Mobile phones, sexual socialisation and media literacy: perceptions and challenges in digital protection of children and adolescents

Teléfonos móviles, socialización sexual y educación mediática: percepciones y retos en la protección digital de la infancia y la adolescencia

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ABSTRACT: Sexual objectification is one of the ways young people socialize on social media and has become a challenge in digital child and adolescent protection due to its impact on sexual maturity and self-esteem. This research aims to understand the perceptions of both experts and young people regarding sexual socialization, as well as the motivations behind adolescents' use of sexual content they consume and/or exchange on social media. The methodology consisted of 14 semi-structured interviews with experts and a survey conducted with 421 adolescents who participated in digital sexual education workshops between 2022 and 2024. The results show that experts identify approval—through sexual display—as a key factor in adolescents' use of social media. However, most young people do not perceive a risk in using social media to send nude images of their bodies, either for themselves or others, as they consider it a private matter. The research encourages reflection on the fact that young people value their bodies as the most important aspect of their personality, highlighting the need for improvements in media education. It also provides arguments for policymakers, the technology sector, educators, and families regarding digital child protection.

Keywords: mobile phones; social media; youth, sexual socialization; perceptions; media education.

RESUMEN: La cosificación sexual es una de las formas de socialización de los jóvenes en redes sociales y se ha convertido en un reto en la protección digital de la infancia y la adolescencia por su impacto en la madurez sexual y en la autoestima. Esta investigación pretende conocer qué percepciones tienen, tanto las personas expertas como los jóvenes, respecto a la socialización sexual, así como qué motivaciones de uso tienen los adolescentes respecto a los contenidos sexuales que consumen y/o intercambian en redes sociales. La metodología ha consistido en 14 entrevistas semiestructuradas a personas expertas y una encuesta realizada a 421 adolescentes participantes de talleres en educación sexual digital entre 2022 y 2024. Los resultados muestran que los expertos identifican como un factor primordial la aprobación, mediante la exhibición sexual, en el uso de las redes entre adolescentes. Sin embargo, la mayoría de los jóvenes no percibe un peligro el uso de las redes para enviar imágenes del cuerpo desnudo, ni para ellos ni para los demás, ya que lo consideran algo privado. La investigación lleva a la reflexión sobre el hecho de que los jóvenes valoren su cuerpo como lo más importante de su personalidad, lo que implica acciones de mejora en su educación mediática, y aporta argumentos para responsables políticos, sector tecnológico, educadores y familias sobre la protección digital de la infancia.

Palabras clave teléfonos móviles; redes sociales; juventud; socialización sexual; percepción; educación mediática.

1. Introduction

There is international concern about the abuse of technologies since the age of 11 (European Association for Digital Transition, 2024, p. 2) and of social media as the main means of socialisation for children under 15, who access them via mobile, and during 56 minutes a day (Qustodio, 2023; ONTSI, 2024).

One reason for this concern is the risk associated with the use of images that produce sexual coding. especially for girls: mental health problems (Sapien Lab, 2023, p. 3), receiving *online* sexual messages -photos, personal images or videos of an erotic or sexual nature- (UNICEF, 2021, p. 8), pressures to make *sexting* (Barrié Foundation, 2022) or harm in the sexual affective sphere, sexual maturation and self-esteem (draft of Law for the Protection of Minors in Digital Environments, 2024). Specifically, the Agreement on Digital Minors defines this problem associated with socialisation as:

> inappropriate content for the comprehensive development of boys, girls and adolescents, such as pornographic one, which generates a trivialisation of sexual relations, early sexualisation, gender biases for which boys, girls and adolescents are not prepared (European Association for Digital Transition, 2024, p.2).

This type of media literacy is specified in the most recent legislation in Spain as "the dissemination of information to families, and people who routinely come in contact with minors, the safe use of devices, the research and creation of spaces for interaction and collaboration in digital culture" (draft of Law for the Protection of Minors in Digital Environments, 2024, p. 10).

Young people have several sources of sexual information to deal with this content: colleagues (68.7%), the Internet (59.1%), television (47%), teachers (36.5%), books (23.5%) and parents (14.8%) (Baati et al, 2020). Rather than access to information, the need to process that information critically and avoid potential risks is detected, so comprehensive sexual education programmes are required to help acquire the knowledge and confidence that the young need (Yu et al, 2021). Two examples of awareness campaigns would be, in the case of Spain, *#GenerationXXX* promoted by the European Parliament and carried out with the NGO *Dale una vuelta ("Give it a turn"),* to reflect on age verification measures on sexual content platforms, and *A mobile is more than a mobile* (AEPD, 2024a), aimed at the use of *smartphones*.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Effects of persuasive content about the body on social media

The majority trend of conversation on social media remains lifestyle, a type of content that *influencers post most about* (Feijoo, Vizcaíno-Verdú & Núñez-Gómez, 2024). Identified by their high number of social media followers, they interact through tweets, videos and posts (Spanish Association of Advertisers -AEA- and Association for Self-Regulation of Commercial Communication -Autocontrol-, 2020). They seek to establish parasocial relationships with users in a way that generates an affective bond and emotional commitment with them (We are social, 2023).

An example of the most common lifestyle content on social media is body image and self-expression, which on Instagram is focused on proclaiming an ideal self, encouraging the interaction of followers and comparing themselves through *selfies*, serving a beauty canon (Lozano-Blasco et al., 2023, pp. 133-134). This fact indicates that persuasion occurs not only in direct or covert advertising of products, services and ideas, but also in the generalisation of behaviours and attitudes, especially in audiences such as childhood and adolescence. As Feijoo and Fernández-Gómez claim:

> The challenge is to effectively engage users given the various use scenarios, limited screen space, and personal nature of mobile devices. These factors make users very sensitive to the content and messages they receive (2024, p. 37).

Networking is the most widely used medium for younger people – Alpha Generation – who spend the most time connected, more follow *influencers* on TikTok and Instagram and remember more visual content (images, videos) according to the Interactive Advertising Bureau Spain report (2024), which has included children aged 12 to 17 for the second year. Although 8 out of 10 teens consume content on social media daily, only 1 out of 10 upload their own content daily, such as photos, videos or messages (Rodríguez & Rodero, 2024).

Overuse of the Internet since the age of 11 -particularly social media - is associated with depression, anxiety, stress, loneliness and other forms of body discomfort and dysfunctional behaviours (Ports, 2020). Popular content and strategies on these platforms impact the health of adolescents by the pressure of their peers (Castillo-Abdul et al., 2021), and the emotional content shared by *celebrities* reaches popularity (Eyiah-Bediako et al., 2021). The significant relationship between the degree of subjective well-being of adolescents and some health problems or at-risk behaviours has been demonstrated (Sánchez et al., 2003), since the brains of adolescents "are very malleable and vulnerable to addiction" (Giray, 2022, p. 5).

2.2. Effects of digital sexual socialisation

An additional element to this digital reality are "complex relationships between age, sexuality and the media" (Scarcelli et al, 2021), in an environment where sexual content is not explicitly classified (Albury, 2021). Social media has become, for adolescents, "a powerful transmitter of information and messages through advertising and the consumption of pornography" that are "contradictory in relation to sexuality and sexual relations" (Rodríguez et al., 2021, p. 552). An academic line of work has analysed youth socialisation through self-sexualisation and self-objection (Gothreau et al., 2024; Huang et al., 2024; Plieger et al., 2024; You & Kwon, 2024). This is the case of *sexting*, which consists of "the voluntary sending of photographs or intimate recordings to a person" and is classified as a risk practice for constituting a crime, for extending to people other than the recipients and for entailing a loss of privacy, anxiety or depression according to the Spanish Data Protection Agency (AEPD) (2024a).

The phenomenon of "postpornography" is used to refer to the pornographic aesthetic of society characterised by the visual and the spectacularisation, where what is outside the scene – the sublime, which is beyond all representation because it is censored – is allied with "advertising, postmodern and even reactionary affinity" (Pérez, 2021, pp. 15-16). Other studies find "sexualised culture" in adolescent videos in TikTok (Suárez-Álvarez et al., 2023).

The tendency to show the body in digital culture has been called "media pornoculture" (Naief, 2013), linked to *influencers*, *blogs* and social media (Dejmanee, 2016; LLovet & Establés, 2023). *Online* identity pornification was widespread with the OnlyFans platform, particularly during the COVID19 pandemic, but it is the platform Instagram that generalises the "porno *chic*" aesthetic as a promise of empowerment, due to the ability of social media to offer social recognition (Drenten et al., 2019, Bussy-Socrate & Sokolova, 2024).

Others link the contemporary sexuality of social media such as YouTube to extimacy, a concept from the psychological domain that alludes to public representation of what used to be preserved for the more intimate environment (Baldallo González et al., 2020). The phenomenon of integrating manifestations that were previously exclusive to pornography and that are now common in everyday culture has also been referred to as "pornification" of culture (Domínguez & Porto, 2020). In fact, for 30% of the 1,753 adolescents, pornography is their only source of information about sexuality (Save the Children, 2020).

