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"I Learned All by Myself": Romanian Young People's Self-Perception of Their Digital Competence[1]

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Abstract. Following the theoretical framework and analysing the empirical data of the *EU Kids Online III* (2013) project, in this study, we have followed the digital competence of Romanian children and adolescents. We have studied the online activities they undertake, their attitudes towards the Internet and the perception they have of their digital competence. Romanian children and adolescents are very present in the digital world, which they perceive as a social space distinct from that of the adults, where they can retreat and where they can meet their needs for communication, information (not just for homework but also questions of their own concern), leisure, etc. However, the situation is far from ideal. The modest implication of parents and teachers in the online life of children and adolescents has a detrimental impact on their level of digital competence.

Keywords: digital competence, online activities, attitudes towards the Internet, EU Kids Online, Romanian Youngsters

1. Introduction

In our information society, children and adolescents[2] grow up in a saturated media environment, where the presence of computers, the Internet, and other digital technologies in the home are commonplace and mediated interactions

1 The Romanian version of this study (entitled "Poveştile de dincolo de statistici: despre competenţele digitale ale copiilor şi adolesenţilor din România") was published in the *Romanian Journal of Sociology*, 5–6/2015.

2 In this study for children (9–12) and adolescents (13–16), we use the collective noun "youngsters".

are part of everyday life (Livingstone, 2002). Young people develop different lifestyles from those of their parents, with specific old and new media usage habits. In their use of new information and communication technologies (ICT), youngsters are often more efficient than adults.

At the same time, researchers have drawn attention to the second-level digital divide among young people, whether they are Romanian or from other European countries (Buckingham, 2006; Neuman–Celano, 2006; Tőkés, 2014). The first-level digital divide was defined in terms of access to ICT. In the second-level digital divide – influenced by the spread of ICT and improving access opportunities –, the focus has shifted to the inequalities found in competence and skills (Hargittai, 2001; Helsper–Galaczi, 2009). Buckingham (2008) considers that the use of new media by young people is no longer a question of access but one of social and cultural practices as digital media continually offers new forms of mediation, representation of the world and alternative channels for communication and interaction.

International analyses (e.g. surveys from *EU Kids Online* abbreviated as EUKO), which were implemented in 2010 – the collection of quantitative data by questionnaire –, and in 2013 the collection of qualitative data (through focus groups and interviews) showed that differences in children's digital competence were mainly due to individual-level differences and less due to national peculiarity. There are significant correlations between the level of digital competence, the pattern of Internet use, and the confidence in online skills (Sonck et al., 2012: 87).

In our study, we follow the level of digital competence of Romanian children and adolescents and their self-perception regarding their digital abilities. We build on the secondary analysis of qualitative empirical data from *EU Kids Online III*.[3] We strive to comprehend the self-perception of children's digital competence by analysing their specific digital skills and, more implicitly, by looking at the diversity of Internet activities they engage in (Sonck et al., 2012: 88). For a better understanding of their self-evaluations of digital competence, we also explore the Romanian youngsters' attitudes toward the Internet.

2. About the Concepts: From Digital Literacy to Digital Competence

Translating the concept of digital literacy into digital competence (in Romanian and in other languages) provides an instrumentalist denotation to the concept. We use the concept of digital competence with the same meaning of digital literacy. In English, the concept of digital literacy is protected by instrumentalism because the semantic sphere of literacy involves the printed media and automatically

3 The authors are members of the *EU Kids Online III* Romanian team.

brings into discussion the text–audience–producer interaction (Burn–Durran, 2007). As shown by some authors (Burn–Durran, 2007; Lankshear–Knobel, 2008), the instrumentalist approach is very reductionist because digital literacy is much more than a list of online skills, it is more the ability to use digital media efficiently in a given socio-cultural context.

Defining the concept of digital literacy, Fieldhouse and Nicholas (2008: 50) add to the instrumentalist approach the requirement of being "information savvy" or "information literate", specifically the ability to identify if and when information is needed, to locate it and to use it effectively. This requirement to distinguish between information, to analyse it critically, and especially to know how to look for it appears to be a vital part of digital literacy in the views of several authors.

Buckingham (2008) indicates that most discussions about digital competence are concerned with the manipulation of information, yet neglect the cultural aspect of Internet usage. Although many authors stress the importance of information evaluation ability, they still tend to consider digital literacy a technical "know-how" accumulated relatively easily. Few authors recognize the symbolic and persuasive element of digital media, which goes far beyond the aspect of informational content.

Beside technical and informational abilities, another aspect of digital literacy is the cognitive processes that occur when using electronic information. According to Glister, digital literacy is "the ability to understand and use information in multiple formats from a variety of sources when presented via computer" (Glister, 1997: 33). We could say that his vision derives from the concept of "critical media literacy" applied to the digital environment (Buckingham, 2003; Alvermann-Hagood, 2000).

Glister's famous formula "mastering ideas, not keystrokes" focuses attention on another aspect of digital literacy, namely the socio-cultural context in which the user uses the medium. Several authors have shown that literacy does not imply knowing how to read and write, but it assumes adjustment to the medium, comprehension of information in every form it is presented – taking into consideration the medium–information–audience triad (Lanham, 1995, *apud* Lankshear-Knobel, 2008).

According to Powell (2007), literacy is a set of social practices that becomes relevant in the socio-cultural context in which they are implemented. These practices are not static but dynamic and evolving; they accumulate during the use of technology, building on existing knowledge and abilities. Differences between users appear mostly in these practices because the technology is only a tool to be exploited in everyday life according to one's skills, habits, cultural values, beliefs, and attitude.

