Social Networking Practices of Young Romanians

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Abstract. The aim of this study is to investigate the involvement of young Romanians in social networking activities and find out the popularity of the social networking among the range of available online activities. We analyse the characteristics of their online self-presentation and the social networking practices they develop. We describe and compare the progress of young Romanians in social networking activities, enhancing the differences in usage patterns occurred between 2010 and 2013. We also characterize the social networking patterns of the young Romanians as compared to European youngsters.

Keywords: social networking sites, social networking practices, Romanian young people, European young people

Introduction

There are hundreds of social networking sites that offer various technological means of supporting a wide range of interests and practices. Whilst their key technological features are fairly consistent, the usage practices that emerge around social networking sites are varied. Most sites support the nurturing of pre-existing social networks, but others help strangers connect based on shared interests, views or activities (boyd–Ellison, 2007).

Social networking is one of the most popular online activities in which young people engage. Social networking sites offer a range of possibilities for young people to perform, express identity, create and communicate with others. What defines young people as social beings is reflected very often in social networking sites (Kupiainen–Suoninen–Nikunen, 2012: 99).

Previous research shows that the online and offline world of teenagers are intertwined (Livingstone, 2009; Livingstone–Mascheroni–Murru, 2011). Young people tend to use social networking sites predominantly to connect online with

friends made offline (boyd, 2008). A presence on social networking sites supposes the creation of an online identity by self-presentation. The online identity construction is a public process, blurring the boundaries between the public and private life of young people (Kupiainen–Suoninen–Nikunen, 2012: 102). But young people go online precisely to see and to be seen by others (boyd, 2008: 131).

In the present study, we investigate the involvement of young Romanians in social networking activities. We analyse the characteristics of their online self-presentation and the social networking practices they develop. We describe and compare the progress of young Romanians in social networking activities, enhancing the differences in usage patterns occurred between 2010 and 2013.

About the Social Networking Sites

Social networking sites are very popular among large segments of Internet users (Lampe–Ellison–Steinfield, 2008: 721), and many of them integrate social networking activities into their daily practices (boyd–Ellison, 2007; Kupiainen–Suoninen–Nikunen, 2012: 99). Social networking sites are social spaces where many users interact over long periods of time Lampe–Ellison–Steinfield, 2008: 721). Social networking sites potentially integrate diverse online and offline modes of communication more seamlessly than was previously possible. As social media, social networking sites potentially mediate the social relations of everyday life (Livingstone–Mascheroni–Murru, 2011).

boyd and Ellison define social network sites (SNSs) as web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections as well as those made by others within the system (boyd–Ellison, 2007).

boyd and Ellison (2007) highlight that the backbone of SNSs consists of visible profiles that display an articulated list of friends who are also users of the system. Profiles are unique web pages where one can represent oneself. After joining an SNS, an individual is asked to fill out forms containing a series of questions. The profile is generated using the answers to these questions, (typically including descriptors such as age, location, interests and an "About Me" section). Most sites also encourage users to upload a profile photo. Some sites allow users to enhance their profiles by adding multimedia content or modifying their profile's look and feel.

The visibility of a profile varies by site and according to the users' discretion. Structural variations around visibility and access are one of the primary ways by which SNSs differentiate themselves from one another (boyd–Ellison, 2007). What makes SNSs unique is that they enable users to articulate and make their social networks visible. After joining a social networking site, users are

prompted to identify others in the system that they have a relationship with. Most SNSs require bi-directional confirmation for friendship. The public display of connections is very important. The friends' list contains links to each friend's profile, enabling viewers to traverse the network graph by clicking through the friends' lists (boyd–Ellison, 2007).

Most SNSs also provide a mechanism for users to leave messages on their friends' profiles. In addition, SNSs often have a private messaging feature similar to webmail. Some have photo-sharing or video-sharing capabilities; others have built-in blogging and instant messaging technology. Some web-based SNSs (e.g. Facebook) also support limited mobile interactions (boyd–Ellison, 2007).

SNSs, including Facebook, integrate possibilities for self-presentation, contact, communication and participation. SNSs are social places where social relations of everyday life take place, mediating between the online and offline worlds of the users.

About Facebook

For a better understanding of the social networking practices of young Romanians, we feature Facebook: the most popular SNS among Romanian young Internet users (NCGM 2013). Facebook exemplifies the notion of convergence culture by integrating chat, messaging, contacts, photo albums and blogging functions.