The marketing of these types of images that are distributed indiscriminately could reach the minors (draft of Law, 2024, p. 13). The legislation regulates real cases of ultra-spoofing of sexual content or *pornographic* deepfakes that have occurred in recent years in Spain, such as false nudity of children made with artificial intelligence. Faced with the Instagram-announced move to blur nudity to prevent sexual harassment in April 2024 (Meta, 2024), the platform's algorithm recommended adult-created content sexual videos to accounts of 13-year-olds within the first three minutes of logging in and promoted the sending of nudity photos to those who interacted with their own messages (Vigario, 2023).

Alteration of appearance and sexual attributes among youth is linked to social media pressure globally (Guizzo et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2021). Online sexual targeting experiences among women have been shown to produce unwelcome messages and negative comments about indirect sexual appearance, and offline indirect targeting beyond interpersonal sexual targeting (Cary et al. 2024), even relating to violence towards women (Vance et al, 2015). The problem of normalising sexual aesthetics and culture is that it makes it difficult to differentiate between pornographic aesthetics made for pleasure or for money" (Neely, 2012). In addition, objectified women are perceived as less competent and authentic, more self-promotional and self-objection promoters by those exposed to their images (Vendemia, 2024). A content analysis that develops an ad-hoc scale on sexual culture on the *livestreaming platform* Twitch.tv shows that women self-sexualise more and more intensely than men (Anciones-Anguita et al., 2024). Perhaps these studies explain that the emotional impact of displaying nude images of others without consent and as revenge occurs in a greater and more durable manner in women (McGraw et al., 2024).

2.3. Childhood and adolescence protection and media education

The Digital Rights letter seeks to engage all agents in learning tailored to the digital transformation of "human-centred" society (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Digital Transformation, 2021, p. 18). The draft of the Law for the Protection of Minors in Digital Environments of 2024 states that the sexual content of certain images produces the objectification of young people -especially the instrumentalisation of girls, treated as a consumer object-. The passive role shown by the persons depicted in these images could affect their sexual affective development, sexual maturation and self-esteem, as well as constitute a crime against moral integrity.

At the regional level, Law 4/2023, of March 22, on Rights, Guarantees and Comprehensive Protection of Children and Adolescents of the Community of Madrid (Articles 41 to 44) limits direct, indirect or covert advertising of an erotic or pornographic nature in publications aimed at children, either in audiovisual media at special child protection time slots, either in recreational activities or consumer services, because it is contrary to the rights of childhood and adolescence and harmful to their development.

For its part, Law 13/2022 on Audiovisual Communication, article 89 e), requires age verification systems from providers of video exchange services through the platform, to protect children and the general public from audiovisual content "that may harm the physical, mental or moral development of children", in order to "prevent their access to the most harmful audiovisual content, such as free violence or pornography" (pp. 42-43).

Along with legislation, it has been found useful to adopt critical education measures in popular culture, which provide young people with autonomy in their interaction in complex social and cultural contexts that involve social, political and aesthetic content, according to Alvermann et al. (2018). In virtual environments with artificial intelligence on the rise, the double challenge of preventing and raising awareness is posed by a visual literacy process around the subject-woman who identifies the violence that bullies women. For example, even when used as a cultural resource (for learning or entertainment), it is recognised that pornography is a defective representation of sex and sexuality (Neely, 2012).

Critical thinking becomes essential in media education programmes in the face of problematic use of the internet and social networks - discriminatory biases, handling, violence, abuses, cybercrime (cyberbullying, *sexting*, *grooming*...), substance-free addictions, pornography, mercantilisation of minor data, lack of critical thinking-, and the consumption of content inappropriate for the age, in particular pornography (European Association for Digital Transition, 2024, p. 2)

As for teens' moral judgement on online ads, the use of female nudity and beauty is controversial, due to, among other reasons, negative effects on teens' self-esteem and a desire to lose weight (Adams et al., 2017).

3. Methodology

This research aims primarily to address sexual objectification, which is one of the main challenges in digital protection of childhood and adolescence. This process responds to the need to address the breadth of the phenomenon under study, from different perspectives (communication, protection of minors and media literacy) and theoretical nuances, so two research questions are generated:

1. What perceptions of use do both experts on childhood and minors and adolescent users have regarding digital protection of young people in their use of social media to send or receive sexual content?

2. What usage motivations do teens have regarding the sexual content that they consume and/or exchange through social media?

To carry out this exploratory research, quantitative and qualitative techniques are combined through the perspective of professionals. The design of a mixed methodological triangulation has allowed for increased validity and consistency of findings. The documentary review of the conceptual framework was used to design both the interview and the survey models[1].

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[1] Due to its large size, the table with all variables based on academic literature is shown in the annexes.

First, interviews were conducted with semi-structured questions focused on international professionals in an exploratory manner (Hernández Sampieri, 2014, p. 10). The interviews, which allowed for the capture of meeting points in the conversation, are considered essential to get to know the matter in depth due to their explanatory nature. Specifically, 14 interviews (nine men and five women) were conducted between March 2022 and June 2024. Interviews were conducted via email and/or video calls. Those which were video recorded were transcribed for later encoding. The following criteria were applied to the choice of people interviewed:

a) Specialisation in minor media literacy and digital competitions.

b) Experience on the topics of sexual socialisation and pornography prevention.

c) Specialisation in topics on psychology and in particular on young people addictions.

d) Experience in legislation on violence against minors.

Table 1 shows the list of expert people consulted, taking into account the type of specialisation that they have. In fact, in order to preserve the identity of the people interviewed, both their names and job titles have been anonymised.

Table 1. Type of specialisation of the expert people interviewed

Experto/a	Experiencia profesional
Male Expert 1	Researcher on pornographic aesthetics and communication
Male Expert 2	Psychologist specializing in addictions in minors
Male Expert 3	Educator and expert in pornography prevention
Male Expert 4	Lawyer specializing in family and youth law
Male Expert 5	Professor and researcher in psychology
Male Expert 6	Expert and public speaker on addictions
Male Expert 7	Expert in digital competencies
Male Expert 8	Researcher specializing in online sexual crimes
Male Expert 9	Expert in education and children's digital rights
Female Expert 1	Criminal lawyer specializing in minors
Female expert 2	Educator and expert in media literacy
Female expert 3	Psychiatrist specializing in addiction prevention
Female Expert 4	Lawyer specializing in online sexual crimes
Female Expert 5	Educator specializing in digital competencies

Source: Own elaboration.

Second, to complete the data obtained with the interviews, a survey method (Medina & Bustamante, 2023) aimed at adolescents was used, which allowed a broader perspective on the status of the issue. Adolescents are the target audience of this study and because a broad sample was needed, for practical reasons, it was chosen to make questionnaires that would allow the results to be quantified, to obtain conclusions of a confirmatory type.

In this regard, the questions and answers were reviewed by members of the NGO *Dale una vuelta* so that the terms of the theoretical review were understandable to young people, such as when translating *sexy* or pornographic aesthetics by *images of naked body parts*.

In total, 421 adolescents, from an infinite universe, were surveyed at the Sexuality and Pornography workshops (Dale una vuelta, n.d.) led by this NGO between November 2023 and April 2024. The survey was submitted online two weeks before the workshops were delivered. As indicated by the AEPD (2024b), the informed consent forms were sent to the schools by the NGO so that they could be completed by the participants and their families.

3.1. Interviews

After the design, validation, testing and execution of the 14 semi-structured interviews, the coding process was performed. Specifically, it was conducted from a deductive perspective, considering literature review and research questions. In particular, the systematisation of the responses of the people interviewed was executed by means of double-coding, firstly automated and subsequently manual. Lumivero NVivo mixed and qualitative data analysis software has been used for the coding process. To ensure the reliability between the different encoders, the analysis criteria were agreed at meetings of the research team, and the codes were reviewed and adjusted according to the operational definitions of the analytical categories of the research (Rodríguez-Fernández and Establés, 2023).

3.2. Survey Sample and Procedure

With regard to the sample, a population between 14 and 17 years of age has been selected, from different Spanish regions, collecting perceptions of realities from different centres, specifically those located in 7 cities in Spain: Teruel, Zaragoza, Madrid, Toledo, Lugo, Palma de Mallorca and Valencia. Table 2 below lists the sample characteristics.

Table 2. Survey sample

Variable	Distribution	Porcentage
Nacionality	Spanish	100%
Sex	Males Females Not Disclosed	51.3% 47.2% 1.5%
Age	14 years	47.2%
	15 years	38.7%
	16 years	11.8%
	17 years	1.8%
Education level	Secondary Education	100%

Source: Own elaboration.

The survey structure (Medina & Bustamante, 2023) is based on four blocks: the perception of the role of social media as a body image sharing platform (commercial in nature by actors, influencers or their own colleagues), about using social media for sexual purposes (e.g. *sexting*), about the beliefs of whether choosing that aesthetic for one's own profiles produces social recognition, resistance to self-objectification, self-sexualisation, violence, developmental or relationship difficulties with others, and about the media education that they believe they possess about sexuality, use and critical awareness around social media.

Regarding the design of the questionnaire, a pilot test of 100 cases was carried out during October 2023 among participants of the aforementioned workshop, to guarantee that the issues were understood by the target audience of the survey, since when addressing a very young audience it is important to ensure that the terms are correctly raised. This test also ensured that the extension of the questionnaire was adequate to be fully completed. The data from the questionnaire were analysed with Excel 2021 for Windows, using dynamic tables, since in this way summations could be performed allowing that accurate data are represented in graphs. Categories and subcategories of analysis were measured using five-point Likert scales, recommended for measuring attitudes, and also nominal dichotomous scales, recommended for detecting perceptions quickly.