As a summary, we highlight at least three aspects of the digital literacy concept (Livingstone, 2004: 12). The functional model views literacy as a list of skills

required for functioning effectively within the information society. The socio-cultural practice model sets out the role of the socio-cultural context, in which the accumulated competence gains meaning. The intellectual empowerment model enhances the symbolic capital of literacy, permitting efficient presence in society. "Gaining literacy in the digital world is thus one means by which the individual can retain a hold on the shape of his/her life in an era of increasing uncertainty" – maintains Martin (2008: 156) in his study concerning the role of digital literacy in information society.

Instead of a conclusion, we present Martin's synthesising definition of digital literacy: "awareness, attitude and the ability of individuals to appropriately use digital tools and facilities to identify, access, manage, integrate, evaluate, analyze and synthesize digital resources, construct new knowledge, create media expressions, and communicate with others, in the context of specific life situations, in order to enable constructive social action; and to reflect upon this process" (Martin, 2008, *apud* Lankshear–Knobel, 2008: 167).

3. Measuring Digital Competence

To understand better the implication of digital competence, we have to distinguish between the conceptualization and operationalization of the concept (Bawden, 2008). Operationalization is the process of defining the variables and items (e.g. understanding the functions of the PC, knowing its components, using online applications, online searching abilities, etc.) that empirically measure digital competence. The misunderstanding of the distinction between conceptualization and operationalization – or the reduction of the concept of digital competence to a list of technical skills – only serves to deepen the second-level digital divide (Neuman–Celano, 2006; Gee, 2007).

The conceptual debate concerning the concept highlights those essential aspects of digital competence which require consideration. In order to measure digital competence, we first need to determine how it can be done.

Bowden (2008) considers that digital literacy is a frame concept that integrates four essential components. The first component is a set of technical skills. The second component is related to the world of information and knowledge about digital in general, e.g. knowledge required for a competent user. The third component sums up the specific skills such as reading and comprehension of digital and non-digital content, content creation, evaluation of information, informational skills, and media competence. The fourth component is the set of attitudes and perspectives of the users which make the connection between the old and new knowledge and skills and which allow the user to apply this cognition to their advantage (Bowden, 2008: 29).

When reseachers began using the concept of digital competence, the meaning of the term in the literature was vague. At present, in numerous studies (Media Literacy, 2007; EAVI, 2009: 117), we find the rigorous operationalization of the concept. If we consider digital competence as a form of critical media literacy and outline the operationalization of the mentioned concept, we can then identify four basic dimensions of digital competence (Bowden, 2008; Scheibe-Rogow, 2012: 25; EAVI, 2009: 34):

(1) Technical skills: the ability to use digital technologies in general. With the spread of the Internet and media convergence towards the online sphere, these technical skills are becoming more complex, thereby excluding some from successfully accessing ICT.

(2) Cognitive skills: the ability to critically understand digital messages. The critical understanding of digital content requires critical thinking and autonomy in decoding, evaluating, and interpreting digital messages. Critical thinking involves deliberately raised critical questions regarding the content being processed – the ability to answer these questions. Critical thinking requires positive attitude and a healthy skepticism concerning online messages. Because online messages are a form of multimedia, the decoding of these messages involves decoding skills relating to text, image, sound, and audiovisual content.

(3) Social skills: the ability to interact through communication and participation in the online space. Social skills involve online (formal and informal) content creation, which facilitates the interaction and which also includes the presentation of self, construction of identity, and communities online. Interactivity is a characteristic of Web 2.0; therefore, social skills – contacting other people, creating relationships and social networks, creating online identities and communities, and creating their own content – are essential skills.

(4) As a fourth specific component of digital competence, researchers list attitudes and personal perspectives. According to this approach, digital competence relates to more than a series of skills: it refers to a certain way of thinking and to the presence of positive attitudes and beliefs regarding the content and functioning of online space (Bawden, 2008: 18). All digital skills are valuable only if they are grounded in a social and cultural context and represent a new element that enriches the cultural capital of the holder (Bawden, 2008: 30).

4. The Romanian Context

Regarding the digital competence of Romanian children and adolescents, empirical data are accessible. 2010 and 2013 saw the completion of the second and third phases of the international research: *EU Kids Online.* These data collections were carried out in several European countries, including Romania.

EU Kids Online is a cross-national research network which seeks to enhance knowledge regarding European children's online opportunities, risks, and safety. It employs multiple methods to map children's and parents' changing experience of the Internet. The *EU Kids Online* II (2009–2011) project saw the participation of 25 countries, including Romania. The main focus was on a survey of children and parents, which aimed at producing original, rigorous data on their Internet use, online risk experiences, and safety mediation. A random stratified sample of 25,142 young people aged 9–16 who use the Internet plus one of the parents of each youth was interviewed in 25 European countries during spring/summer 2010. In *EU Kids Online* III (2011–2014), 33 countries participated (again including Romania). The empirical project was a cross-national qualitative study of teenagers' accounts of online risks. Qualitative data were gathered in 2013 by focus groups and semi-structured interviews. In every participating country, 6 focus groups were conducted (3 with girls and 3 with boys) and 12 individual semi-structured interviews (for methodological details and the report for the nine European countries, see Smahel–Wright, 2014: 16).

4.1. Digital Competence of Romanian Youngsters as Reflected in the Quantitative Data of EU Kids Online II

Given the complexity of the problem, "the *EU Kids Online* survey included three measures of digital literacy: (1) specific digital skills (8 skills), range of online activities (17 activities), and children's beliefs about their Internet abilities" (Livingstone et al., 2012; Sonck et al., 2012: 88).