Facebook is the second most visited website in the world (Alexa.com, 2014) with more than 1.3 billion users. This very popular SNS is open to users over 13 years old who have a valid email address. Facebook began in early 2004 as a Harvard-only SNS (Cassidy, 2006). To join, a user had to have an institutional email address. This requirement kept the site relatively closed and contributed to users' perceptions of the site as an intimate, private community (boyd–Ellison, 2007; Zhao et al., 2008). In September 2006, Facebook was opened to the public and began expanding.

Users are required to register on Facebook with their personal information (including their real name) and are advised to create just one personal account. After registration, users have access to their personal wall: a virtual space in which personal content can be organized and displayed. Here they can post information and further personal content. They can also decide what kind of information to share and with whom to share it (Facebook, SRR). The user's wall is visible to anyone with the ability to see their full profile and wall posts by their friends that appear in the users' news feed. The news feed is a page in which users can view a constantly updated list of their friends' activities (Facebook, SRR).

There is also a communication function on Facebook that allows users to interact with one another through public comments and private messages (Zhao, 2008: 1819). Facebook users can give feedback to their friends with the *Like* function,

allowing the liked content to appear in their friends' news feed. Individual users can create groups where people can come together online to share information and to discuss specific subjects. Facebook members can use their account to log into third-party websites, mobile devices, and gaming systems. Via these media, they can connect and post information to their Facebook profiles (Facebook, SRR). A special feature of Facebook is that developers can create their own applications to interact with the core Facebook features.

Online Self-Presentation

Like online contexts in which individuals are consciously able to construct an online representation of themselves, social networking sites constitute an important research context for scholars investigating processes of self-presentation and friendship performance (boyd–Ellison, 2007).

Self-concept is the totality of a person's thoughts and feelings in reference to oneself, and identity is that part of the self by which we are known to others. The construction of identity is a public process that involves both the identity announcement, which is made by the individual by claiming an identity, and the identity placement made by others who endorse the claimed identity. The identity is established when there is a coincidence of placements and announcements (Zhao et al., 2008: 1817).

Zhao et al. (2008: 1818) point out that in an anonymous online environment a new mode of identity production emerges. An important characteristic of this emergent mode of identity production is the tendency for people to play-act at being someone else or to reinvent themselves through the production of new identities.

But the online environment is not entirely anonymous. If an online environment can verify personal information and also make it public, then interpersonal relationships are fully anchored in that environment (Zhao et al., 2008). The non-anonymous online environment places constraints on the freedom of identity claims. In the non-anonymous online world, people may tend to express what has been called the "hoped-for possible selves", which are socially desirable identities an individual would like to establish (Zhao et al., 2008: 1819). Even if most sites encourage users to construct accurate presentations of themselves, participants do this to varying degrees.

Facebook provides users with new leverage for selective self-presentation. Facebook allows users to have control over their information and who sees it. Users can modify the basic visibility rule by the settings of their account. Users can present themselves differently to different audiences by hiding certain parts of the account from certain people or block certain people from viewing the account (Zhao et al., 2008: 1823). Lampe, Ellison, and Steinfield (2008: 727) show

that Facebook members portray themselves positively by using specific strategies like constraining the people who see their profile or by removing elements that they feel would cast them in a negative light. Users become stars of their own production (Pempek, 2009: 234).

Zhao et al. (2008: 1825) identify a continuum of modes of self-presentation on Facebook from implicit to explicit identity claim. The most implicit identity claims are visual (presenting the user as social actor), involving the display of photos and pictures uploaded by the users themselves or pictures along with comments posted to their accounts by others. Facebook members usually use visual identity claims to generate a desired impression on their viewers, especially in terms of the depth and extent of their social ties. The second cluster of identity claims on the continuum contains consumption preferences and tastes (presenting the user's cultural self), signalling precise cultural tastes. The third mode of an identity claim involves the most explicit verbal description of the self (narrative self). On the continuum of claims from most explicit to most implicit, Facebook users prefer the most implicit ways to present themselves. They prefer to show rather than to tell.

Facebook users prefer to project a self that is socially desirable and close to normative expectations. They attempt to show their social connectedness and popularity among friends. Other characteristics commonly associated with the preferred identities produced are those of being well-rounded, fun-loving and sociable. A third type of personal quality commonly projected on Facebook is thoughtfulness (Zhao et al. 2008: 1828).

Networking and Friending Practices

SNSs are important tools for interconnection and communication (Ross et al., 2009; Lampe–Ellison–Steinfield, 2008: 722; Subrahmanyam–Reich–Waechter–Espinoza, 2008: 420).

Earlier communication tools enabled individuals to create a private list of contacts: to establish a group of contacts that were shared by others, but SNSs extended the practice of creating a publicly visible, personally developed list of contacts, and made it a mainstream practice. The connections between people serve multiple purposes on an SNS. They are employed to mark and display relationships, delineate who can access particular content, and serve as a filter through which viewers can discover friends they have in common. For users, these connections represent their social network (Ellison–boyd, 2013).

