

PARENTAL MEDIATION AND ROMANIAN YOUNG CHILDREN'S DIGITAL PRACTICES

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ABSTRACT

Present study is aimed at exploring digital practices of Romanian 4 to 8 years old children with a focus on parental mediation. Our key research question is how parental mediation takes place when it comes to digital practices of young children. Family is the primary socialization factors haping young children's daily habits, practices and lifestyle. A key conclusion drawn from the literature review is that parents do not realise they are role modelling factors in transmitting digital practices to their children. Our exploratory qualitative study is based on the empirical data collected in Romania from March to August 2016, and a desk research performed during 2017: we conducted semi-structured interviews with 24 parents of small children aged 4 to 8 and 14 educators working in kindergartens and elementary schools. Inline with EU-wide key findings, Romanian young children's digital literacy is overestimated, whereas parents' mediating role as primary technology educators is grossly underestimated. Parents who lack digital skills and awareness have a passive attitude towards shaping children's digital experiences, and seem to ignore the fact that they are role models for their kids.

Keywords: Romanian young children, digital practices, parental mediation, online risks and harms

1. INTRODUCTION

With the information and communication technologies (ICTs) invading both our private and public spaces, we live in a multimedia-rich environment. We experience a changing digital landscape and a changing notion of digital literacy.

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(Kontovourki *et al.*, 2017) No wonder the increased interest in exploring ICT use among different age-and social groups across the world. (Arrow and Finch, 2013; Bakó and Tökés, 2017). Since 2009, children and young people are in the focus of digital literacy research both across Europe and globally: projects such as *EU Kids Online* (2009–2013) and its broader scale continuation, *Global Kids Online* (2014–2018), as well as *Net Children Go Mobile* (2013–2014) have highlighted the need for a multidisciplinary and multistakeholder approach to ICT access, skills and awareness. *Digital literacy and multimodal practices of young children* (DigiLitEY) is a COST action (IS 1410, 2014–2018) lined up with recent research interest in early childhood – “zero-to-eight” – and ICT use¹. (Chaudron, 2015; Holloway *et al.*, 2013) Our study is aimed at exploring the role of socio-cultural context in Romanian young children’s digital practices, with a focus on parental mediation.

2. DIGITAL PRACTICES IN DOMESTIC ENVIRONMENTS

While several research projects are aimed at teenagers’ ICT use (Mascheroni and Cuman, 2014), very young children (aged “zero-to-eight”) are left out from most empirical analyses (Chaudron, 2015). The authors give several arguments on why studying early childhood digital practices is both a timely and useful endeavour (Chaudron, 2015, pp. 11–12):

- *children engage in diverse activities online using a range of internet-connected devices;*
- *online activities can stimulate imagination, fantasy, creativity and play;*
- *many children use devices/contents not designed for their age group;*
- *children’s digital footprints often begin at birth, with unknown consequences;*
- *younger children are more often upset about or vulnerable to risks of harm online.”*

The role of family digital practices in the formation of children’s technology use is widely acknowledged by recent studies. (Blau and Hameiri, 2016; Kumpulainen and Gillen, 2017) A thorough literature review conducted for the COST IS1410 Action has concluded that the role of parental mediation of children’s digital practices in homes is multifold (Kumpulainen and Gillen, 2017, p. 10):

- *many parents see digital technologies and media as positive but challenging at the same time;*
- *parents are not always aware of the range of children’s online activities and their skills;*
- *perceiving benefits of children’s digital activities is less straightforward for parents than anticipating risks;*

¹ <http://digilitey.eu/about/objectives/>.

- *parental mediation includes: “course”, “active mediation”, “restrictive mediation”, “supervision”, “technical safety” and “guidance”;*
- *parental mediation is linked with the number and nature of media devices in the home, and the parents’ gender, education, cultural/socioeconomic background, computer/internet skills and attitudes.”*

With the spread of digital technologies across domestic spaces, the dynamics of family habits undergoes significant changes. (Terras and Ramsay, 2016) Marsh, Hannon, Lewis and Ritchie (2015) have found that children perform several digital and multimodal activities at home, and thus they get used to ICTs from an early age. Parents’ and children’s common digital practices become a family routine, integrated in their daily lives. (Bakó, 2016; Galera *et al.*, 2016; Marsh *et al.*, 2015; Plowman *et al.*, 2012) Parents’ and older siblings’ digital practices have a role modelling effect on young children’s technology use: they strive to be accepted members of their family in all areas, including the use of digital devices, therefore they are keen to copy such authoritative relatives’ behaviour. (Burnett and Merchant, 2012; Velicu and Mitarcă, 2016) Children observe the aims and the circumstances of the mother’s and the father’s digital device use (Burnett and Merchant, 2013) and they copy it thoroughly. (Rogoff, 2003) Recent inquiries suggest that parents’ digital technology use not only influences children’s digital behaviour, but it is a predictor of it. (Terras and Ramsay, 2016)

