time they spend with online social contacts [84]. However, it also seems important to investigate other phenomena related to sexuality and digital technology, such as mechanisms for online sexual activities (e.g., pornography and searching for sexual relations online), as some studies suggest that individuals with low social skills are particularly vulnerable to developing a preference for online sexual activities, which are usually efficient in increasing self-esteem and alleviating social anxiety and loneliness [41]. Given that digital technology can be used to share evaluative content [85], it is important to examine how this relates to cultural factors. Finally, further research on sexting is needed to examine the extent to which different perceptions of sexting apps enable control over privacy issues and contribute to higher levels of sexting participation.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, we analysed attitudes towards sexting and motives for sexting among young people from Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The results clearly show that non-consensual sexting is perceived negatively in both cultural contexts. Gender differences in attitudes toward sexting as well as differences in motives for sexting were clearly evident in both samples. In this sense, men have more positive attitudes toward sexting and are more likely to be motivated by sexting to achieve instrumental goals or to enhance body image compared to women. Predictors of motives for sexting participation were found to vary by cultural context. These cross-national differences in predictors of sexting challenge underlying assumptions about the homogeneity of motives for sexting across countries and suggest that the same risk and protective factors do not apply in all countries. Furthermore, it is often assumed that Western norms and attitudes toward sexting behavior are relatively homogeneous across Europe. However, such assumptions do not take into account that there may be important differences in contextual factors. We therefore believe that culture may play a role in constructing different cultural responses to sexting.

Data Availability

The data is available from the authors upon request.

Ethical Approval

All procedures performed in the study involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and national research committee and with Helsinki declaration.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

Authors' Contributions

All authors contributed to the study conception and design. Material preparation, data collection, and analysis were performed by Arta Dodaj and Kristina Sesar. The first draft of

the manuscript was written by Arta Dodaj, and all authors commented on previous versions of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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