Even though the data are quantitative, it is worth recalling the results in this study. On a scale from 1 to 10, the average of the first indicator at European level was 5.19 (for Romania: 4.26); for the second indicator, the average at European level was 4.67 (while in Romania it was 4.69); and for the third indicator the average obtained in Romania was 5.96, while the European score was 6.35. The differentiating factors seem to be the age and gender of children and the education of parents, as we can see in the table below (Livingstone et al., 2012; Sonck et al., 2011: 91).

Table 1. Self-reported digital literacy by gender, age, and parents' highest level of education

	Specific digital skills (0–10)	**Range of online activities (0–10)**	**Belief in Internet abilities (0–10)**
European average	**5.19**	**4.67**	**6.35**
Romanian average	**4.26**	**4.69**	**5.96**
Gender of child*			
Male	5.37	4.87	6.62
Female	5.02	4.48	6.08

	Specific digital skills (0–10)	Range of online activities (0–10)	Belief in Internet abilities (0–10)
Age of child*			
11–12	3.52	3.80	5.32
13–14	5.41	4.79	6.43
15–16	6.55	5.37	7.24
Highest level of education of the parents in household*			
Primary or lower	4.11	4.00	6.06
Lower secondary	4.94	4.69	6.45
Upper or post-secondary	5.36	4.74	6.41
Tertiary	5.91	4.98	6.36

Source: Sonck et al., 2011: 91

Note: the general differences in digital literacy, that is, the main effects by gender, age, and parents' education are significant at ***p<0.001, *European averages

The quantitative results show that among European youngsters the highest positive association appears between online activities and specific digital skills (r=0.55), while beliefs relating to online efficacy are less associated with the online activities conducted (r=0.36) or with the specific digital skills (r=0.43) (Sonck et al., 2011: 93). There is a difference between European and Romanian youngsters: the positive association between the conducted online activities and beliefs about the online abilities (r=0.44) is stronger among Romanian youngsters. So, among Romanian youngsters, the amount of conducted online activities have a stronger link to the positive beliefs concerning their digital competence than to the real digital skills.

The empirical data of the *EU Kids Online* II survey (2010) verified the pessimistic assumption about digital inequalities among young people, whether they are European or Romanian. It has been shown that at European level there is a strong positive relationship between specific online skills, the number of conducted online activities and confidence in their own digital abilities. Those with a higher level of specific digital skills conduct more online activities and are more self-confident regarding their specific digital skills (Sonck et al., 2012: 87).

European children generally carried out 7.2 online activities (from a total of 17), which shows the popularity of online activities. The more widespread online activities are searching for information, communication, and entertainment, while the less practised are the creative and participative online activities (Sonck et al., 2011: 2). Conceptually, specific online skills can be divided into technical or instrumental skills, cognitive or informational skills, and social skills. European

youngsters have on average 4.2 specific digital skills (from a total of 8), which mainly concern the use of ICT and information management. Regarding their self-perception of online skills, only a third of European youngsters believe they know more about the Internet than their parents and another third thinks they know a lot about the Internet.

The most frequent online activities undertaken by Romanian youngsters are those related to the consumption of content, most commonly the seeking of information to assist in homework activities. Another obvious motivation for Romanian youngsters in their use of the Internet is that of entertainment and leisure, or even escape from everyday life. They watch videoclips, play games (mostly against the computer, and not in a network situation with other players), and communicate using different applications and online platforms. If young Romanians exceed the European youngsters in practising entertaining online activities, they are held back in their use of the Internet in developing their general literacy or professional knowledge. For Romanian youngsters, the Internet offers new ways and opportunities for entertainment, without major expenses – compared to European youngsters, they download more music and movies, play more games on the computer or online with others, yet they remain behind in creative activities, participation, and content generation (Tőkes, 2014: 64).

Studying the level of digital competence at European level, we can see the higher level of attainment among boys and older children, as well as among those who come from families with higher socio-economic status (SES). Children with low SES consider themselves more knowledgeable about the Internet compared to their parents. Romanian youngsters are below the European average level regarding their specific digital skills, number of online activities, and their confidence in their online competence. Hereafter, we seek an explanation for this situation, analysing in particular the self-perception of their online competence.

4.2. The Digital Competence of Romanian Youngsters Reflected in the Qualitative Data of EU Kids Online III

For a deeper understanding of the quantitative results from *EU Kids Online II*, the third wave of the *EU Kids Online* project was planed and implemented, which was a qualitative research. The summer of 2013 saw the third phase of the *EU Kids Online* project, in which qualitative empirical data were collected in 9 European countries (Belgium, Italy, Spain, Greece, Malta, Portugal, UK, Romania, and the Czech Republic). Each country performed 6 focus groups and 12 semi-structured interviews (Smahel–Wright, 2014: 16). In Romania, the following qualitative empirical data were collected:

Table 2. Qualitative empirical data collected in Romania in the context of the EU Kids Online III

Focus groups (number of participants)		
Age	**Boys**	**Girls**
9–10 years	1 (4)	1 (4)
11–13 years	1 (5)	1 (5)
14–16 years	1 (6)	1 (5)
Total	**3 (15)**	**3 (14)**
Semi-structured interviews		
Age	**Boys**	**Girls**
9–10 years	2	1
11–13 years	1	2
14–16 years	2	3
Total	**5**	**6**

Source: *EU Kids Online III* (2013), data gathered by the Romanian research group, director of the group: Monica Barbovschi, members: Anva Velicu, Bianca Balea, Éva László, Valentia Marinescu, Gyöngyvér Tőkés.[4]

Young Romanians were selected from four schools, from public and private as well as from urban and rural schools. The children included in focus groups were different from those used for interviews (Smahel–Wright, 2014: 16).