Several studies have highlighted that family digital habits are not always appropriate. (Livingstone *et al.*, 2015) Parents’ digital practices are often inefficient and ineffective, and poor digital practices are copied as much as good ones by children. (Terras and Ramsay, 2016; Plowman *et al.*, 2015a, 2015b) Although parents are concerned by the quantity and quality of their children’s digital activities, they spend much time online themselves and engage in risky online behaviours. (Terras and Ramsay, 2016) Many researchers (Stephen *et al.*, 2013; Plowman *et al.*, 2008; Valcke *et al.*, 2010) have found that parents do not realize how important role they play in transmitting patterns of digital practices.

3. FACTORS INFLUENCING DIGITAL PRACTICES OF THE FAMILY

3.1. PARENTS’ SOCIAL AND CULTURAL BACKGROUND

Digital habits of families are largely influenced by their infrastructural access to ICTs, by parents’ digital practices and level of experience, and their attitudes towards ICTs (Terras and Ramsay, 2016). These factors correlate with parents’ socio-economic status and level of education. The more educated and well-off, the more open, digitally competent parents are, and the richer digital experience they have. (Livingstone *et al.*, 2015; Valcke *et al.*, 2010)

Parents' social and cultural background impacts the family emotional and educational climate, influencing the efficacy of their children's learning and development. The more educated parents are – especially mothers –, the more responsible they feel for their children's development, the higher expectations they have towards them, and the more they get involved in their children learning processes, including digital literacy. (Eslava *et al.*, 2015) Educated parents encourage their children to acquire more digital practices by enabling a multimedia-rich environment, by acknowledging children digital literacy efforts, or by co-participating in digital activities. Parents' negative digital experiences or the lack of digital skills leads to a reactive attitude toward ICTs. (Terras and Ramsay, 2016)

Stephen *et al.* (2013) have highlighted four factors shaping children's digital practices in domestic environments: (1) Do parents consider digital technologies useful for their child development? (2) Do parents actively get involved in their child development? (3) How are family interactions? Are there siblings? (4) Which are children's personal preferences, choices and characteristics? The interplay of these factors shapes parents' attitudes towards their children ICT use, the formulation of a family ICT use ethos.

The way parents use digital technology is both an influencing factor and a predictor of their children's digital practices. (Terras and Ramsay, 2016) In a survey conducted among 0 to 8 years olds Lauricella *et al.* (2015) have found that beyond attitudes towards digital technologies, parents' behaviour and ICT use is even more significant as predictors of their children's digital practices. The study has found a clear correlation between parents' and children's screen time: if parents' use of digital technology is witnessed by their children, it is very likely that they will emulate their elders' behaviour.

3.2. PARENTAL MEDIATION STRATEGIES: DO THEY REALLY WORK?

According to Schofield Clark (2011, p. 325), parental mediation theory states that “parents utilize different interpersonal communication strategies in their attempts to mediate and mitigate the negative effects of the media in their children's lives.” It also assumes that influencing children's media use plays an important role in the socialization process. Parental mediation effectiveness data were first drawn from studies of children's television use: despite the growing diversity of media restriction strategies, parental control seems to be less effective when it comes to digital devices than television. (Lee, 2012)

Meanwhile, Kalmus *et al.* (2015) have found significant changes in children and teens online behaviour, even if – contrary to researchers' expectations – parents used the so-called “restrictive mediation” techniques of limiting the use of particular applications or activities, as opposed to milder control methods. Other researchers have found that restrictive mediation is rather a source of conflict than a solution to children's online activity watch from parents. (Beyens and Beullens,

2016) The role of parental mediation in the digital age is still to be acknowledged (Livingstone and Helsper, 2008) Kalmus *et al.*'s (2015, p. 126) definition of parental mediation as “active involvement”, “restrictive mediation” and “monitoring and technical solutions” will be discussed in detail at section 5.2. (Table 3), since it was the theoretical framework of interpreting our data on parental mediation, collected from 24 parents and 14 educators from Central Romania.