A total of 421 responses were obtained, using a *Google Forms* form, between the months of November 2023 and April 2024 (November 21, 2023 to April 10, 2024). 47.2% of the responses

corresponded to girls, 51.3% corresponded to boys, and the remaining 1.5% preferred not to say so. To obtain this quantitative data, a structured questionnaire was conducted, and a non-probabilistic data collection procedure was selected, specifically for convenience, based on a collaboration agreement on the digital sexual education workshops of the NGO *Dale una vuelta*.

4. Analysis of results

The results obtained by the proposed methodological triangulation are presented below, with the intention of responding to the research questions raised above.

4.1. Interview Results

The results analysed in the 14 interviews have first been processed automatically by Nvivo, where the main thematic units could be detected. Once this automatic coding was implemented, the manual inferential analysis was carried out following both the subject units and the first research question. Specifically, the results obtained in the interviews have been condensed into five subject areas:

1. Social media as platforms for the exchange and consumption of sexual content.

2. The role of influencers.

3. The critical analysis of sharing sensitive content on social media.

4. Alterations in emotional and affective development in youth.

5. The role of Spanish legislation for the comprehensive protection of childhood and adolescence.

4.1.1. Social media as sexual content sharing and consumption platforms

One of the most worrisome factors for experts is the role that social media plays as sexual content exchange platforms, since they consider that they have become a fundamental channel for the consumption and distribution of sexual content, especially affecting adolescents. In this sense, male expert 8 emphasises that "pornography has found its golden age with the development of the internet" thanks to the interactivity, privacy and cost reduction it offers. He mentions that specialised internet platforms are the main channels, although they are also penetrating social media such as OnlyFans.

Male expert 7, meanwhile, underscores that most young people between the ages of 12 and 16 have multiple accounts on various social media platforms, where they "state their different levels of privacy or advertising." He highlights the remarkable volume of sexual content exchange, especially *sexting*, with increased pressure on girls to share content. In fact, female experts 3 and 5 agree that social media facilitates the exchange and viralisation of sexual content, becoming the first access route for young people. Male expert 2 says that social media has become more "social sexual networks" than traditional social interaction platforms. This is why validation and approval through sexual display has become a key factor, especially among adolescents.

In addition, male expert 4 points out that pornography is "at the fingertips of a simple *click*" and that society has changed its perception and mindset about the consumption of this content, transforming users into deliberately unconscious "consumers and suppliers". In this regard, he reflects on how private life has become a public window display due to the internet. In relation to this reflection, male expert 1 describes the concept of "hypersexualisation" and how it is spread through social media. This is why male expert 1 indicates that they have eliminated the distinction between fantasy and reality, creating a kind of "broth" for the distribution of

pornographic speeches. Related to the virality of social networks, female expert 2 mentions that social networks are a priority channel for the exchange of sexualised content, reaching a massive audience without the need for specialised *websites*.

4.1.2. The role of influencers

Another factor that experts reflect on is the role influencers play in digital youth protection, particularly their influence on the proliferation of a sexualised aesthetic on social media. Male expert 8 points out that "beyond explicitly erotic or even pornographic photos, there is a very powerful sexual aesthetic not only on the part of celebrities, but also on the part of many influencers, who see in their appeal an added value to gain followers." Much related to this statement is that of male expert 7, who highlights that they "embed a culture of sexual content to attract a certain audience", normalising certain standards that especially influence girls, who mimic these popular patterns.

Male expert 9, meanwhile, stresses that influencers "create the idealisation of body shape: what your face, muscles, thinness should look like... You can become a celebrity just for that." Following this line, male expert 5 explains that these figures "serve as role models for their followers," and can negatively influence those who are more vulnerable and have lower media skills. In tune with this reflection, male expert 6 states that "influencers become famous for overexposing their bodies", and points out some of the responsibility that they may have as they aim at the social validation that rewards these behaviours which promote virality and overexposure.

On a different matter, male expert 2 reflects on the influence that artists and influencers should mind concerning teenage people, as "any audiovisual story or aesthetic, even if it is fiction, educates, creates referents, changes perceptions and models patterns of behaviour." In fact, male expert 4 mentions that "the first 20 most followed Instagram accounts are of footballers, singers, models and influencers: beautiful people, young people, and preferably with bodies out of this world", which is a clear cult to the body and image, and which leaves other intellectual virtues aside. Going beyond this reflection, female expert 1 stresses that "influencers are role models," and their influence is evident in eating disorders and other behaviours. Thus, female expert 3 emphasises the importance of digital marketing in this type of content, as "sexual aesthetics draw more attention from users, so it can be used to increase the number of followers on social media".

Female expert 2 also pays attention to the role of parents because, although influencers and celebrities "create trends among younger people", influencing their way of dressing and acting, it is relevant for parents to be interested in the content their children consume and be able to educate them critically.

4.1.3. Critical analysis about sharing sensitive content on social media

As to the factor of whether young people are aware of the impact of sharing, receiving or sending sexual information on social media, there are certain nuances when the experts measure this issue. Actually, several experts believe that they are unaware or that it will depend on the level of maturity that young people have. Male expert 8 contends that "younger age, lower awareness" and adds that the desire to be liked, be popular, and group pressure contribute to young people lowering their guard, engaging in risky practices by sharing sexual images or comments. Additionally, male expert 7 notes that, although young people are increasingly informed about the risks of practices such as *sexting*, they do not have "the ability to set boundaries" nor are they sufficiently aware of the implications. This is why he mentions that unintentional dissemination of private content is a persistent problem, exacerbated by new technologies such as artificial intelligence.

For his part, male expert 3 stresses that the effect that *online disinhibition can have must also be taken into account*, since physical distance facilitates bolder behaviours and reduces the perception of risk. This is why male expert 3 says that "clicking a 'send' button is much easier and seems safer."

Some experts believe that there is awareness in young people about the risks of sharing sexual content where education plays a critical role. However, for example, Female expert 4 highlights educational efforts in schools to teach about the legal, sanitary, and social implications of sharing nude images, although he notes that a tendency to take risks in adolescence can make it difficult to internalise these lessons. In fact, this need for sexual education coincides with female expert 2's analysis, alerting young people that shared images are no longer theirs and that "they can lead to serious problems like *sexting and grooming*."

Female expert 5 also warns that sexual content on social media can become the main source of sexual education for some young people, which can encourage risky sexual behaviours and more permissive sexual attitudes. In addition, on educational issues, female expert 3 identifies three educational challenges from social media: self-esteem, attention and boredom.

4.1.4. Disturbances in emotional and affective development in youth

Regarding the factor on whether sexual content on social networks can be linked to any of the alterations in the emotional and affective development of young people, both personally and academically, there is a generalised consensus, although nuanced, among the different experts consulted.

For example, male expert 8 highlights the existence of extensive scientific literature documenting the effects of sexual content consumption on children, especially when this consumption is continuous or compulsive. These effects include alterations in affective-sexual development, mental health, and academic performance.

Additionally, male expert 7 points out that the young people who use intensive social media tend to experience worse outcomes in terms of emotional well-being and satisfaction with life. Male expert 3's reflection goes on this line too as it underscores the importance of emotional connection, identification and regulation of emotions in the development of sexuality.

4.1.5. The role of Spanish legislation for the comprehensive protection of childhood and adolescence

The fifth most prominent aspect by experts focuses on the social importance of the new Spanish legislation on the comprehensive protection of childhood and adolescence. In particular, it is Law 8/2021 of 4 June, on Comprehensive Protection of Children and Adolescents against Violence, which amends the General Advertising Law (Art. 3. a) 34/1988 of 11 November, declaring unlawful both advertising that incites any form of violence on minors and that which promotes stereotypes of a sexist, racist, aesthetic, homophobic or transphobic nature. In light of this new law, the analysis of the consulted experts on the comprehensive protection of minors has focused on whether pornography should be considered a form of violence.

For her part, male expert 7 emphasises the importance of building a protective environment for children, free of inappropriate content, involving all society in this work since "the only way to achieve a protective environment is that we are safe from receiving content for which we are not prepared." Therefore, he argues that this requires the joint work of all society, including families, who must facilitate access and maintain a channel of communication with young people. It is vital that minors have a trusting relationship with their parents and can ask for help if they are facing difficulties. He adds that "any system of law protection that makes advertising or violence against people illegal is going to be a blow to an industry that is finding a quarry that should not have access with the ease it has had so far." It also mentions the risk

associated with video games and social media, where "there are video game platforms for very young ages, where you can also put [youth] into risky situations they shouldn't have to bear."

In this line, male expert 8 coincides with his diagnosis since he suggests that, beyond the modification of the General Advertising Law, considering pornography not only as content that can affect children but as a form of violence towards them would allow the development of a more safeguarding regulation.

Regarding the validity of the legislation, male expert 4 highlights the obsolescence of the current General Advertising Law versus the speed of digital evolution, suggesting that legal regulations are usually reactive rather than preventive, which makes it more difficult to effectively protect minors from risks such as addiction to pornography.