4.2.1. Research Problem

Although the *EU Kids Online III* qualitative research focused on the perception of youngsters regarding the meaning of online risk, the gathered empirical data – focus groups and semi-structured interviews – frequently revealed associated topics concerning online activities such as motivation and consequences of digital participation, the place of an online presence in school life and within a family of youngsters, what they are able to do online, how they learn, what they know, etc.

The main research problem addressed by this study is the effective presentation of Romanian youngsters' self-perception of their digital competence based on the secondary analysis of the *EU Kids Online III* empirical data.

In public, and even in few academic discourses, the young generation is considered to be digitally competent by nature. In this study, we challenge this assumption by investigating the following subproblems:

– What are Romanian children doing online? What are the online activities and in what context do these activities occur? What is the history of these activities in children's lives?

4 For more information, see: http://www.lse.ac.uk/media@lse/research/EUKidsOnline/ParticipatingCountries/romania.aspx.

– Do Romanian children use ICT and the Internet in a 'mimetic' and/or intuitive way, or consciously due to a deeper knowledge of the opportunities offered by the Internet?

– How do Romanian children relate their digital competence and how they evaluate their digital skills compared to the competence of their parents, teachers, and friends?

– Bawden (2008: 24, 30) shows the importance of positive attitudes and social skills in using the Internet. We examine the direction and strength of attitudes of Romanian children concerning ICT and the Internet.

– We also turn our attention to the social universe in which the Internet is placed. Offline Romanian children interact daily with friends and siblings, parents and other relatives, teachers and other adults, but from their online world adults are absent (Buckingham, 2006: 4; Mesch, 2009). So, if in offline everyday life the practices of the adults influence the behaviour of young people, in online situations they lack relevant examples (Tőkés, 2014).

To answer these questions, we perform a secondary analysis of the *EU Kids Online III* qualitative empirical data: first, we select the relevant aspects of focus groups and semi-structured interviews, and then we conduct a thematic analysis and interpret the results.

5. Results of the Qualitative Research

5.1. What Do Children Do Online?

Romanian children and teenagers "have access to a wider range of devices than those they actually own or have for private use" (Mascheroni–Cuman, 2014: 6). In recent years, the use of tablets and smartphones has spread, and "smartphones are the devices that children are more likely to own or to have for private use" (Mascheroni–Cuman, 2014: 6). Mobile devices often replace laptops; however, laptops have some advantages over tablets or smartphones. The results of the qualitative research *Net Children Go Mobile* (2014) draw attention "to the ecology of devices that children inhabit, and that includes more and more personal and portable devices". Even so, children place more value on privacy and convenience than mobility (Mascheroni–Cuman, 2014: 6, 7). As an overview, at European level, a correlation was found between the use of smartphones or laptops and the socio-economic situation of the child's family. "The differences in the daily use of smartphones in relation to socio-economic status are also notable:" daily smartphone use was more often observed among children with higher SES than among children with lower SES (Mascheroni–Cuman, 2014: 8).

Quantitative analyses have shown that the level of digital competence positively correlates with the number of conducted online activities. Considering the nature of online activities as a marker of Romanian youngsters' online competence, thereinafter we present the online activities undertaken by young Romanians. Qualitative data confirms the results of the quantitative survey of the most popular online activities among Romanian youngsters. They use social networking sites and communicate online, also have fun and play games, they also use the Internet for homework and information gathering.

5.1.1. The Use of Social Networking Sites and Online Communication

The Used Platforms

Among Romanian children and adolescents, the use of Facebook is very popular, and this is true even for children under 13 (the age limit for having a Facebook account). In 2013, 78% of Romanian young people used Facebook (Mascheroni–Cuman, 2014: 16), a third of the users were under 13, and therefore below the allowed age limit (Tőkés, 2014: 96).

Facebook offers many opportunities for entertainment. Romanian youngsters – apart from the online presence, which justifies their existence in the eyes of their reference groups – play and communicate extensively through this online channel. "I'm obsessed... with Facebook" – says a 14-year old boy. Besides Facebook, Skype is also used for calls, and those who play online seldom chat on games pages.

At younger ages, many young Romanians used Yahoo Messenger for communication, but now they mostly use Facebook. During the data gathering period, some of them still had accounts with Yahoo Messenger, but these accounts are abandoned now. This transition from one online communication platform to another one is specific to young people and has been documented also in other researches. This phenomenon is called "communication trajectory," which denotes ventures between the personal development of the child and the technological development (Velicu, 2009). EUKO III data has shown that at an early age (9–10 years) children had few contacts on Yahoo Messenger and they were mostly family members and relatives. Later on (at the age of 11–12), they increased their contact list to include unknown persons, usually of their own age. Of those who communicate intensely online, the number of contacts on Facebook is higher than on Yahoo Messenger. Moving from Yahoo Messenger to Facebook is sometimes accompanied by negotiating with parents because some parents do not freely allow the creation of a Facebook account. Many children use false information to create a Facebook account, particularly regarding their age, as they do not meet the legal age requirements to open an account or because they do not know exactly what that age limit is (13 years). On Facebook, it is easy to quickly create a network of friends.

Friending on Social Networking Sites

In the first stage, children come into contact with classmates and friends from real life (offline), but among Romanian children it is quite acceptable (18% of the respondents in the NCGM, 2014) to accept the friend invitation of unknown persons of the same age (Mascheroni–Cumana, 2014; Velicu et al., 2014). They also accept the friend invitation of those from the same school or with whom they spend their free time after school.