Research shows that parental mediation is influenced by their level of digital literacy. Romanian adults' lack of digital skills and awareness should be explained in a broader context, as of the next chapter.

3. DIGITAL READINESS IN ROMANIA: ACCESS, SKILLS AND AWARENESS

According to the Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) for 2017, Romania ranks the lowest among the 28 EU countries: despite access to fast broadband connections in urban areas and the accelerating take-up of mobile broadband, the digitisation of the economy and digital skills is still very low (EC, 2017).

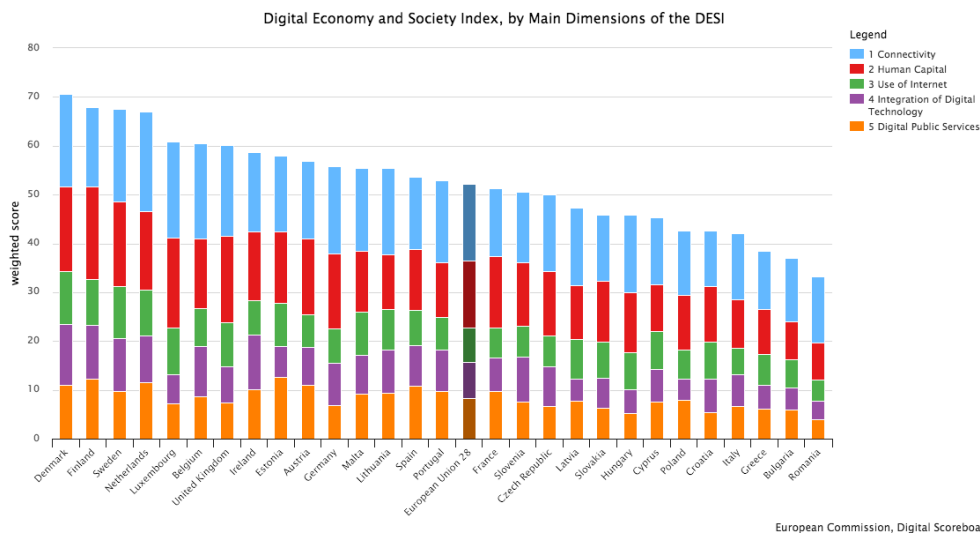


Figure 1 – The DESI-index for the European Union countries: Romania is lagging behind.

Access to ICT infrastructure and the fast pace of mobile broadband uptake (Table 1) are preconditions for richer multimedia environments in the country. Meanwhile, intelligent use of digital devices for both work and play, benefiting from the opportunities of the digital age need an aligned multistake holder effort from policy makers, businesses, civil society actors and educational institutions in order to increase the low level of digital literacy in Romania.

Table 1

Increasing mobile broadband internet penetration rate in Romania (2015–2017)

Assessment date	30.06.2015	31.12.2015	30.06.2016	31.12.2016	30.06.2017
Mobile access (%)	84,7	94,3	95,2	103,9	101
Mobile broadband (%)	64,2	73,8	74,8	84,2	84,7

Source: ANCOM, 2017 (www.ancom.org.ro)

While better mobile internet access is an opportunity, large scale ICT availability without proper online safety awareness is a challenge for internet users in Romania.

5. EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

5.1. METHODOLOGY

Present exploratory study is based on qualitative data collected from March to August 2016 in four Romanian locations. As residence plays a key role in shaping digital literacy and multimodal practices, selecting a variety of socio-cultural environments was critical when designing our research. We recruited educators from schools and kindergartens willing to participate in our study. Parents were selected based on educators' recommendations.

We conducted 38 semi-structured interviews: 24 with parents of small children aged 4 to 8, and 14 with educators working in kindergartens and elementary schools, from a big city (Cluj-Napoca, Cluj County – over 300,000 inhabitants), two medium-sized towns (Sfântu Gheorghe, Covasna County – over 54,000 inhabitants, and Miercurea Ciuc, Harghita County – 38,000 inhabitants), and a small town (Miercurea Nirajului, Mureş County – 5,500 inhabitants).

