

The Virtual Environment: Dangerous or Not? Perceptions and Representations of the Online Experiences among Children and Adolescents

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Abstract: *The Internet and new media are now part of some broad changes that have occurred lately related to how individuals engage in knowledge assumption and production, interaction and information seeking. While digital media are gaining more visibility and attention, both because their associated benefits and inherent dangers, a generation of youngsters is growing up in an era dominated by technological advances that might produce experiences of different kinds in their developmental processes. Although the higher use of the Internet has been accompanied by numerous hopes related to the positive outcomes it might stand for, feelings of fear and panic have also come into play when referring to the child-virtual environment alchemy. This is particularly true in the case of adults' and public policy representatives' perceptions of young people as inexperienced users who might easily become targets of the online dangers. Based on three focus-group discussions and using a child-centered approach, this paper presents the perspectives of 24 school teens aged 9-16 who make use of the Internet at least once a week, and explores how they actually embed this into their daily lives, and how they understand and manage risks by themselves. Comparing the answers of three samples of pupils using a focus-group approach, this analysis allowed capturing various interpretations and perceptions related to the online dangers that might occur while exploring the virtual space, by positioning young people at the center of discussions.*

Keywords: online risks; online environment; identity formation; parental mediation.

Cuvinte-cheie: riscuri online; mediul online; construcție identitară; mediere parentală.

Introduction

Over the last years, there have been several authors pointing to the important role that the Internet has had in people's lives during time, producing "electronic revolutions" (Jan van Dijk, 2006; Davis, Hirschl and Stack, 1997; Castells, 1996), inequalities (DiMaggio et al., 2001), and individualization (Wellman, 2001; Beck, 1992), showing how media culture is part of youngsters' lives from their early ages. The rapid rise of new technology among young people, which will continue to grow and evolve even more due to broadband penetration and national strategies and policies (European Commission Digital Agenda, 2013), gives indications on the fact

that media, especially the Internet, no longer serve as simple means of communication and interaction. Rather, they have become so much embedded into youngsters' daily routines and have become so natural and habitual that they can easily be considered a form of life in itself which cannot be analyzed separately from the larger environment in which children live (Morimoto and Friedland, 2011). They are important instruments contributing to teenagers' processes of socialization, interaction and identity formation, creating a "lifeworld" in which almost every action is mediated (Bakardjieva, 2005; Habermas, 1981).

Due to the significant appropriation of this medium in their "lifeworlds", young people have got to be not only prime innovators and head-

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masters of the online environment, but also legitimate social actors able to take responsibilities and decisions with respect to the activities they undertake. Therefore, the need to understand deeper the relationship between the Internet use and young people is urgent and stringent, if perceived through the lens of the large scale and speed with which technology evolves and produces changes, both at the social and at the individual levels. When it comes to children, apart from its general characteristics of continuous development and diffusion which can encourage social change, the Internet use can also lead to identity construction. Considering this view, young people can be perceived as active forces that are able to find their ways in this modern Internet-based “risk society” (Beck, 1992). In spite of the evidence showing the potentially large scale of perils, vulnerabilities and harm across Europe (Haddon and Livingstone, 2012), little research was conducted in order to understand how youngsters perceive the role of the Internet in their lives, which are their conceptualizations of online risks, and how they pertain to these negative situations. Moreover, there are no recent publicly available studies that deal with children’s experiences and motivations of engaging in risky activities. Similarly, there are very few surveys dealing with the factors that favor the likelihood of accessing this kind of negative content and of getting involved in interactive situations that might end with offline meetings; in the same lines, there is no recent survey on the effectiveness of particular approaches such as parental rules (Stefanescu et al., 2009; Stefanescu, 2009; Diaconescu, Barbovschi and Baci, 2008; Barbovschi and Diaconescu, 2008). Therefore, this paper aims to explore children and adolescents’ perceptions and attitudes towards the modern means of communication and information, their characteristics of Internet use, along with the associated risks, and the child – parents – online environment relationship. The few studies dealing with Internet use and risks conducted in Romania generally emphasized that youngsters are intense internet users who go online mainly from their homes and perceive this medium

as being very important in their daily lives, indicating a strong need of research focusing on the outcomes that this relationship might bring. In the following part of this article some theoretical perspectives of risk will be emphasized which will then be tested using the focus-group method on three samples of pupils. In the last part of the paper, the results of the study will be analyzed and discussed, and some limitations to the approach will be stated.

Theoretical framework

In recent years, the evidence has pointed to a growing online connectivity of people, including children and youngsters. Eurostat statistics (2013) show that overall, the proportion of households in the EU28 with access to the Internet was 76% in 2013, an increase of 6 percentage points, compared with 2010. Children under the age of 18 in most of the countries make up a high percentage of the total number of people online. According to Livingstone et al. (2011), overall, around 65% of the 9-16 years old children living in Europe go online daily or almost every day, and the average age when they first go online is *nine*. Various studies (Livingstone et al., 2011; Ofcom, 2012; Lenhart et al., 2013) reveal the fact that levels of access increase with children’s age. According to Kotilainen (2011), children’s media use is diversified and begins at a very early age. The media environment is constantly changing, therefore the TV programs, DVDs and games are created in such a way as to be used by children smaller than 3 years old. Internet usage appears to increase and even become regular at the age of 5-7.