"If they are friends, like I know somehow, so ... I accept their friend requests … I have sent friend invitations to children I know ..." (boy, 12 years, rural).

"I accept those that I know by sight" (girl, 11 years).

Among the motivations for friending on Facebook, we can see common interests and concerns. For example, a 15-year-old girl – fan of Lala Band – accepted the invitation of other fans. A 14-year-old boy says: "I like to sing folk music, on violin, you know? ... And there are other singers on Facebook, and I added them recently."

Another reason leading to online connection is common offline activities such as frequenting the same clubs, enjoying the same hobby, or participation in language courses.

Most children mention the existence of a "safety" limit, and verify the identity of those with whom they connect online. For example, they accept friend requests from those who are already friends in the real world: "well ... I look if there're mutual friends, and if there are a few ... more than one or two, I accept them" (boy, 14). Sometimes they connect with people suggested by Facebook provided they have enough mutual friends, and check whether they wish to accept the request.

Especially in the early days of Facebook, Romanian young people were eager to establish a large network of friends, which is a marker of affiliation and popularity among peers (Velicu et al., 2014). Thus – particularly among teenagers who had previously established communication via Yahoo Messenger –, friend lists were transferred to Facebook in order to quickly build large networks of friends (see also Velicu, 2009).

After a while, selectivity is adopted in accepting friend requests, and young Romanians delete initially accepted "friends" too easily.

We have often found an absence of any selection criteria in young Romanians' decisions to accept friend requests from unknown persons; sometimes they mentioned subjective criteria that they perceive to be "safe". For example, for one 14-year-old boy, it was important that his Facebook friends be Romanian: "if I see that they are Romanian, I accept them, if not, then no. Recently, there was an Arab whom I had accepted as a friend, and he began to call me on Facebook. I refused ... then I said ... I began to mock him and I said words that I knew randomly. (…) words that do not exist (laughing) ... and then he cursed me in English" (boy, 14). A good first impression also plays an important role in accepting a request from an unknown person: "They sent me a friend request and I looked at their page ... and

I saw that they are not too aggressive, so if I have trouble with them ... but, before, I check to see who they are ... noo, I don't accept the initial request" (boy, 14).

Repeated online meetings give the feeling of familiarity: "I have not met her, but I know her because we have been communicating on the net or on Facebook for a long time ..." (girl, 16).

Children at younger ages use even more vague selection criteria, separating the "good kids" and the "bad kids", the bad being the verbally aggressive ones; a 10-year-old boy (under the age limit for Facebook) said that "those who curse ... I don't add ... I have heard from those who have accepted them ... cursing so much ... so I told myself I did not want anything to do with them". Qualitative data confirms that most Romanian youngsters' contacts from their friend lists are aquaintances of their age, from their offline lives. Romanian children rarely invite friends' parents and teachers (Tőkés, 2014: 92). Their online network of friends is their own social space where they can express themselves freely.

Construction of Online Identity

We have previously mentioned that presence on Facebook for the younger generation is a form of social affirmation. On Facebook, they build their digital identity, on the one hand, by drafting their profile and, on the other hand, by building up a network of friends (boyd, 2008).

In the construction of a digital identity, an important decision is the amount and type of information posted online. Romanian youngsters are ambivalent regarding disclosure; they oscillate between safety considerations, moral judgments, and gratitudes. Most often, they realize the risks of disclosing personal information; even so, they choose the gratifying disclosure and social interaction:

"I removed the year of birth. [I revealed] only the day, so people could wish me happy birthday" (girl, 15).

Thus, we see the rejection by Romanian young people, at least declaratively, of an exaggerated exhibitionism:

Interviewer: "But you have pictures of you online, right?"

Girl (15): "Yes, but not like that. I do not post pictures of me every day like others do."

The Significance of "Like"

The number of "Likes", besides the number of friends, like a visiting card, shows the popularity of someone. "If you have many Likes, you are popular; so, that is why you accept any friend request – to receive Likes, but ... it can become addictive in that you always feel the need to get Likes, to post that ... so that everyone appreciates you," says a 15-year-old girl, explaining the mechanism which links the number of friends and their appreciation to increasing self-esteem. Sometimes, the collecting of "Likes" is an ultimate

goal, and conflicts can rise when accidents or the spite of friends provokes the "loss" of these likes:

"Boy (14 years): …. I have my own Facebook page. I had 3,000 likes, I think, or 4,000. (...) Last year in September, I ask a boy (to be my) admin; and there is an option that prevents giving 'Likes' to those people below a certain age. And he changed something there ... and I drop to 900 'Likes', when I started then I reached 10 'Likes'."

Researcher: "So, you went down?"

Boy (14 years): "Yes. I lost all the 'Likes' people had given to me, and did not have the age that my admin set."

Researcher: "And what did you say to that boy?"

Boy (14 years): "I was mad at him ... I have another friend, we both were admins, both of us got angry, and we began to cuss as children use to do."

However, the attitude is dual, because, although Romanian younsters willingly receive these "Likes," they are also critical of the "rush after Likes". They perceive this (always in others, not in themselves!) as a violation of certain rules of public morality:

Girl (12 years): "I have seen cases, girls I do not know, girls around 10, 12, or 9 years, who post pictures on Facebook about them almost naked, only to obtain 'Likes'."

Researcher: "And what do think you about this?"

Girl (12 years): "It seems to me ... I'd be ashamed, first, because there are teachers and people who see those pictures ... just for Likes and stuff like that ..."