Our inquiry is aimed at exploring digital practices of Romanian 4 to 8 years old children from a socio-cultural perspective, with the key research question: how does family digital practices and parental mediation take place when it comes to digital practices of young children? In order to answer our research question, we break it down into five thematic components – addressed within the interview guide – which were the content analysis framework for our interviews:

a. How do parents relate to digital technology? Do they consider it useful for their children?

b. Which are the digital practices of the parents?

c. Which are the digital practices of the children?

d. How do family's digital practices influence children's digital practices? Which are the influencing factors of the family's digital practices?

e. Which are the risks perceived by parents related to their children's digital practices and how do parents mediate children's internet use?

5.2. PARENTAL MEDIATION: CONCEPTUALIZATION AND OPERATIONALIZATION

For a more accurate thematic analysis of our empirical data – 38 interviews (ROINT) conducted with 24 parents and 14 educators, we used the conceptualization and operationalization developed by Kalmus *et al.* (2015): they defined three forms of parental mediation (Table 2), from milder interventions implying co-use, guidance and support offered by parents to children, to more strict measures aimed at internet safety, defined either by interdictions or rules of limiting ICT use.

Table 2

Conceptualization and operationalization of “parental mediation”

Forms of parental mediation	Description of parental behaviours	Occurrence in ROINT
Active involvement (parental activities)	Talk to the child about what s/he does on the Internet	3
	Stay nearby when the child uses the Internet	3
	Encourage children to explore the Internet on their own	1
	Sit with the child while s/he uses the Internet	3
	Do shared activities with the child on the Internet	2
	Explained why some websites are good or bad	0
	Helped the child to do or find on the Internet	3
	Suggested ways to use the Internet safely	0
	Suggested ways to behave towards other people online	0
Restrictive mediation (activities forbidden)	Give out personal information to others on the Internet	0
	Upload photos, videos or music to share with others	0
	Download music or films on the Internet	0
	Have one's own social networking profile	0
	Watch video clips on the Internet	0
	Use instant messaging	0
Monitoring and technical solutions (activities monitored and controlled)	Which websites the child visited	0
	The child's profile on social network, online community	0
	Which contacts child adds to social networking profile	0
	Messages in the child's email/ instant messaging account	0
	Parental controls or blocking or filtering some websites	0
	Parental controls or tracking websites the child isits	0
	Service or contract limiting the child online time	1

Note: 0 – never occurred; 1 – sometimes (one or two occurrences); 2 – often (three to five occurrences); 3 – very often (more than six occurrences).

Source: compiled by the authors, based on Kalmus *et al.*, 2015, p. 126.

While active mediation enables a smooth learning climate for acquiring digital skills in domestic environments, the stricter and technically more savvy solutions to children's protection online are critical, especially for early ages. Our respondents have never mentioned restrictive parental mediation solutions, and they were rather helpless and repeating stereotypes when their children online behaviour was under scrutiny ("we should never exaggerate" or "they should rather go out and play, it is healthier" types of answers). Looking at the occurrences of parental mediation forms among the interviewees, it is rather obvious that both parents and educators lack the ICT skills needed for such an endeavour: out of 22 techniques of parental mediation, respondents have only mentioned seven: no wonder that issues of internet harms and risks have not been part of parental concerns.

5.3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

While our previous study focused on children and their digital universe (Bakó, 2016) posing several ethical and methodological challenges related to collecting data from four-to-eight years olds, their vulnerability, parental consent issues, access to home environments or access to educational institutions (Tökés, 2016), this research is somewhat within the comfort zone: we re-build the mosaic of children's digital practices as reflected in the accounts of their teachers, mothers and fathers².

When it comes to parents' attitudes towards the developmental role of digital technologies, both literature on digital literacy and our empirical analysis support the claim that a positive attitude from parents and educators leads to more supportive, active parental mediation practices of young children.

a. How do parents relate to digital technology?

The vast majority of parents and educators consider digital technology as a useful given, as an opportunity worth seizing: "It is indispensable... I could not imagine our life without it" (ED6). "I think it has a positive effect on children's development... If they don't learn it, in one or two years they would lag behind" (PA18). "I use it with pleasure, I wouldn't exclude it from my life. On the contrary: it helps me with my work" (ED7). A parent considered that digital practices should be rather taught in school: "We should teach [digital technology use] in an organized manner: it would be much easier to highlight the useful side of it. To use it not only for playing, not only for diverting attention, but for a conscientious, effective use" (PA5). While educators had mainly a positive opinion on children's digital practices, some parents expressed concern and skepticism: "I do not like it. It is not good for me and it is not good for my child either" (PA13). An educator considered that parents should be trained in order to set limits and guide their children: "My suggestion would be to take care [of children's digital technology

² We annotated respondents as follows: educators with ED1, 2, ...n, and parents with PA1, 2, ...n.

use] from an early age: parents should be informed about limitations. Parents should be provided some training or information on what to teach to their children. If parents allow them everything, it will be difficult to cope with it later in school” (ED5).