For her part, female expert 3 underscores the need for greater control of the content advertised on social media, although she also emphasises the responsibility of society in general. In addition, female expert 2 points to the relationship between pornography and sexist stereotypes, suggesting that media pornography could fit into the description of sexist stereotypes. Following this line, female expert 5 argues that exposure to pornography at early ages is concerning – an estimated 17.4% of adolescents accidentally come into contact with pornography via digital device ads – suggesting that the new law could have positive effects on the protection of children.
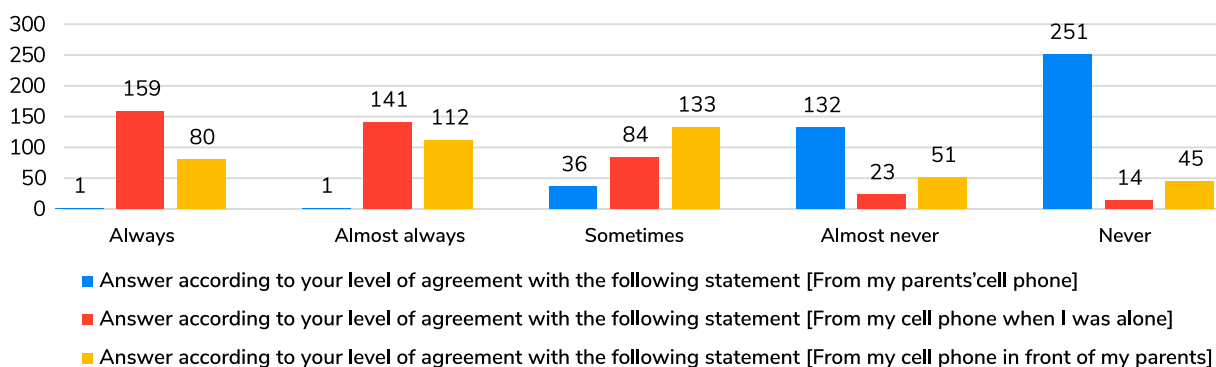
4.2. Survey Results

The analysed results for the 421 adolescents are grouped into two main themes: perceptions of use and motivations for image exchange.

4.2.1. Perceptions of Teen Usage

Regarding the perceptions of the use of young Spanish people, they state that they use technology in their day-to-day lives. Out of 421 respondents, only 7 of them say they never or rarely use their mobile phone and two of them say they use their tablet very often. Mobile phone is used by 369 respondents with a frequency of "always" and "almost always", which represents a high percentage of the total (87.6%). Based on this number, it is interesting to know how they access the network. Most do this from their mobile phone, while they are alone (71.2% of the time), and 45.5% of the time from their own mobile phone in front of their parents.

Figure 1. Accessing the network from mobile phones

Answer according to your level of agreement with the following statement [From my parents'cell phone]

Answer according to your level of agreement with the following statement [From my cell phone when I was alone]

Answer according to your level of agreement with the following statement [From my cell phone in front of my parents]
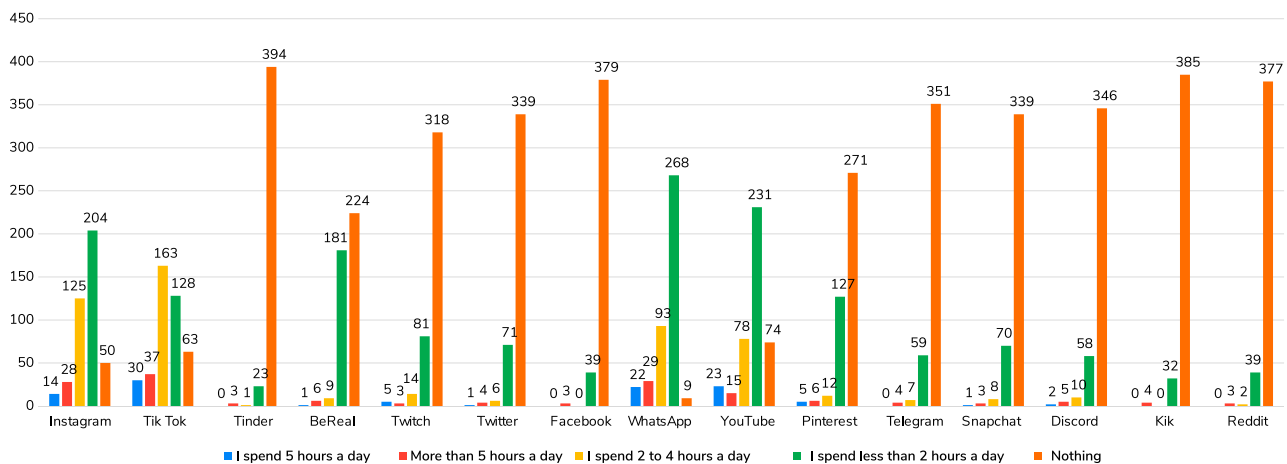
Source: Own elaboration.

Teens' responses show that networks such as TikTok, Whatsapp, Youtube and Instagram are the most consumed by young people, who, in a significant percentage, claim to spend more than 5 hours a day on these platforms.

Meanwhile, 54.6% of respondents report spending more than two hours per day at TikTok, compared with 30.4% who report spending less than two hours per day. Only 14.9% say they don't spend time on social media. TikTok is the social network that experiences a greater number of connections among younger people. Instagram is positioned as the second most widely used social network by the surveyed audience. 34.2% of respondents say they spend more than two hours a day on Instagram, compared to 48.4% who say they spend less than two hours a day. Only 11.8% say they don't spend time on social media. Gender percentages are barely significant, and all teens report knowing this network.

In figure 2, it can be seen that both networks are the ones with the most diversity of use, compared to others that are outside the interest of adolescents, such as Tinder, Kik and Reddit.

Figure 2. Connecting in daily hours to social media

Source: Own elaboration.

Based on what has already been stated, it is a fact that social media, for its immediacy, acts as a catalyst to send and receive images, since creating and sharing content is the reason why they remain active. This is why we want to know the perception of young people, in relation to the interaction they make with images of the body, either naked or partially naked.

Respondents show a high awareness of the importance of not sharing images of the bare body, with the predominant claim that "it's not a game", as can be seen in figure 3. They find that performing these types of practices can pose a danger to them in 81% of responses, and they also point out that they are a risk for others in 79.8% of cases.

The means by which adolescents detect greater sending/visualisation of images or messages of the body or part of the body naked are films, being perceived as something common in 39.4% of cases, followed by social networks, with 38.9% frequency on this type of platform, followed very closely by the series, with 38%. In contrast, video games show a result of 87.4% saying that they have never seen this content in them, followed by animes as a place where there are barely any such images.

For the most part, 60.5% of young people say they know what sexuality is, although they have not asked their parents in most cases, nor have they been informed about it through pornography, according to 73.1% of respondents. Still, they say in a small percentage (19%) that sometimes their parents have talked to them about it.

With regard to usage habits, the perception of young people is relevant, since they claim for the most part to distinguish what advertising is in 63.6% of cases, and recommend that other colleagues use social media in 50.5% of the answers. They also report finding the information that they are looking for online in 52.7% of the answers.