Beyond the violation of social norms to achieve "Likes," the collecting of "Likes" is judged from the perspective of a lack of authenticity, again, especially when it comes to speaking of others: "I find it a waste of time, because "Likes" do not show what kind of person you are, these are just some 'Likes,' showing anybody who sees your profile that you have some friends" (girl, 12 years).

But the "Like" is important not only to the person receiving it but also to the person who gives it. It can potentially ruin the image of the giver as it is an indication of his/her taste and identity.

"It was a picture from a website, and I did not know how I got there or why I gave a 'Like' ... and I wiped it as fast as I could, I deleted it..." (girl, 16 years)

Beyond being gratifying – sometimes helping to increase self-esteem –, the "Like" can be an element of risk in the online environment. The friends' "Likes" expose the network automatically to that content that can be damaging:

Researcher: "What don't you like on the Internet?"

Girl (10 years): "When the math teacher gives 'Like' to a lot of junk. Well ... from cursing to weird jokes, stuff about football, naked people."

In summary, we can say that a presence on social networks, especially Facebook, is a sign of existence, conformity, and popularity in the world of youth. Facebook

is a social space where gratuities are instantaneous and taking responsibility does not seem to be a necessity. These online activities become a common part of daily routine; moreover, with the spread of mobile devices that are very individualized (Mascheroni–Olafsson, 2014), the exposure of young people on social media grows more and more.

"Young people use the Internet because it's cool. Let everyone know. Because I know that everyone uses the Internet and the news spreads quickly. It spreads that you go to the gym or that you have bought a new pair of trousers" (girl, 16 years).

5.1.2. Entertainment and Gaming

The quantitative data highlighted that the Internet is used mostly by Romanian youngsters for entertainment and leisure. This is confirmed also by the results of qualitative research, where the online game and leisure type activities are frequently mentioned.

"I play various games, go on Facebook" (girl, 10 years).

"I listen to music on YouTube ... if I find a nice film on the TV, and I would like to see it again, I watch it again on the computer" (girl, 16).

"I watch movies, music, etc. online" (boy, 14).

"I watch YouTube, listen to music of famous singers, dancers ..." (girl, 11 years).

"I post funny videos online..." (boy, 14).

Sitting in front of the computer can be fun, but at the same time it can be an escape from life and everyday problems: "sometimes I sit in front of my computer so that my mother and brothers leave me alone" (11 years old girl).

Online Gaming

When it comes to escaping, online games are at hand because they are easy to access, affordable, interesting, entertaining, offer a good feeling at the same time, and provide the possibility of social activities (Messerlian et al., 2004). Being a free entertainment, without commitment and without the need to provide a real identity, the popularity of online games is high (Tőkés, 2014: 64; Skinner et al., 2004: 266). Usually, when we discuss the problem of excessive use of the Internet, we have to mention online games too because gratuities are large (Wong–Tong So, 2014).

"He (brother) plays first, and then he lets me, and then I let him again, and in the night I always play," says a boy of age 12 from the countryside.

"I am the kind of boy who is passionate about games" (boy, 14).

"I play on the tablet ... download from Google Play, and I play" (girl, 11 years).

Gentrification of Games

The games are perceived as being more for boys than for girls. In the qualitative research discussions, children clearly differentiated the "games for boys" from the "games for girls". Moreover, even in the case of girls, the most digitally competent, with many online skills and multiple activities, generally do not admit that they play, or really do not play games "for girls", which require more social skills and less technical skills or dexterity (such as action games). Playing complex games dedicated for boys offers girls higher status and they feel more special.

Gaming and the Age Differences

We can see a differentiation by age in terms of participation in online games: the younger children play "games on websites for children" while older children prefer games on the websites aimed at networking, especially on Facebook. Facebook games are very attractive, with many children creating Facebook accounts just to have the opportunity to play.

Children perceive the risk of excessive use of online games, they often appreciate it as harmful to spend long periods of time with these activities.

These online activities – not always beneficial – are spread mostly among boys and older children (Wong–Tong So, 2014). The popularity of online games comes from the fact that they are easily accessible, comfortable, often free, anonymous, and allow an escape from the problems of everyday life. In online space, it is easier to give up inhibitions, the interaction with other playmates with similar interests and the repeated success are an incentive (Griffiths, 2003).

5.1.3. Homework and Collecting Information

Among the most common online activities carried out by Romanian youngsters, we mention the collection of information for school purposes.

"I look for stuff on Wikipedia for school" (girl, 10 years).

"When I have to do a study, I use the online dictionaries" (girl, 11 years).

"I use the dictionaries very often, especially in Romanian, English, French" (boy, 12).

Activities for school purposes include searching for information on the Internet, but these tasks are sometimes misunderstood. Without respect for ethical norms, young people appropriate the work of others and present it as their own; they are merely concerned with the accuracy of the content:

Researcher: "You just download the paper and give it to the teacher?"

Boy (12 years): "First, I look to see if it is correct."

The phenomenon of plagiarism is also highlighted in the *Net Children Go Mobile* research. Among the possible causes, it lists the lack of school rules for accessing online information and the low level of digital competence of teachers

and educators who often do not know how to check the authenticity of the texts produced by children. It is suggested that they should form new attitudes related to searching and using online information (Mascheroni–Cumana, 2014; Velicu et al., 2014).

There is a confusion in the delimitation of activities that are for homework and those considered educational. Many online entertainment activities are considered by children to be educational (possibly to make them "acceptable" in the eyes of adults – parents and researchers). For example, boys at a school in a village appreciated quiz-type games to be educational, while a girl was talking about "educational series" with adolescents.