The most commonly utilized social networking activities include reading/ responding to notes/messages, reading comments/posts on their pages/walls, writing comments on friends' pages, posting on other people's walls and tagging

photos. SNSs users use the sites primarily for social reasons that involve people from their offline lives (Subrahmanyam–Reich–Waechter–Espinoza, 2008: 426). Although exceptions exist, the available research suggests that most SNSs primarily support pre-existing social relations.

Friending practices are the core activity of SNSs. Even if all the contacts are called friends, users are able to distinguish among the kinds of relationships in their circle. In offline contexts, we maintain many different kinds of relationships, ranging from weak ties to strong connections, which exist in multiple contexts. As the personal networks on the SNSs grow, the kinds of connections also become more and more diverse (Ellison–boyd, 2013).

Lampe, Ellison, and Steinfield (2008: 722) show that Facebook is used mainly to maintain existing offline relationships or solidify offline connections, as opposed to meeting new people. These relationships may be weak ties, but typically there is some common offline element among individuals who friend one another, such as a shared class at school. Lampe, Ellison, and Steinfield (2008: 722) also point out that Facebook users searched for people with whom they had a previous offline relationship and that their anticipated audience was comprised of peers rather than non-peer members of networks. Facebook users engage in "searching" for people with whom they have an offline connection more than they "browse" for complete strangers to meet (boyd–Ellison, 2007; Ross et al., 2009; Pempek, 2009: 229). Facebook favours the transformation of latent to weak ties (Ellison et al., 2011) as well as the maintenance and strengthening of weak ties (Bohn–Buchta–Hornik–Mair, 2014: 31).

Children and young people, especially, are adopting social networking as part of their social relationships, learning, consumption and creative practices (Kupiainen–Suoninen–Nikunen, 2012: 99). boyd (2008) indicates that Facebook enables youths to socialize with their friends even when they are unable to gather in unmediated situations; she observes that SNSs are "networked publics" that support sociability, just as unmediated public spaces do (boyd–Ellison, 2007). For young people, SNSs are seen as functioning like places to which their identity is tied: not just with who you are, but with whom you are connected (boyd, 2007).

Popularity of SNSs among Young People

Although some of the ways in which young people spend their time have changed in the digital age, the central developmental tasks of adolescence have remained constant. The key characteristics of adolescent development include the formation of identity, the creation of intimate relationships and the power of the peer group (Steinfield–Ellison–Lampe, 2008: 434; Subrahmanyam–Reich–Waechter–Espinoza, 2008: 421; Pempek et al., 2009).

SNSs generate culture by functioning as social spaces where users (from all age-groups) can explore patterns of social interaction, expression and identity formation. For young people, the question of "Who am I?" is more stressful compared to other age-groups, so they look for answers in their offline and also online world. Therefore, they become accentuated users of social networking sites. Given that adolescents are typically concerned with peer acceptance, physical appearance and the impressions they convey, they are receptive to SNSs because these sites present platforms by which they can connect to their peers without adult surveillance as well as to facilitate identity construction and experimentation within a social context (Livingstone, 2008). Young people want to show themselves and find out how they are seen (Livingstone–Mascheroni–Murru, 2011).

Young people use SNSs to interconnect with others, to stay in touch with their friends, family members and relatives, to keep in touch with friends they have not seen often and to make plans with those they do see often (Subrahmanyam–Reich–Waechter–Espinoza, 2008: 431). Steinfield et al. (2008: 435) suggest that maintaining friendships through SNSs by young people may play an important role in psychological development. Maintaining relationships influences identity formation and the ability to develop long-term relationships.

Previous research has shown that the online and offline worlds of young people are intertwined (boyd, 2008; Livingstone, 2009). Young people seem to use SNS predominantly to connect online with friends made offline and to get social support (Valkenburg et al., 2005; boyd, 2008; Ellison et al., 2007). Young people use the Internet to do traditional things in new ways (Mesch, 2009: 57). The Internet and the SNSs have provided social relations and identity construction with a new visibility rather than reconfiguring them completely (Robards–Bennett, 2011). To be on SNSs like Facebook is a statement of identity for young people (Davis, 2012: 27).

Methods and Materials

In this study, we present the results of statistical analyses conducted on empirical data gathered in 2010 regarding Romanian youth within the *EU Kids Online II* project. We compare the data collected in 2010 with data gathered in 2013 in the context of the *Net Children Go Mobile* project. The quantitative data are completed with qualitative data from focus groups and interviews with young Romanian people carried out in June 2013 in the context of *EU Kids Online III* project.