Figure 3. Social media perceptions and their interaction with body images
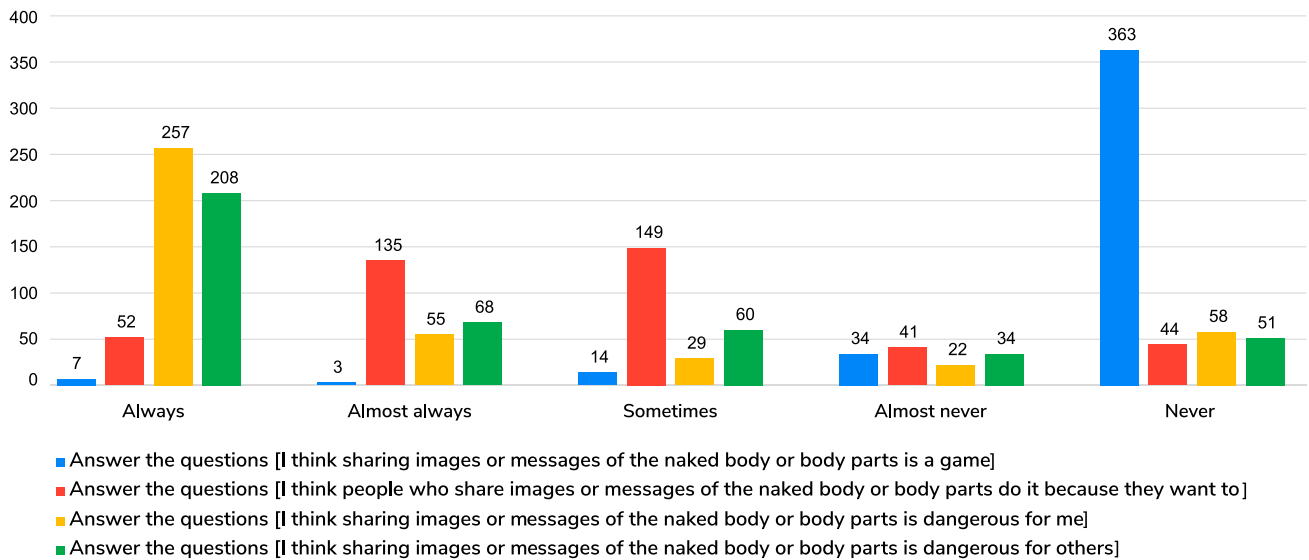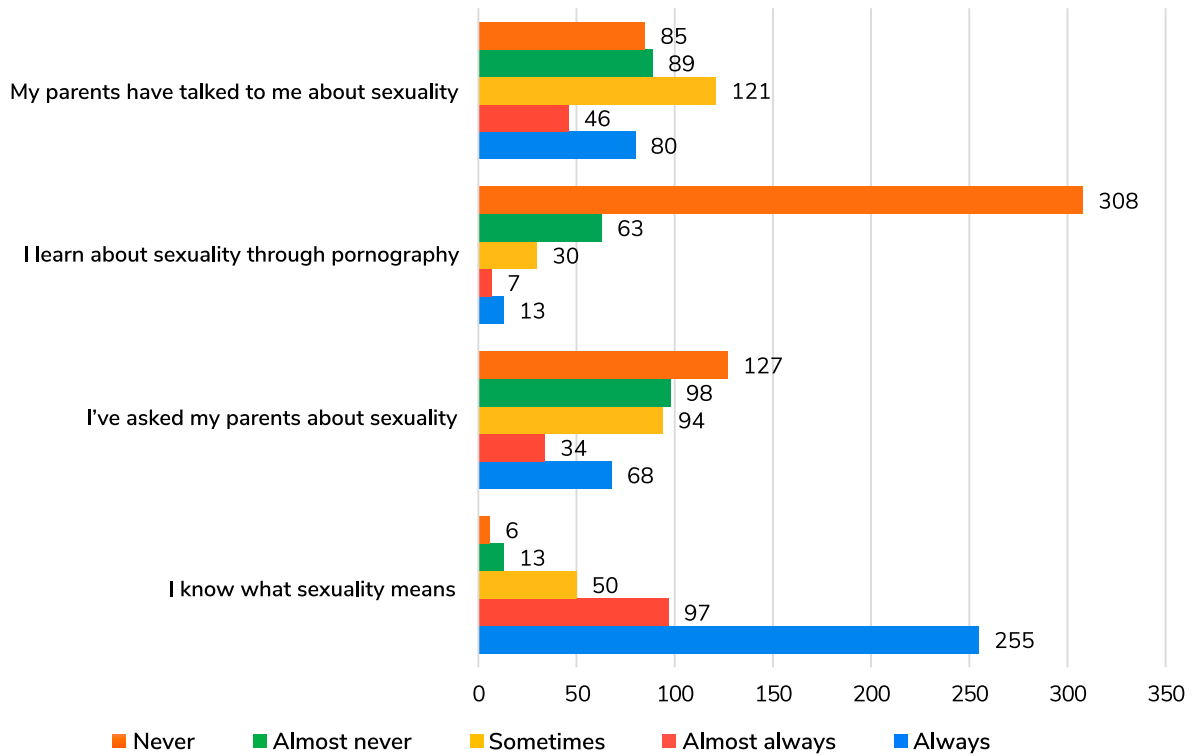

Source: Own elaboration.

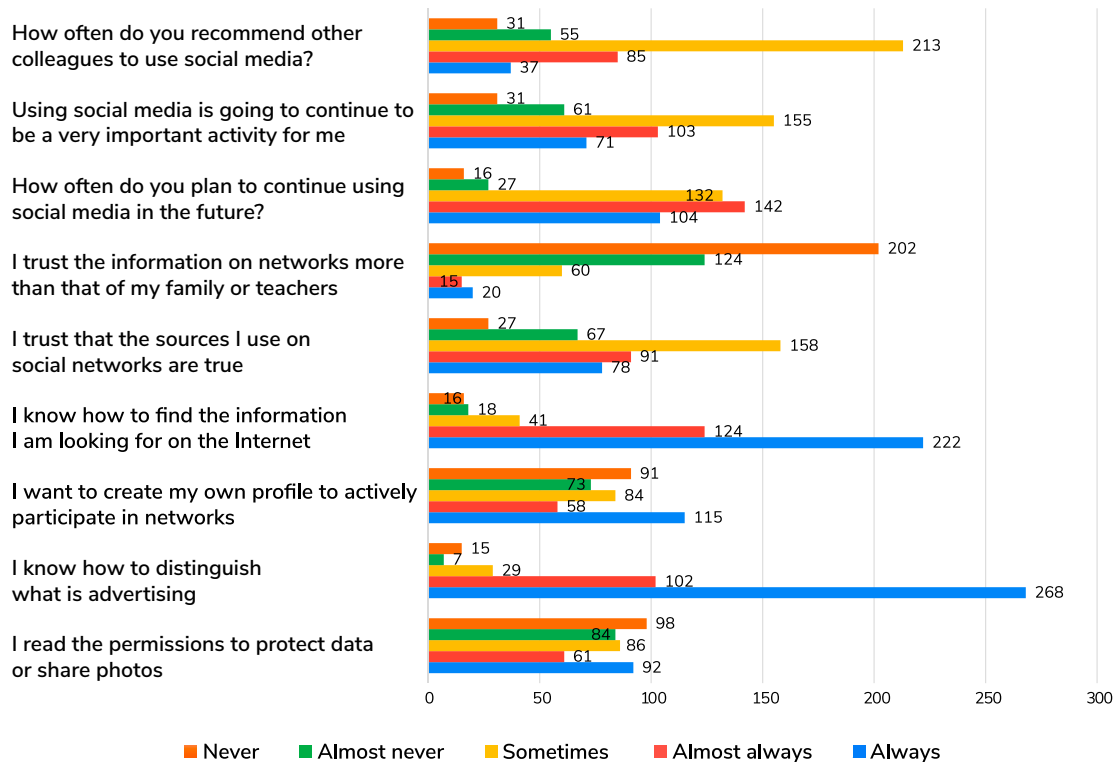**Figure 4.** Sending images or messages of the body or parts of the body naked by means
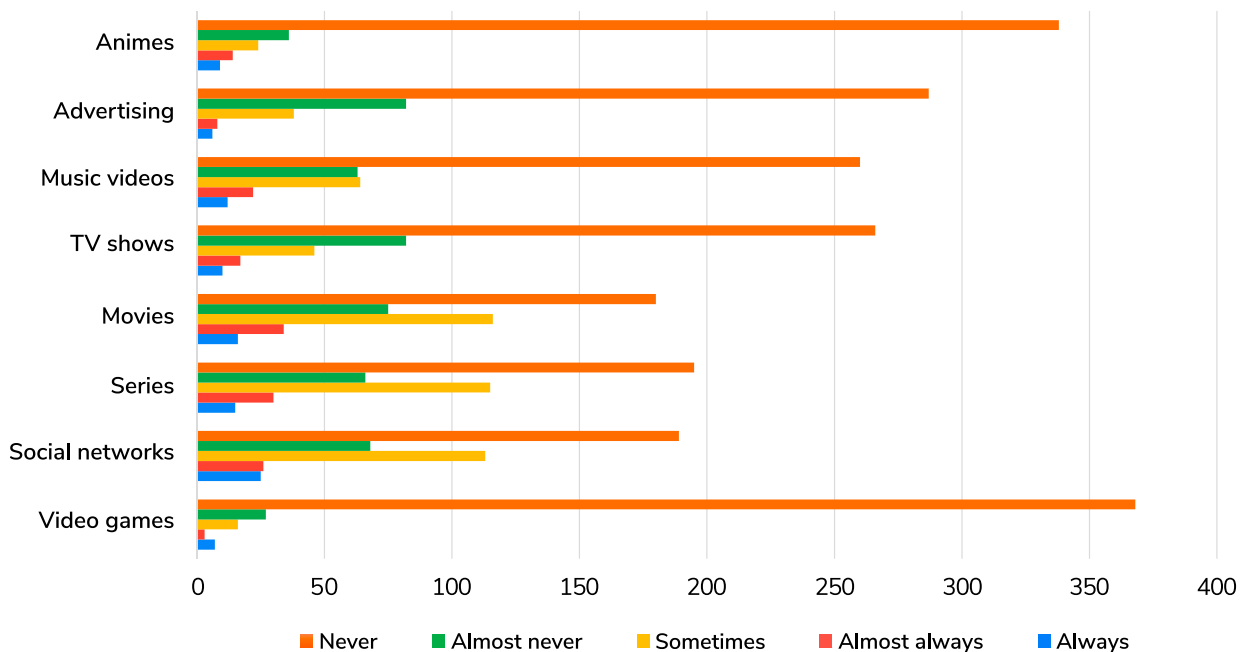
Source: Own elaboration.