This rather simplistic use of the Internet by Romanian youngsters draws attention to the insufficient knowledge of digital activities and to the role of schools in the development of digital competence. The way schools and teachers relate to the virtual universe or school tasks and the online solutions offered are examples for Romanian children and adolescents (given that most parents do not use the Internet for educational purposes). Children imitate parents or colleagues in conducting their online activities, but they do not have authentic models in using the Internet for personal and professional development.

5.2. Self-Assessement of Digital Competence

Taking notice of the correlation between the diversity of online activities and digital skills (Sonke et al., 2011), in the previous section, we presented a detailed view of the online activities of Romanian youngsters. We observed that, although at first sight they conduct many online activities, these activities are performed in rather passive ways – the content available for doing homework or for entertainment were being consumed passively. Rarely do Romanian youngsters involve themselves in the digital world as initiators or active participants.

An often overlooked reason of this is the language barrier. There is a false view of digital competence as a list of technical skills, which are solely responsible for the child's success in online activities. Among younger children or among youngsters from lower SES, English language knowledge is the first premise for positive experiences on the Internet. Qualitative studies emphasize that children from English-speaking countries are generally more satisfied with online content than those from other countries (Livingstone et al., 2012; Mascheroni–Olafsson, 2014; Velicu et al., 2014). As a Romanian boy (12 years) said, it is not the use of the computer that presented difficulties but the understaning of messages sent by the computer which were in the English language: "My mother helped me, especially when I was younger, with English". This situation leaves limited opportunities for interaction and communication with children from other cultural spaces, whether or not they are English-language speakers:

Researcher: "Do you speak with other players?"

Boy (10 years): "Sometime they ask me, but I do not really know how to respond because I am not so good at English."

To analyse the level of Romanian youngsters' digital competence, we have looked at how familiar they were with digital technologies; whether they can work effectively with them. As revealed by the quotes below, most Romanian young people learned to handle ICT and perform online activities on their own, through trial and error. Help from outside came from friends, siblings, or relatives having slightly higher or similar ages to them, but rarely from significant adults in their lives (e.g. parents or teachers).

Researcher: "Who taught you [how to use the ICT]?"

Boy (12): "I learned it by myself. Alone. I learned it from one from another, from my cousin; he has got a computer, and I learned it all by myself..."

"... I know what's in the computer, anything that moves, I can install, uninstall... You can download games via torrent, and before you install or download you have to scan it... on Facebook ... when you sign up ... you got to ... to be in topic and to know to what you expose yourself to ... I say this from my own experience" (boy, 14).

"I have an uncle that works as a computer specialist ... and when I have a problem I call him, he comes to me, and I tell him what programs to install for me..." (boy, 11 years).

Learning from self-experience is not always beneficial since, when at risk, children cannot always cope; so, they mystify the "dangerous" online situations:

"Girl (16 years): ... it would be better not to comment; and there are all kinds of online competitions that you give 'Like' to … and so: you get a phone…

Researcher: And you believe in these competitions?

Girl (16): No …

Researcher: But do you usually give 'Like,' to share, or to comment?

Girl (16): I give 'Like,' but I do not write comments. You have to give 'Like' and to write, to comment. Or participate and get into the competition, but I think there might be a trick in it... if you write, they require some personal data.

Researcher: So! And you don't practice this?

Girl (16): Nooo! I share only with friends because I do not like everyone to see my photos, my data, and all my stuff."

"I learned it on my own skin. They told me not to download any games ... Well, for example, if you look for a game, and something pops up instantly – except my game – I instinctively give X and get out of there..." (girl, 16).

Moreover, learning by trial and error does not suit everyone and can be quite inefficient, so the need for help is openly affirmed, especially among girls who have very modest technical skills.

"Researcher: What don't you like about the Internet?

Girl (16 years): I'm no good at software updates. I always have to ask someone to help me in updating the software."

"I made a page [Facebook], but I accidentally deleted it" (girl, 10 years).

Younger children are not aware of the need for selection of information, but with age comes an increase in the capacity to recognize relevant information: "I check several sources, and the most abundant and repeated information I consider correct" (girl, 16 years).

Social skills are an important component of digital competence and children often import these skills directly from the offline world; the adjustment to online is minimal: "When you share something about you, you can select to do it public, or just to friends or just to myself" (girl, 16 years).

To conclude this section, we observed the very low level of technical and informational skills of Romanian youngsters, and we also saw – as shown by Ehrlinger and colleagues (2008) – a significant lack of awareness regarding the low level of cognitive and social skills necessary to succeed in the online universe.

5.3. Attitudes toward the Internet

Another factor influencing the success of online activities is the positive attitude towards the digital universe. Attitudes influence what we think, how we evaluate and interact with an object; these are formed from beliefs, impressions, feelings, and experiences with an object (Smith–Mackie, 2002). Attitudes toward the Internet are influenced by interaction with the digital world and, in turn, the attitudes influence the user's online behaviour.

Romanian youngsters' attitudes towards the Internet are ambivalent, reflecting the sometimes negative attitude of parents and adults in general – whose attitudes often derive from ignorance and which in turn generate a lack of security.

"I try new things on the Internet only when I know well those who recommended it and I know that they have a good taste, or if my parents allow me to" – is the opinion of an 11-year-old girl, whose attitude seems coloured by uncertainty.

Also, another source of negative attitudes is traditional media, namely television, which often induces a sense of panic among the population concerning the potential risks of the Internet: "… because I have seen negative cases (related to Facebook) on television," said a 13-year-old girl justifying her anxiety related to becoming a victim of "grooming" (an activity undertaken by adults who hide behind fake online profiles, stating that they are children or adolescents in an attempt to lure other children or adolescents to meet later with them offline), or a girl of 10 years who did not want to create a Facebook profile, although her colleagues have done so, because she had heard bad stories about Facebook on television.