Interview excerpts presented above show that parents and educators consider digital technologies useful for young children, if not for the present, for their future. They are aware that digital literacy is a social expectation both for themselves and for their children. Parents who rarely use digital technologies are less aware of its benefits: they cannot make the difference between useful and less useful digital practices, since ICTs are merely means of entertainment for them.

b. Which are the digital competences and experiences of the parents?

When it comes to family digital practices, our findings are in line with digital literacy research results: ICTs change family routines. Key factor of digital habits and routines are parents' digital practices: they shape children's behaviour and ground the family's digital practices ethos. We have noticed that parents who integrate digital technologies in their work are keen to take advantage of ICT-enabled problem-solving, learning and entertaining at home too.

Most parents and educators interviewed were not particularly technologically savvy, but had basic ICT skills related to interpersonal and professional communication, or to using digital devices for work purposes. “We don't need to know everything [...] We need to learn how to find information. I am good at that” (ED3). “I use email a lot, and I use statistical programs, but also excel, word, PowerPoint” (PA15). However, the wind of skepticism blows again: “I know less than my daughter, because I am not a phone maniac, like her.” (PA6) “I am not skilled for it, I do not bother, because I do not have time” (PA14).

Parents and children rarely perform digital activities together; it is more common that children emulate their parents' activities, to the extent that their parents allow it. Parents are unaware of this blissful engagement, and tend to see their children as extremely tech-savvy as digital natives. Young children are more digitally connected with their older siblings, and it is a common practice that parents mediate access to devices between their children, since Romanian families under study, although with a middleclass status, did not own as many digital devices as to allow access for all family members.

c. Which are the digital competences and experiences of the children?

When it comes to young children's digital practices, we have found that they do not take advantage of the wide range of creative and learning opportunities enabled by ICTs. Instead, they use devices mainly for entertainment. Parents often initiate digital fairy tale watching sessions, and they seem to ignore the vast range of educational videos and games available online, although they often encourage such practices in offline context – for instance educational board games.

Parents feel rather helpless and disconnected from their children's universe, like “strangers in Digiland”, as we already concluded in a previous study. (Bakó

and Tökés, 2017, p. 109) Although upon a thorough scrutiny children's digital competences are limited and shallow, parents feel overwhelmed: "she is capable of such things on my phone... I have no clue about it" (PA12). "He downloads a game, tests it, it is not good, he deletes it, and downloads the next one. He learned how and from where" (PA17). Creative multimodal practices, although rare in our respondents' accounts, are not missing: "the other day he took photos of the towers she built, because I told her: you have to collect [your toys...], we are cleaning up. OK, let me take a photo of them, okay? Okay, you may take a photo [...] and she took a photo and a video, to be able to rebuild it, she said" (PA3). "She likes to make selfie videos. She talks, she explains, she shows off like a little actress... she shows it to us and we watch it together" (PA6). Meanwhile, educators report that many children are left alone with their digital devices to pick and choose whatever content they would like. Both parents and educators reported that boys are keener to play aggressive games, or simply watch trailers of such games. Educators reported that 7–8 years olds have already had social media accounts activated.

Based on parents' and educators' responses, Romanian young children under study rarely benefit from the creative and educational aspects of digital media, except for the communication applications, when family members live and work abroad. Children's digital content creation is likely to appear in families where parents are more open towards ICT use: photos and home videos mainly, shared offline among family members, and not publicised online. Basically, children under study and their parents are rather media consumers than creative users of digital technologies.

d. How do parents and siblings influence children's digital practices?

Family digital practices have a significant impact on young children's ICT use. Our empirical research has shown that parents' knowledge, skills and attitudes towards digital technologies shape their children's behaviours, since they rely on adult family members. Daily ICT use, screen time, older siblings models and parental mediation are important factors to consider when understanding children's digital practices.