Figure 5. Sources of sexuality information

Source: Own elaboration.
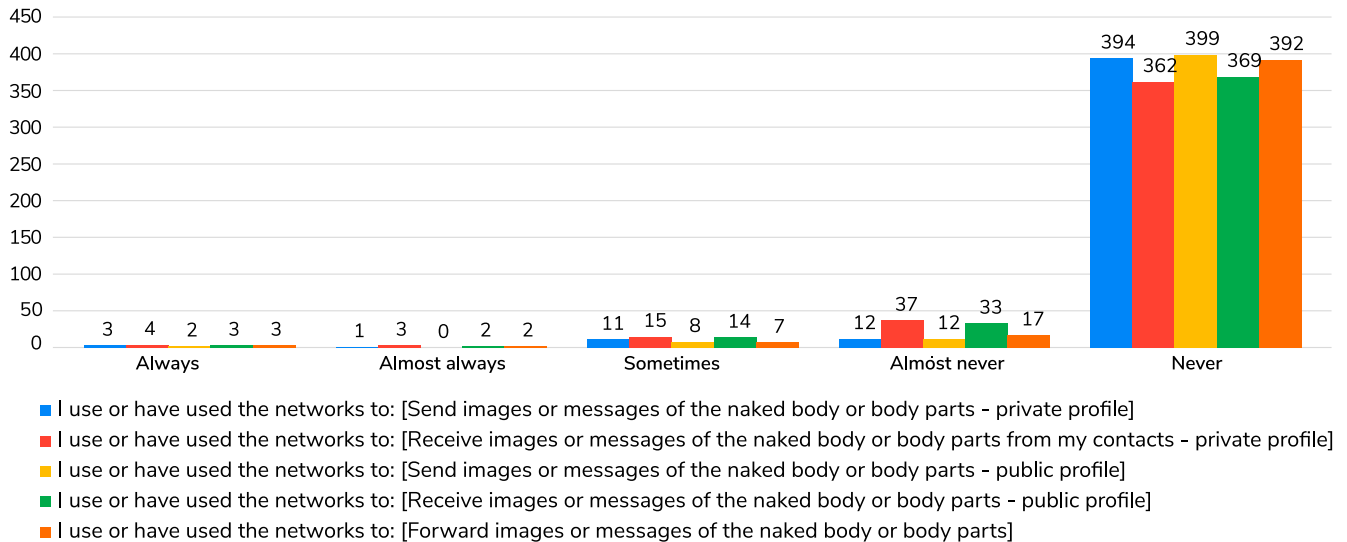
Figure 6. Social media habits

Source: Own elaboration.

4.2.2. Teen Usage Motivations

Regarding the use motivations of young Spanish people, they state that young people do not use social media to send or receive images of the bare body. However, some claim that they almost never use it for this purpose, and it is detected that there is a greater tendency to receive both by public and private profile rather than to send images of this type (8.7% of cases).

Figure 7. Social media for interaction with body images

■ I use or have used the networks to: [Send images or messages of the naked body or body parts – private profile]
■ I use or have used the networks to: [Receive images or messages of the naked body or body parts from my contacts – private profile]
■ I use or have used the networks to: [Send images or messages of the naked body or body parts – public profile]
■ I use or have used the networks to: [Receive images or messages of the naked body or body parts – public profile]
■ I use or have used the networks to: [Forward images or messages of the naked body or body parts]

Source: Own elaboration.

The main reason for doing it is "because they value your body as the most important thing in your personality". Although the reason cited is the most numerous in 12.3% of the answers obtained, there are other factors such as "Because my partner has asked me for it" at 9.2%. However, the most significant responses are those saying that they never do this type of practice.

Figure 8. Reasons for sending images or messages about the body or body part naked

■ Always   ■ Almost always   ■ Sometimes   ■ Almost never   ■ Never
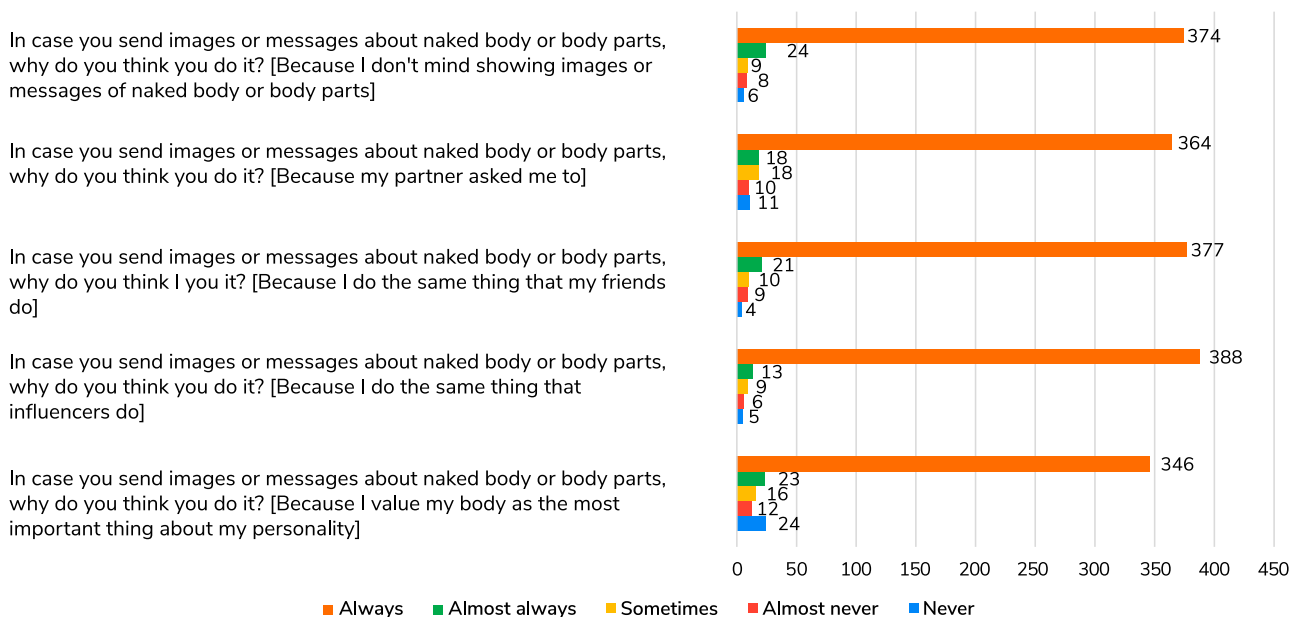
Source: Own elaboration.

Additionally, the motivations for not sending these types of images or messages about the naked body have also been detected, stating that the main reason for not doing so is "Because I think sexuality is something personal" in 85% of the responses, followed by "Because I don't like to show my body or body parts naked" with 77.4%, as shown in figure 9.

Figure 9. Reasons not to send images or messages about the body or body part naked
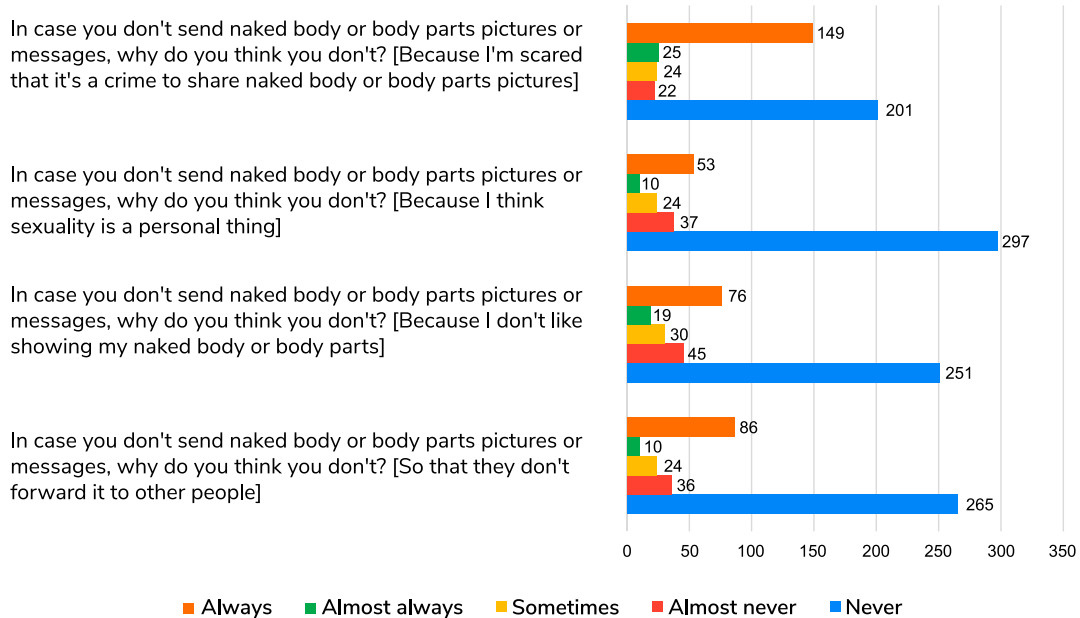
Source: Own elaboration.

Motivations have a significant impact on attitude. Based on this, young people are aware that they can manipulate their images on the internet (71.2%), demonstrating a consequent attitude that not everything that appears on the internet is real (71.9%), and that the information they share remains on the networks (66.5%), regardless of the reasons that lead them to perform image exchange.