Young Romanians have also inherited from adults their fears of excessive use or reliance on computers and the Internet; in some cases, children recognize that

these risks can be real, even for themselves (not just regarding others): "I lose my time [on the Internet]" (girl, 15), or "Some find all their happiness on the Internet because they do not have anything else in their lives, they play, yet it is more important to live in the real world" (girl, 11 years), or "The Internet is something that helps spend your time very quickly. At least it seems that time passes quickly ... You cannot solve all your needs with the Internet. (...) You do not even notice, and you stay glued to the virtual world. You lose touch with reality, with your real friends ... you start to like it more in cyberspace. Because satisfaction is immediate. For example, if you play or talk with friends ..." (girl, 16).

Romanian youngsters recognize risks, but they do not have a defeatist attitude; they also provide solutions to Internet risks, one of which is the classification and consumption of media content according to age: "So, children to have access to different information depending on their age. Children of a certain age to have access to certain kinds of information, youngsters like me, other kinds of information, and the older more..." (girl, 16).

Despite these fears, Romanian youngsters love the Internet, especially because it allows them to escape from the problems of everyday life: "I like the Internet because when I play I'm a little bit elsewhere and not at home" (girl, 11 years).

They like the Internet as it is, but they still see the need for improvement. The ideal Internet would be like: "... to have everything you need for school, after doing all your homework, to have beautiful games, not those which (...) but activity games, games for intelligence .... We have to find all on the Internet" (boy, 12 years).

Research (Durnell–Haag, 2002) shows a positive correlation between positive attitudes towards Internet and high self-efficacy, or reduced anxiety in using the computer or the longer use of the Internet. Qualitative data support mostly the positive attitude towards the digital universe of Romanian youngsters, this attitude being more intensive among boys. What caught our attention is the ambivalent attitudes toward the Internet transmitted likely by adults to children and adolescents. Romanian children are protected restrictively, although loosely, without being initiated into this universe through best practices offered by parents or educators (Helsper et al., 2013; Mascheroni–Cumana, 2014; Velicu et al., 2014).

6. Conclusions

Following the theoretical framework of the *EU Kids Online* project (Livingstone et al., 2011), in this study, we have followed the digital competence of Romanian children and adolescents by analysing the online activities they undertake – more specifically, the way in which they engage in these activities, how they access them, how they perceive the benefits or risks (perceived or real) – and

also the attitudes towards the Internet and the perception they have of their digital competence. The public discourse argues that the younger generation has a high level of digital competence, although quantitative research does not seem to confirm this. Starting from the qualitative data of the international project *EU Kids Online* III (2013), in this study, we have focused on the perspective of Romanian youngsters regarding the level of their digital competence and how they perceive their online competence.

As mentioned in the introduction, the definition of digital competence is not unambiguous, covering a wide range of meanings from simple lists of digital skills to lifestyles or habitus in the sense given by Bourdieu. What is common, however, is the attempts to highlight the social and cultural side of the digital competence, the reflexive nature of it, the possibility of creative use and the application of digital technology to specific aims (Martin, 2008: 167).

Operationalization is generally done through a list of items that measure different things (understanding components and PC operation, using applications and online browsing capability) and is usually used in measuring the level of digital competence to develop stimulative public policy.

Romanian children and teenagers use the Internet mostly at home and less at school, but they use it mostly on their own devices – the digital technology and the Internet being a quasi-permanent presence in their daily lives. In recent years, mobile and convergent media (e.g. tablets, smartphones) has spread particularly among children from high SES families. Children belonging to households with more modest SES predominantly access the Internet on laptops (Velicu et al., 2014).

As shown by quantitative surveys and qualitative data, the most popular online activities are the use of social networking sites, communication through various applications, online games, entertainment and the collection of information for school.

As in other areas of learning, the digital competence of Romanian young people increases through the practice and repetition of online activities; what is significant is that Romanian youngsters are left alone in this learning process.

Parents and teachers are barely present (and mostly ineffective) in young people's online lives, thereby leaving them to learn by trial and error. For some children, this method is beneficial, while for others it can lead to negative results (e.g. lower self-esteem, lack of confidence, and withdrawal from the digital universe). This might explain the different online competences of Romanian youngsters: technical skills are more developed for boys and older children while social skills are more developed for girls and adolescents and cognitive skills are more developed in older children. From the self-reports of Romanian children, we have noticed that they are rather passive consumers and participants in the digital world, lacking the initiative to create their own online content.

Even in these conditions, Romanian children and adolescents are very present in the digital world, which they perceive as a social space distinct from that of the adults, where they can retreat and where they can meet their needs for communication, information (not just for homework but questions of their own concern), leisure, etc. The digital universe is a special space for them, where they enjoy the recognition of their friends and fellows, and where they obtain immediate gratification (the "Likes" on Facebook or victories in games), where they communicate and have fun, having a sense of belonging and legitimacy.

However, the situation is far from ideal. The modest implication of parents and teachers in the online life of children and adolescents has a detrimental impact on their level of digital competence. Also, when adults mediate, they do so in a mostly restrictive manner. Adding the fact that these adults lack a high level of digital competence and have an ambivalent attitude towards ICT, they can not really urge and motivate the development of digital competence in Romanian youngsters. On the contrary, by their ambivalent attitude, they provide justification for kids to remain in the state of incompetence, not urging them to develop ICT skills and become efficient in handling it, or they allow the youngsters to live with a false sense of their own online competence, judging themselves by comparison with the poorly-skilled adults around them.

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