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 (EUKO). The *EU Kids Online II* (2009–2011) project

saw the participation of 25 countries, including Romania. The main focus was a survey of children and parents aimed at producing original, rigorous data on their Internet use, 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 final empirical project is a cross-national qualitative study of teenagers' accounts of online risk. Qualitative data were gathered in 2013 by focus groups and interviews. In every participating country, 6 focus groups were conducted (3 with girls and 3 with boys) and 12 individual semi-structured interviews.

The *Net Children Go Mobile* (2013) project is aimed at studying the post-desktop media ecology that young people inhabit and its consequences on their online experiences. The project investigates access and use, risks and opportunities of mobile Internet access in the European context. In the project, data was gathered by a survey that involved 2,500 young people aged 9–16, who were Internet users, and their parents. Data was also gathered by qualitative means, such as group interviews with teenagers and focus groups with adults/parents, teachers and carers.

To analyse the social networking practices of the Romanian young people, we follow how social networking activities are integrated into other online activities. To reveal the online presentation of the self, we examine the characteristics of the online profiles of the young Romanians. For revealing their communication and networking activities, we look at the number of contacts they have. To understand and explain the popularity of the SNSs, we present quotations from focus groups and interviews in which Romanian young people interpret their social networking activities.

Undertaking Online Opportunities

In this part of the study, we present the online opportunities taken up by European and Romanian young people in 2010. Then we compare this to the situation in 2013.

In 2010, the average number of online activities that Romanian young people engaged in was 7.4. Romanian children engaged in the same number of online activities as European children did. The number of online activities European and Romanian young people engaged in increased with age (Mascheroni–Ólafsson, 2014: 25) and with the years of Internet use. There were gender differences in terms of both older and younger boys being involved in a wider variety of activities than girls of the same ages (Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt–Runnel, 2012: 75; Tőkés, 2014: 61). Teenage girls tended to engage more in communication

and entertainment practices, while boys of all ages played more (Mascheroni–Ólafsson, 2014: 26).

Among young Europeans and Romanians in 2010, the content-based activities were the most popular, followed by the contact-based activities. The conduct-based activities, requiring the initiative to create content and claiming online skills, were the least frequent activities (Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt–Runnel, 2012: 75; Tőkés, 2014: 64). Using the Internet for communication was also very common. Among European children, the instant messaging and the social networking activities showed a similar importance and were used almost equally (Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt–Runnel, 2012: 76). Among young Romanians, the situation was markedly different; the instant messaging was very popular and the social networking less so.

In 2010, only half of the Romanian children (51.8 percent) visited a SNS regularly and 57.2 percent of Romanian children visited a SNS usually. The differences between the regularly and usually undertaken online activities show which of the online activities was important and common for Romanian young people. At this time, the Romanian young people were generally involved in 7-8 online activities, of which 4-5 activities represented daily activities (Tőkés, 2014: 61).

In 2010, visiting social network sites was prevalent among Romanian children over 13 years old. While one third of the 9–12-year-old children visited SNSs daily, more than two-thirds of the 13–16 year olds did the same. This daily online activity was more popular among 13–16-year-old girls (76.7 percent) than boys (70.3 percent). Considering that the lower age limit of most SNSs is 13 years old, it is noteworthy that one third of the 9–12 year olds engaged in social networking activities.

In 2010, the number of online activities carried out by Romanian young people positively correlated with gender and age, and the SES also positively influenced the amount of online activities (Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt–Runnel, 2012: 75; Tőkés, 2014: 61). In 2010, visiting SNSs daily was more popular among Romanian children with high SES and less prevalent among those with low SES (59.4 percent vs. 44.4 percent).

In 2013, we saw an increase in personal and portable devices, leading to a greater personalization of Internet access and use among European young people. The laptop (46 percent) and the smartphones (41 percent) are the most used devices. *Net Children Go Mobile* data show that communication practices (social networking and instant messaging), entertainment activities (music, video clips) and the use of the Internet for school work top the list of activities performed on a daily basis. Compared with the *EU Kids Online II* data, we can see that the social networking, sharing and entertainment activities increased substantially from 2010 to 2013 among European young people. The creative and interactive uses of the Internet are still less practised. Mobile devices encourage all of the

online activities, the greatest differences being found in communication and entertainment practices (Mascheroni–Cuman, 2014: 14).