Figure 10. Attitude to Social Media (Critical Awareness)
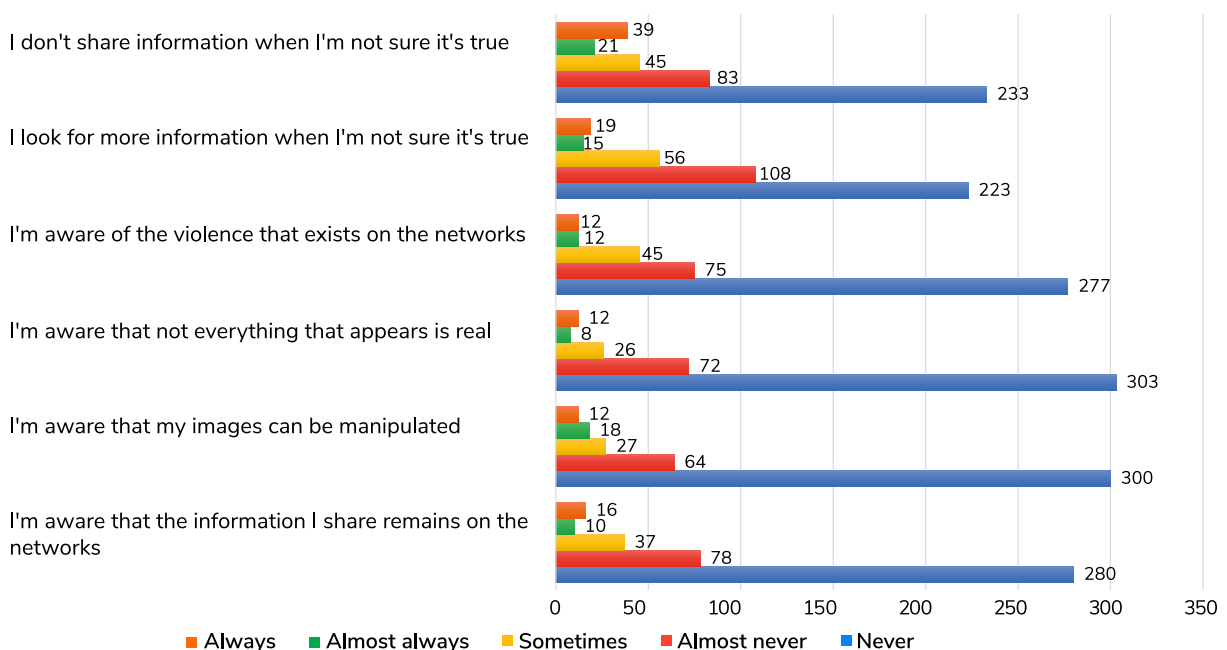
Source: Own elaboration.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

This research has fulfilled its purpose of addressing sexual objectification, one of the main challenges in digital protection of childhood and adolescence, both from the perspective of young people themselves and experts.

Applying a mixed methodology has allowed us to compare the perspectives of experts with those of young people accessing the internet via mobile devices (ONTSI, 2024). This double vision fits with two trends, which understand sexual objectification as a form of expression of sexuality (Albury, 2021), and which consider the risks it poses (Fernández et al., 2025).

While the two groups perceive the high use that young people make of networks from mobile devices, and in particular the use of them as a channel to socialise (Lozano Blasco et al., 2020; We are social, 2023), however, the perception of sexual content or display of the bare body varies as a usual form of socialisation among young people. In addition, experts coincide in detecting a link between lack of education and lack of control, which can be associated with the danger of sharing intimate images on the Internet by young people (Villanueva Blasco & Serrano Bernal, 2019), and the response of young people about access to networks from their own mobile phone when they are alone, in the vast majority of cases. However, parental control is being claimed from educational institutions (Villanueva Blasco & Serrano Bernal, 2019).

Our research answers a global social need, realised through the Digital Minority Agreement, where the impact of social media on boys, girls and adolescents is explained. They are a particularly sensitive audience, for the evolutionary and neurodevelopmental moment and because these products are designed for adults. As a result, they can affect their socialisation and potentiate possible mental health issues, such as anxiety and depression, as well as facilitate situations of violence such as bullying and sexual harassment that are moved to the online world, or which are specific to the digital environment" (European Association for Digital Transition, 2024, p.2).

In view of this, training in media skills is essential so that citizens can respond intelligently, critically and creatively to the big challenge of the 'global screen' (Baldallo González et al., 2020). Especially among children, who show less initiative to contrast the content they consume on the Internet (Zozaya Durazo et al., 2023).

Among the main conclusions from the first research question, concerning expert perceptions, the psychologists interviewed coincide with the studies reviewed in perceiving digital sexual objectification as a serious problem that can lead to addictions, and influence the well-being of young people (Sánchez et al., 2003; Castillo-Abdul et al., 2021; Giray, 2022; Puertas, 2020; Rodríguez & Rodero, 2024). This is also corroborated by the worrying use rates of social media reported in 1 in 3 adolescents according to UNICEF (2021, p. 15).

Experts also find that sex-affective relationships are promoted by sharing body image content on networks, raising concern among all interviewees. This phenomenon is aligned with the study by Martín Critikián and Medina Núñez (2021) that alerts about the implications that social media can have on young people and the loss of self-control derived from their use.

Interviewees relate the lack of control of the information that young people handle to the fact that they follow influencer trends, although they believe that young people do not perceive it like this. This conclusion links to the warning of several studies on protection against influencers who provide misleading advice, with serious consequences for public health (Bromberg & Fitzgerald, 2021; Feijoo et al., 2024) or with contradictory transmission of values and countervalues (Digón Regueiro et al., 2023). The danger is that "regular and ordinary people share their opinions about brands", which has led to the growth of influence marketing (Ramos Gutiérrez & Fernández Blanco, 2021, p. 84).

One of the risks of the socialisation that influencers lead to is sharing life experiences and showing their body through objectifying images "that convey body display as empowerment" (Cuenca Orellana et al., 2024, p. 24). This is also framed in media productions that choose conventional representations of the female body inspired by pornography, fashion and popular culture (Dejmanee, 2016).

There is widespread consensus among experts on the potential negative consequences associated with youth's consumption of sexual content on social media, as evidenced by existing literature (Guizzo et al., 2021; McGraw et al., 2024; Pérez, 2021; Plieger et al., 2024; Rodríguez et al., 2021). Especially noticeable is that the age of young people determines the sexualising characteristics included in videos of social media users such as TikTok (Suárez-Álvarez et al., 2024).

These perceptions coincide with studies linking sexual aesthetics with a particularly harmful attitude for young people (Vendemia, 2024). The dissociation between real bodies and female -hypersexualised- and male -a model of proportion- body models are other consequences of "new models of sociability and sexual relations where desire, dominance and violence are normalised" (Rodríguez et al., 2021, p. 556).

Taken together, these statements underscore the powerful role that artists, influencers and celebrities play in shaping a sexual aesthetic on social media, shaping behaviours and perceptions especially among young people, as well as other studies do (Segarra-Saavedra & Hidalgo Marí, 2018; Drenten et al., 2019; LLovet & Establés, 2023; Bussy-Socrate & Sokolova, 2024; IAB, 2024).

This is why most experts agree on the need for greater protection for children from pornography, considering it a form of violence that requires stricter regulations and collaboration across society to create a safe environment for children. In this sense, the new legislation includes the need to address the Internet access of young people "from a formative, preventive and social perspective, under the principles of equality, accessibility, intersectionality, respect, protection and guarantee of the rights of children and adolescence (draft of Law for the Protection of Minors, 2024, pp. 23-24).

Among the main conclusions from the second research question concerning young people's perceptions about digital protection of young people in their use of social media to send or receive sexual content, it is relevant to note the disproportionateness that exists between the survey results - where most spend more than two hours a day on social media such as TikTok and Instagram-, and the data available about social media usage time for 50 minutes per day (Qustodio, 2023). However, they do coincide with the more than three hours per day noticed by the study of Martin Critikán and Medina Núñez (2021), and with the type of favourite networks of this generation, Instagram and WhatsApp. These contradictions suggest comparing the context in which these field studies have been conducted to determine the potential influence of the type of methodology employed on biases. For example, if young people answer the survey on their own devices, on their parents' devices, or in front of their teachers.

Another conclusion about the use of social media by young people is that it is not exclusively dedicated to play activities - as perceived by parents - according to Besolí, et al. (2018), but rather there are adolescent practices in the digital field that "seek the recognition of their peers with the aim of becoming an influencer" (Guerrero-Pico & Establés, 2021, p. 422).

On whether youth use social media to view or exchange images of sexual content, and what type of entertainment they use, interviewees demonstrate how social media interactivity and accessibility have radically transformed sexual content consumption and perception, posing significant challenges to young users' privacy, mental health and safety as Albury anticipates (2021). The main motivation for youth to use social media is approval through sexual display,

emphasising the role of social media for sexual expression as noticed by previous studies (Albury, 2021; Badallo-González, Anciones-Anguita & Checa Romero, 2024). The predominant lack of perception that young respondents have of using the usual means they consume - movies, networks, series, etc. - to send images of their body could be explained by the distinction that young people make between pornographic representations and the notion of romantic intimacy that they attribute to real sex (Spišák, 2024).