As presented in the section on parental mediation (table 3), among the 22 forms of mild or strict intervention in children's digital practices our respondents only mentioned seven: about a third. Active involvement strategies were the most used parental mediation forms, while restrictive mediation, as well as monitoring and technical solutions were missing from parents' intervention toolkit. Should it be a matter of joy or concern? Talking to the children, standing nearby while they use digital devices, helping them start games, download applications, find their favourite videos are signs of openness and flexibility. "If she doesn't understand what is the point of the game [she just downloaded], I explain it to her" (PA12). "If I show her something once, she can do it. She remembers the icons" (PA17).

“These children learn miraculously...” (PA14). Meanwhile, more technically savvy forms of parental mediation, such as restrictive mediation, as well as monitoring and technical solutions of content filtering are totally absent from the discourses of parents and educators under scrutiny. Only one parent has mentioned blocking internet connection during the night, in order to limit online access for the older sister. Although Romania was assessed as a high risk country in terms of children and youth online safety (Helsper *et al.*, 2013), none of our 38 respondents have raised the issue of cyber security, online privacy, or the risks of cyber bullying. A long way to go on the road of digital literacy development among parents and educators.

e. Which are the risks perceived by parents related to their children's digital practices?

The role of parental mediation in mitigating online risks is crucial, according to studies presented in sections 1 and 2. There are rare occurrences of unwanted and inappropriate online content for children, if parental mediation is effective. There is a broader concern related to advertisements targeting children, and parents interviewed have noted that they avoid kid channels with an overflow of ads, because they could experience the impact they have on their children. Young children's parents under scrutiny considered online risks as a problem of the future, since their children were not yet on social media and online game platforms.

Educators are more concerned than parents when it comes to children's online safety, although more of a hunch than accurate knowledge: “[parents] know how dangerous it is to stay online all day or watch the television for hours. But there are those who do not pay attention, because they are busy working and making money... their children are glued to digital devices all day long” (ED3). Most parents are concerned that digital practices kill their children's fantasy, or see these devices as unnecessary source of stress for children, and source of unhealthy lifestyle. Terms such as online safety, personal data protection, safe online behaviour are not part of the parents' and educators discourses, as shown in the parental mediation analysis (section 5.2., *Table 2*).

6. CONCLUSIONS

Present study explored digital practices of children aged four to eight, re-building these experiences from the mosaic of 24 parents' and 14 educators' discourses, with a focus on family digital practices and parental mediation. Young children's development and learning is strongly affected by the behaviours, values and lifestyles of the community in which they are immersed during early childhood.

Our analyses have reinforced the strong influence family habits and attitudes toward ICTs have on young children's digital practices. Young children observe and replicate their family members' ways of behaving in digital environments, both from a quantitative (screen time) and qualitative point of view (programs, application use, variety and richness of content they interact with).

Parents have acknowledged the social expectation of savvy technology use, but they considered too early to develop such skills for young children aged four to eight. They considered that children are using ICTs merely for entertainment, and were not aware of the educational potential of digital devices. Neither parents, nor educators take responsibility for young children's digital literacy development. Parents formulated the need for a systematic digital competence development, whereas educators blame the curriculum and place responsibility on parents.

Parents and educators interviewed could manage digital devices on a basic and independent user level suitable for their own digital needs, and they used mobile phones mainly for entertainment, in line with their young children practices. No wonder that smart phones have become the ubiquitous and most versatile digital device in the family.

Children's digital experiences have evolved in parallel with their parents', with little guidance from them. More technologically savvy parents have offered guidance and support to their children in learning operations and applications they were interested in. Most parents limited their children's screen time, giving timeframes and sometimes content guidance on what is permitted and what is not.

Little account was given on Romanian parents enjoying digital spaces together with their children, or giving them meaningful feedback on their digital practices and experiences.

It is striking that parents are completely unaware of the risks and harms their young children might be exposed to: they reported that they can easily guard children for those one or two hours the little ones spend online. Risks and harms might emerge from dangerous content, risky cyber-acquaintances or risky behaviours. In line with international findings (Marsh *et al.*, 2015), respondents considered that risky cyber-acquaintances and risky behaviours are not dangerous at an early age, but access to risky content should be given more attention.

Our findings are in line with international research results on children aged zero-to-eight access, skills, awareness and parental mediation: the role of socio-cultural context, especially family is crucial.

Limitations of our empirical analysis are due to the narrow scope of the study and the focus on merely middleclass respondents. In order to broaden and deepen our analysis, a larger quantitative inquiry is needed, and it is in a planning phase. Large scale quantitative data should be complemented with in-depth analyses involving children's perspectives as first-hand storytellers of their digital worlds.

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