In 2013, Romanian children used the devices mostly in their own bedroom, but they had reduced access when they were out, on the move. The Internet is mainly a domestic phenomenon and it has not yet been integrated into school life (Mascheroni–Ólafsson, 2014: 12). Smartphones are not so prevalent among Romanian children, just 26 percent of them own one (Mascheroni–Ólafsson, 2014: 16); so, Romanian young people are more likely to use laptops than smartphones on a daily basis. The ownership of smartphones increases with age. Penetration of tablets is even lower than that of the smartphones, remaining under 10 percent (Mascheroni–Ólafsson, 2014: 17).

The age, gender and SES differences persist also in 2013 among European and Romanian children as well (Mascheroni–Ólafsson, 2014: 26). All the online activities surveyed increase with age, except gaming; girls tend to engage more in communication practices than boys, while boys play more. Gender variations combined with age differences tend to be greater among younger children. In 2010, 59 percent of European and 46 percent of Romanian young people had profiles on an SNS (Livingstone–Haddon–Görzig–Ólafsson, 2011: 36). Romania appears at the top of the list in 2013 with more than 80 percent of children having a profile on an SNS. Additionally, social networking activities have been increasing, having passed almost 80 percent (Mascheroni–Cuman, 2014: 26).

In 2010, on a European level, the most popular SNS was Facebook (Livingstone, 2011: 3). In 2013, Facebook is still the most used SNS among European children. In 2010, among Romanian young people, the most popular SNS was Hi5, while only 25 percent had a Facebook account. In 2013, almost 100 percent of Romanian children registered a Facebook account. All of the Romanian respondents indicated Facebook as the SNS they used the most. The second most commonly used SNS is YouTube (84 percent), mostly to create playlists and listen to the favourite videos (Mascheroni–Ólafsson, 2014: 26–27).

Online Self-Presentation of Romanian Young People

According to *EU Kids Online II* data in 2010, 59 percent of the 9–16-year-old European Internet users had a social network profile, while 23 percent of them had more than one profile. Social networking varied little by gender, with 58 percent of boys and 60 percent of girls having their own profile. It also varied little by SES. The age of the users formed the main differences in having an SNS profile. One quarter (26 percent) of the 9-10 year olds had their own profile compared with half (49 percent) of the 11-12 year olds (Livingstone–Haddon–Görzig–Ólafsson, 2011: 36). For teenagers, percentages were much higher:

77 percent of the 13–16-year-old Internet users had a social network profile (Kupiainen–Suoninen–Nikunen, 2012: 101).

In 2010, Romanian young people were underrepresented among European children having an SNS profile. At that time, 46.4 percent of Romanian young people had their own SNS profile. Three quarters of them had a single profile, while a quarter had more than one profile (Livingstone–Haddon–Görzig–Ólafsson, 2011: 36).

Contrasting age patterns for users of SNSs existed among Romanian young people: the percent of Romanian young SNS users was growing steadily from 29 percent among the 9–12 year olds to 69.7 percent among the 13–16 year olds. The differences between Romanian young girls and boys were not so accentuated, but there were more SNS users with their own profiles among girls (52.8 percent) than among boys (47.2 percent) (Livingstone–Haddon–Görzig–Ólafsson, 2011: 38).

In 2013, social networking tops the activities taken up by European children on a daily basis. 68 percent of European young people have an SNS profile. The use of SNS varies consistently by age. One fourth of children aged 9-10 have SNS profiles. 60 percent of children aged 11-12 on SNS is also noteworthy since most social networking platforms have age limits that are not being followed. Social networking varies very little by SES (Mascheroni–Ólafsson, 2014: 25).

In 2013, 79 percent of Romanian young children had a profile on SNSs. So, Romania is at the top of the list among the European countries with around 80 percent of children having a profile on a SNS. In 2013, social networking activities increased considerably among Romanian young people; the rate of those who have profiles on SNSs almost doubled compared to 2010 (Mascheroni–Ólafsson, 2014: 30). It is a notable fact that 50 percent of Romanian children aged 9–10 and 80 percent of children aged 11–12 have SNS profiles even though the age limit on the SNS is 13 years. 86 percent of the 13–14 year olds and 92 percent of the 15–16-year-old Romanian children have an SNS profile (Mascheroni–Ólafsson, 2014: 26).

Users of SNSs have to make decisions concerning how much personal information they provide. Extending the friendship circle or looking for new friends on the Internet requires the revelation of a certain amount of personal information (Kupiainen–Suoninen–Nikunen, 2012: 99).

In 2010, almost half (44.2 percent) of the Romanian young people had entirely public SNS profiles, 18 percent partially private profiles and 37.8 percent private profiles. Usually, the profiles of young users included profile photos, more than half of them (54 percents) revealed their real age. It was less frequent to disclose their phone numbers (6.4 percents), address (17.1 percents), and school (18.5 percents). Even if SNSs are designed to provide personal information, European young people are more moderate in revealing personal data. In 2010, just 27 percent reported that their profiles were public, 28 percent kept them partially public, and 44 percent private (Kupiainen–Suoninen–Nikunen, 2012: 103). Girls

and children from high SES homes appeared to keep their SNS profiles private (Livingstone–Haddon–Görzig–Ólafsson, 2011: 39).