Despite the perception of young people about the sending of information as a game, most of them claim to be jealous of their privacy and therefore prefer to receive images, which is aligned with the fact that only 1 in 10 uploads their own content daily, whether sexual or not (Rodríguez & Rodero, 2024). However, these young people are exposed to a large amount of personal and private information on social networks (Vizcaíno-Verdú et al., 2022), alluding to the concept of extimacy by Baldallo González et al. (2024). In fact, young people say that the main motivation for sharing images or messages of the bare body is to value the body as the most important part of their personality, corroborating studies that detect the priority of physical appearance (Castillo-Abdul et al. 2021; Dejmanee, 2016; Huang et al. 2024) even though this focus produces negative effects (Yu et al. 2021), and suggesting that young people reflect on building online identity through body display.

For this reason, the involvement of our research in digital sexual education is evidenced, as shown too by the NGO *Dale una vuelta* workshops, endorsed by joint studies simultaneous with this Spanish initiative on the most representative phenomena in the media consumed by young people: online identity pornification, also called postpornography or pornculture in the media (Domínguez & Porto, 2020; Yu et al., 2021). There is a need to encourage a critical attitude of young people about sexuality in digital socialisation from a multidisciplinary perspective (media, psychological, aesthetic, commercial, etc.)

It is necessary to conduct a study about young people in Spain concerning the dangers that the interviewees have stated so as not to send images of the bare body in the social media they use most: that it is not legal and that it is private information. For example, if they are given feelings of dissatisfaction about their own body (Guizzo et al., 2021; You & Known, 2024), psychological discomfort (McGraw et al., 2024), or lack of empowerment (Vendemia, 2024). A first contradiction is the concern about the obligation that networks and others have to respect their privacy and sexual consent and yet choose them to represent and relate (Spišák, 2022). It is important to know if they find any examples of sexualised violence (Naief, 2013) or sexism (Plieger et al., 2024) on networks that they often use.

In any case, future research on the effects of self-objectification is suggested, as some studies link it to desires to undergo cosmetic surgery (Huang et al., 2024). This study would make reflect on the conflicting message that young people receive to take care of their mental health by accepting themselves, while focusing their full value on their appearance or imitation of others. For example, it would be appropriate to ask them which of the influencers that they follow objectify themselves, or check whether they use mechanisms to protect vulnerable audiences (Bromberg & Fitzgerald, 2021; Ramos Gutiérrez & Fernández Blanco, 2021).

Our recommendation - given the fact that young people cannot identify the persuasive character of the messages they receive on social networks, especially from influencers (Rozendaal et al., 2011; Adams et al., 2017; Feijoo & Fernández-Gómez, 2022) - is to define sexual content as non-explicit persuasive. With regard to recommendations to professional practice, the involvement of the teenage and childhood environment is encouraged in a joint discussion about the effects of body display content frequented by youth, which they access individually and anonymously from smartphones.

A last line of work could explore the media competence and informal learning strategies of young people around their sources of information regarding sexuality (Fernández et al., 2025),

replicating in Spain the study of Baati et al. (2020) by concluding that the main sources of sexuality are colleagues and the Internet.

Finally, it would be necessary for research such as the one that we have carried out to increase its sample to other countries in the European Union and Latin America with the aim of making a comparison on the perceptions obtained on this very concerning issue in current society, as well as proposing possible strategies and solutions on how to address the digital protection of minors both to legislators and stakeholders and to parents and educators.

6. Contribution

Task	Author 1	Author 2	Author 3
Conceptualization		x	
Formal analysis	x		x
Funding acquisition			
Project administration	x	x	
Investigation	x	x	x
Methodology	x	x	x
Data curation	x		x
Resources		x	
Software	x		x
Supervision		x	
Validation	x		x
Visualization			x
Writing – original draft	x	x	x
Writing – review and editing	x	x	x

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Appendice

Table 3. Analysis variables or categories based on the reviewed literature

Variables	Analysis Subcategories		Academic Literature Authors
Using Social Media	Time of use	Nothing to more than 5 hours a day	IAB, 2023; Qustodio, 2023; Martin Critikián and Medina Núñez, 2021; Giray, 2022
	Social media	Instagram, TikTok, Tinder, Bereal, Twitch, Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube, Snapchat, Pinterest, Telegram, Discord, Ki, Reddit	Puertas, 2020; Interactive Advertising Bureau Spain, 2023; Lozano-Blasco et al, 2023; Vigario, 2023; Rodríguez and Rodero, 2024; Martín Critikián and Medina Núñez, 2021
	Type of social media access	From mobile, from parents' mobile, alone or accompanied, with tablet, computer or mobile	Besolí et al, 2018; Sapiens Lab, 2023; Law for the Protection of Minors in Digital Environments 2024; ONTSI, 2024; AEPD, 2024
Images of the body or body parts naked	Media used to share these images	Video games, series, movies, TV shows, music videos, advertising, animes	Naief, 2013; Neely, 2012; Dejmanee, 2016; Pérez, 2021; Scarcelli et al, 2021; Suárez-Álvarez et al, 2023, Cary et al, 2024; Anciones-Anguita and Czech-Romero, 2024; Plieger et al, 2024
		It's a game	Albury, 2021, Vendemia, 2024
	Meaning given to the use of these images	Resulting from ambient pressure	Castillo-Abdul et al, 2021; Guizo et al, 2021; Wang et al, 2021; Barrié Foundation, 2022, Huang et al, 2024
		It's dangerous	Adams et al, 2017; Sánchez et al, 2003; Vance et al, 2015; Spišák, 2022 and 2024; McGraw et al, 2024; Rodríguez et al, 2021; Albury, 2021; Rodríguez et al, 2021; Guizzo et al, 2021, Giray 2022; AEPD, 2024
	Ways to access these images	Private profile or public profile	Qustodian, 2023

Images of the body or body parts naked	Management of these images	Send, receive, forward	Castillo-Abdul et al, 2021
	Reasons to share these images	Valuing the body as the most important thing	Lozano-Blasco et al, 2023; Gothreau et al, 2024, Huang et al, 2024, Plieger et al, 2024, Bussy-Socrate and Sokolova, 2024
		What friends do	Lozano-Blasco et al, 2023; Suárez-Álvarez et al, 2023
		What influencers do	Drenten et al, 2019; Eyiah-Bediako et al, 2021; Ramos Gutiérrez and Fernández Blanco, 2021; Dejmanee, 2016; Llovet and Establés, 2023; Bussy-Socrate and Sokolova, 2024; Cuenca Orellana et al, 2024
		What the partner is asking for	Barrié Foundation, 2022; Plieger et al., 2024
		It doesn't matter to share images of my body or nude body parts	Pérez, 2021; Anciones-Anguita et al, 2024; Neely, 2012
	Reasons not to share these images	I don't want others to forward it	Law 8/2021, of 4 June, on Comprehensive Protection of Children and Adolescents against Violence, 2021
		I don't like it	UNICEF, 2021
		Sexuality is personal	Spišák, 2022 and 2024; Vizcaíno-Verdú et al, 2022
		Fear of crime	McGraw et al, 2024; Draft of Law for the Protection of Minors in Digital Environments, 2024
	Sources of sexuality information	I know what sexuality is	Cary et al, 2024; Anciones-Anguita et al, 2024
		I have asked my parents about sexuality	Baati et al, 2020
		I learn sexuality through pornography	Yu et al, 2021; Gothreau et al, 2024
		My parents have told me about sexuality	Baati et al, 2020
Media literacy	Social media habits	Read permissions to protect data or share photos	Besolí et al, 2018; European Association for Digital Transition, 2024
		I know what advertising is	Segarra-Saavedra and Hidalgo Marí, 2018; Monge-Benito et al., 2021; Feijoo & Sádaba, 2022
		I want to create my own profile to actively participate in networks	Rodrigo-Martín et al., 2021, Ramírez-Plascencia, et al., 2022 and López de Ayala et al, 2022
		I know how to find the information that I am looking for online	AEPD, 2024; Zozaya Durazo et al., 2023
		I trust that the sources I use on social media are true	Guerrero-Pico y Establés, 2021; Martínez-Sanz, 2021; Digón-Regueiro et al., 2023
		I rely more on social media information than my family or teachers	Lozano-Blasco et al., 2023
		How often do you plan to continue using social media in the future	European Association for Digital Transition, 2024
		Using social media will still be a very important activity for me	BOE, 2024
		How often do you recommend to other colleagues using social media	Besolí, et.al, 2018; Rodríguez and Rodero, 2024

Media literacy	Attitude to Social Media (Critical Awareness)	I am aware that the information I share stays on networks	European Association for Digital Transition, 2024
		I am aware that they can manipulate my images	Rozendaal et al. 2011; European Association for Digital Transition, 2024
		I am aware that not everything that appears is real	Zozaya-Durazo et al., 2023; Alvermann et al., 2018; European Association for Digital Transition, 2024
		I am aware of the violence on social media	Naief, 2013; Vance et al, 2015; Rodriguez et al, 2021; Audiovisual Communication Act 13/2022; European Association for Digital Transition (2024)
		I look for more information when I'm not sure it's true	Ramos Gutiérrez and Fernández Blanco, 2021; Bromberg and Fitzgerald, 2021
		I don't share the information when I'm not sure it's true	Zozaya Durazo et al, 2023

Source: Own elaboration based on the cited literature.