In 2013, the tendency regarding online disclosure by European children persisted. 29 percent of the European children have a public SNS profile, 27 percent have partially private and 44 percent private profiles. Romanian children are more likely than their peers in other countries to have public profiles. More than half of the Romanian children (57 percent) report having a public profile in 2013. Variations by gender are consistent, with girls being more likely to have a private profile. The majority of European children include their surname and a photo showing their face on their profiles. 9 out of 10 European children across all age-groups and genders do not share their phone number and home address. Since 2010, the proportion of children who posted an incorrect age on their profile has increased (one in six) in order to obtain a profile on age-restricted SNSs (Livingstone–Haddon–Görzig–Ólafsson, 2011: 40). In 2013, one in three European children displayed an incorrect age on his/her profile. Often this is the way children circumvent the age limits of the SNSs (Mascheroni–Ólafsson, 2014: 32).

Social Networking Practices of Romanian Young People

Online communication activities, like social networking or instant messaging, are increasingly important among young people in some countries, including Romania, in the early stages of Internet use (Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt–Runnel, 2012: 82). Using the Internet for communication is very common, especially among older children. Media is shaping experience in online spaces and reorganizing social relations, for example, between parents and children, and between friends and strangers (Kupiainen–Suoninen–Nikunen, 2012: 100).

In 2010, few European children reported to have more than 300 contacts on their social networking profile (9 percent), although one in five (20 percent) had between 100 and 300. Half (51 percent) had fewer than 50 contacts and 20 percent had fewer than 10 contacts (Livingstone–Haddon–Görzig–Ólafsson, 2011: 38).

In 2010, most Romanian young people had just a few friends in their network. More than half of Romanian young people (63 percent) had up to 10 contacts on their contact list, one third (30 percent) had under 100 contacts and less than 10 percent had more than 100 contacts in their network (Livingstone–Haddon–Görzig–Ólafsson, 2011: 38). At that time, visiting SNSs was more popular among those Romanian young people who practised more than the average number of online activities. 89 percent of those who practised 10–12 online activities (from 17) and 97.8 percent of those who practised 13–17 online activities visited SNSs on a daily basis. It was also common that visiting SNSs increased with a higher level of digital skills (Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt–Runnel, 2012: 76; Tőkés, 2014: 67).

In 2013, online communication – more specifically, social networking (SNS) and instant messaging (IM) – was on the rise among European children and adolescents. Staying in touch with friends represented a greater part of young people's online daily activities (Mascheroni–Ólafsson, 2013: 35).

Among European children, the proportion of those having small circles of friends on the Internet varied by age and gender, and it was higher among girls and younger children (51 percent of girls and 66 percent of 9–10 year olds having less than 50 contacts on SNSs). 18 percent of the European children had more than 300 contacts: this number rose to nearly one in four teenagers aged 15–16, while it made up just 2 percent of the 9–10 year olds. Around one in three European children (35 percent) had more than 100 contacts (Mascheroni–Ólafsson, 2014: 36).

In 2013, 66 percent of Romanian children had more than 100 contacts. 34 percent of Romanian kids having less than 100 contacts. Romanian young children have a very special online communication pattern: under-age use has more than doubled in the last 3 years (from 29 percent of the 9–12 year olds to 65 percent); the number of children with over 100 contacts has also increased dramatically (from 8 percent to 66 percent) (Mascheroni–Ólafsson, 2014: 37).

Friending norms influence the number of online contacts among young people. The majority of online contacts maintained through social networking sites as well as email and instant messaging are localized in offline social circles (Livingstone–Mascheroni–Murru, 2011). The proportion of children who have small circles of friends online is higher among girls and younger children. Older children are more likely to have over 300 online contacts (Mascheroni–Ólafsson, 2014: 30).

In 2013, almost half (49 percent) of European young people added new contacts only when they knew them. 18 percent of European children added new contacts if they knew them very well and one in four accepted requests from people with whom they shared friends in common – just 9 percent accepts all requests. Gender differences were not pronounced, but girls were less likely to accept all requests. Older children were more likely to accept all friending requests (Mascheroni–Ólafsson, 2014: 31).

According to 2013 data, the young Romanians have different friending patterns than their European peers: the under-age use is high and the number of children with over 100 contacts is also high. The number of children who generally accept all requests is the highest in Romania: 18 percent (Mascheroni–Ólafsson, 2014: 30–31). 45 percent of Romanian young people prefer to add people they already know, 26 percent like to accept requests from people with whom they share friends in common and 11 percent add new contacts if they know them very well (Mascheroni–Ólafsson, 2014: 31). This could be connected with the fact that searching for new friends has been more frequent in Romania (50 percent) and Bulgaria than in the rest of the investigated countries (40 percent) (Kupiainen–Suoninen–Nikunen, 2012: 104; Livingstone–Haddon–Görzig–Ólafsson, 2011: 43).

In 2010, gender and age differences were pronounced. Usually more boys (31 percent) than girls (20 percent) communicated online with people whom they only knew online. This could have multiple reasons: boys found it easier to communicate online than face to face, they took more risk, and they were more likely to maintain an online communication with strangers through multiplayer games. Four out of five children in each age-group communicated online with their existing offline circles. It was more likely for older children to communicate with people whom they had met online (Livingstone–Haddon–Görzig–Ólafsson, 2011: 41).

Popularity of SNSs and Facebook among Young Romanians

Young people are adapting easily to the new digital cultures and are eagerly exploring online worlds that appear strange to many adults (Kupiainen–Suoninen–Nikunen, 2012: 99).

SNSs respond to important developmental requirements of the young people, offering new ways to present themselves, to maintain and develop their relationships with peers and relatives, to make new friendships, to establish communities, to organize common activities and participate in applications (Lampe–Ellison–Steinfield, 2008). In this way, SNSs are new channels of communication and, at the same time, statements of identity for young people (Davis, 2012: 27).

A young person's social life is conducted both online and offline, and their overlap is leading to perpetual communication with peers. When coming home from school, youths continue to maintain contact with their school friends through SNSs like Facebook, Instagram etc. Social access to peers is one of the main motivations for adopting mobile communication. Children combine and integrate different SNSs with other communicative practices (Mascheroni–Ólafsson, 2014: 29).

This continuous contact provides a sense of belonging with others in a mediated environment. Conversations that started at school continue after school through mediated connections. They engage in informal talks, much like that they experience in the face-to-face space: reflections on their day's events, gossip about others etc. SNS also allow users to present information about themselves; encourage users to link to known and like-minded individuals; enable users to establish and maintain contact with others, to post comments, to create personal content etc. (Mesch, 2009: 58). These are peculiar developmental needs of young people, and they are fulfilled through SNSs.

Sometimes teenagers can experience difficulty managing face-to-face situations (Livingstone, 2009). In 2010, half of those aged 11–16 years across Europe found

it easier to be themselves on the Internet than face-to-face. One third (32 percent) of the European children said that they talked about private things online, things that they do not discuss face-to-face. For older teenagers, the Internet offered a valued opportunity for different, more intimate communication. For gender and SES, the differences were slight (Livingstone-Haddon–Görzig–Ólafsson, 2011: 40).

Between 2010 and 2013, the number of children who perceived the Internet as the place for more authentic communication decreased. In 2013, 64 percent of European young people did not consider it easier to be themselves on the Internet than face-to-face. Just 20 percent of European children said that they talked about private things online. Among the Romanian young people, more than half (54 percent) found it easier to be themselves on the Internet and 31 percent of them talked online about private things (Mascheroni–Ólafsson, 2014: 37). Also in 2013, the age differences influenced the responses, especially those of the 15–16-year-old teenagers, who considered the Internet and SNSs as an important opportunity for intimate communication.

To better understand the popularity of the Facebook among Romanian young people, we complete this part of the study with interpretations offered by Romanian young people regarding their social networking activities.

Each day, Romanian young people spend a considerable amount of time engaging in social networking activities on Facebook. To hang out, Romanian children passively follow their news wall, view friends' profiles or actively participate by posting messages, sharing links, photos and music/funny video clips. In this way, they give signals about their presence and participation on Facebook.

"My favourite activity on the Internet is Facebook…" (14-year-old boy)

"I check my Facebook messages… I chat…because here I have more friends… I look at the status messages of my friends… I play Farmville …" (15-year-old girl)

"I am on the Internet because you don't always have somebody to go out with, and it is also expensive to go out all the time…" (15-year-old girl)

"I look at photos, give comments and likes… and sometimes I play." (12-year-old girl)

"I give likes to pictures. I also have a page on Facebook and around 3000 likes or maybe 4000... There are friends who wait for the likes, and also who do not…" (14-year-old boy)

At the same time Facebook is used to gather news: "I read news on Facebook… also from Pro TV, sport.ro…" (14-year-old boy)

These Romanian youngsters dropped some hints that Facebook is the place where they are with their peers, so they resist adding adults like parents, teachers etc. to their contact lists (14-year-old boy, 15-year-old girl). On the other hand, parents' Facebook usage patterns influences the practices of children (10-year-old girl, 12-year-old girl).

Facebook develops new cultures of affiliation: children like to experiment with their identity, and it is usual to create common group profiles and play with them. It is a sign of friendship to share the password of personal profiles: "I have a common Facebook profile with one of my friends…" (10-year-old girl)

Romanian children are very willing to make friends, so they often also accept the requests of unknown contacts.

"If I get a friend request from unknowns, I look at their profile, and if I see that they are not aggressive, probably they will not create problems, so I accept them". (14-year-old boy)

They also discuss school problems and homework: "I like Facebook very much… before I had my phone, I asked everything on Facebook, and I love games…" (11-year-old Hungarian girl)

They organize their leisure time: "On Facebook, we talk over our outings." (14-year-old boy)

There are young people who are not so delighted with Facebook: "I don't really like Facebook. I have made a profile because of my school, we have a group, and I want to see the school information." (16-year-old Hungarian girl)

There are also young people who disbelieve in Facebook and they oppose the facilities offered by Facebook. In these cases, not being on Facebook is a significant part of the identity: "I do not use Facebook to find friends, I am not that type who sends friend requests all over the world…" (16-year-old Hungarian girl)

In the opinion of young people, there is also harmful behaviour on Facebook.

"You expose all your personal data: where you live, which school you attend, your hobbies, tastes, whether you have a boyfriend or not, show your relatives, give your address and plus you show also pictures of all these… I would not feel good knowing that all psychopaths and neurotics know all about me…" (16-year-old Hungarian girl)

"I used to play for hours on Facebook, I abandoned school, and I was obsessed by it." (14-year-old boy)

"On Facebook, it can happen that some people take your picture and make a profile with your name, they pretend to be you, and then they write a lot of crazy things in your name…" (16-year-old Hungarian girl)

"On Facebook, there are a lot of bad people… give ugly comments… mock responses." (15-year-old girl)

They even had harmful experiences: "A friend of mine hacked my account and he asked for money to give it back to me …" (14-year-old boy)

"A friend of mine to whom I gave my Facebook password… opened my account and saw all my conversations…" (15-year-old girl)

Conclusions

Our data show that using social networking sites leads the online communication activities among Romanian young people. The most popular social networking site is Facebook, followed by YouTube. Almost 100 percent of the Romanian young people have Facebook profiles.

Over the past three years, the practice of using SNSs has changed considerably among Romanian children. If in 2010 the most commonly used SNS was Hi5, by 2013 the leading SNS had become Facebook.

On Facebook, communication activities are the most popular, having informative or phatic functions. On Facebook, Romanian young people usually look for information and share content (self-created or someone else's) or make appointments, talk about homework etc. The most common manifestations on Facebook belong to phatic communication, such as commenting or sharing friends' content. To like others' content is also the manifestation of phatic communication. To like each other's shares, images, videos, means that they pay attention to one another, they prefer one another, thereby enhancing their mutual dependence. The reciprocity in giving likes is very important.

Romanian young people spend a lot of leisure time on Facebook. They are just hanging out, looking around, looking for new friends. They use Facebook to be together with their peers, and sometimes they deliberately exclude the adults from their online spaces.

We could not examine in depth the online identity formation of Romanian young people on Facebook. Further observations are needed to discover the strategies used by Romanian children in the process of online self-presentation. We do not have qualitative data about the habits of self-presentation nor about the role of friending activities in the construction of the online self.

The social life of Romanian young people is conducted both online and offline, just as among European young people. However, Romanian youngsters have different social networking habits in some points. Among young Romanians, there is very a high proportion of underage users (under 13 years); similarly, the number of those who have over 100 online contacts is high. During the interviews and focus group discussions, young Romanian users explained the high proportion of under-aged users as being due to the popularity and trendiness of Facebook. It is also a statement of identity for young people to have a profile and to interact on Facebook.

Among Romanian young people, the proportion of those who have completely public profiles is also high as is the proportion of those who accept friend requests from strangers. We assume that this situation can be explained by the lack of parental mediation and by the low level of digital skills of many Romanian

children. We are limited in explaining this situation and further observations are needed to establish the influence of additional factors.

We conclude that for Romanian youngsters, social networking is very popular among the range of available online activities, and it is the preferred channel for keeping in touch with friends on a daily basis. The use of SNSs among Romanian children progressed a lot from 2010 to 2013. Romanian young people display particular social networking patterns as compared to European youngsters. However, there is a pronounced element of risk in some aspects of their online behaviour.

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