Even though the Internet has got strongly embedded into youngsters daily lives (Lenhart et al., 2013; Haddon et al., 2012; Ofcom, 2012; Hasebrink et al., 2011; Kotilainen, 2011; Livingstone et al., 2011; Valcke et al., 2011; Lenhart and Madden, 2007) and accounts for many undeniable benefits related to entertainment, communication, education, creativity, self-expression and information seeking, it is also considered to imply a myriad of risks that are able to influence nega-

tively children's proper development (Valcke et al., 2011; OECD, 2011; OSTWG, 2010; YPRT, 2009; ITU, 2009; Livingstone and Haddon, 2009; ISTTF, 2008; ACMA, 2008; Hasebrink et al., 2008). On the one hand, there is the idea of encouraging and sustaining the further promotion of the Internet as it facilitates many positive outcomes for the users, but on the other hand, there is the idea of reducing the attendant risks. Research shows that the experience of online opportunities and risks appears to be strongly positively related, in spite the long-standing idea that they are rather opposing variables, and, therefore, they should be analyzed separately (Livingstone and Helsper, 2010; Staksrud and Livingstone, 2009).

When it comes to online risks, the literature has spoken so far of a complex array of such dangers which have been gathered in different classifications and typologies over time, but until now, scholars have not agreed upon a generally accepted one (Valcke et al., 2011; OECD, 2011; OSTWG, 2010; YPRT, 2009; ITU, 2009; Livingstone and Haddon, 2009; ISTTF, 2008; ACMA, 2008; Hasebrink et al., 2008). As the number of young people using the Internet increases and the age at which they first go online decreases, identifying and addressing these risks becomes an important public policy objective. Moreover, as their activities, skills and competencies differ and increase by age (Ofcom, 2012; Sonck and Livingstone, 2011; Livingstone et al., 2011), their interactions with, and the conceptualizations of the online environment vary as well, offering space for engaging in risky behaviors. Still, the literature distinguishes between harmful contents and harmful interactions, which will be approached in the lines of this paper as categories of content and contact risks.

Content risks including accessing pornographic materials, negative user-generated (i.e. browsing wrong or untrustworthy information which can result in negative behavior such as suicide, consumption of illegal products or physical disorders) and xenophobic information are some examples of negative experiences that young people might take up while exploring the virtual world. Generally, these kinds of risks refer to the

situation in which "the child passively receives or is exposed to content available to all internet users in a one-to-many relationship" (OECD, 2011, 17), and are related to exposure to information that might be harmful to youngsters, examples of such experiences including: age-inappropriate materials (pornography, hate messages, violent behavior) and harmful advice (eating disorders, drug consumption and addiction, suicide). These kinds of experiences might have some negative and long-time consequences on children, such as increased aggression, fear, desensitization, poor school performance, prevalence of symptoms of psychological trauma, antisocial behavior, negative self-perception, low self-esteem, lack of reality or identity confusion (Cho and Cheon, 2005, 490; Mitchell et al., 2003, 346).

Contact risks, on the other hand, occur when children engage in online interactions related to specific types of Internet usage, such as instant messaging, blogging, chat room use, SNS and playing games online (Ybarra and Mitchell, 2008) which can produce a variety of risk situations, such as meeting online contacts offline, cyber-grooming, sexual solicitation, online harassment/cyber-bullying, and threats to privacy. They started to raise great concerns between parents, teachers, researchers, public authorities and policy makers because of their potential to develop relationships with dangerous perpetrators in search for assaulting possible victims. Besides this fear, there are other consequences that might appear after coming across these risks. These include feelings of distress and anxiety (Mitchell et al., 2001; Mitchell et al., 2007).

Rapid and high penetration rate, intense use and children's low levels of skills might be associated with a higher blend of online dangers that might interfere during virtual world's explorations. While engaging in various activities meant to discover and enjoy the multitude of experiences and opportunities that this medium offers, some threats to safety might also come into play. Depending on how young people behave and perform online, they could attract a large diversity of dangers which can possibly harm them, but which are also likely to help them adapt to

risks. Users may learn how to face those more efficiently and creatively, becoming, therefore, more responsible for their choices and actions. Still, the ways in which media use affects and even constructs youngsters' lives and identities in an environment governed by threats are subjects that need more attention. When children reach the age of adolescence, they need to pass through a series of biological, cognitive and physical transformations which can generate intergenerational conflicts, mood swings and an enthusiasm for risky behavior (Buckingham, 2008, 2). These changes are what James Marcia (1980) and Erik Erikson (1968, cited in Buckingham 2008) called "identity crisis", a stage in which youth overcome uncertainty, become more self-aware of their strengths and weaknesses, become more confident in their own unique qualities, learn how to self-reflect and define themselves, separate from their families and form social competences. In order to achieve a solid identity, the adolescents have to pass through a period of "psychosocial moratorium", meaning a time of searching for their pursuit of self-discovery, which includes engaging in activities that might help them experiment different potential identities and situations, including various kinds of risks.

Besides the perspective that the Internet use brings many negative experiences and harm, there are though some authors who argue that risk might bring certain benefits within youngsters' lives (Hope, 2007; Madge and Barker, 2007), such as particular sensations, emotions, pleasures (Lyng, 1990, 2004), a sense of going beyond boundaries or escaping from the everyday life routines, and even a sense of control over the actions undertaken. Applied to the Internet use, it can give away boredom or loneliness and induce positive feelings of happiness or joy while surfing the World Wide Web, accessing different social networking sites or blogs, or performing Internet connections and relationships. Anthony Giddens (cited in Hope, 2007) pointed that late modernity is defined by risk and that it is an increasingly important part of the process of identity formation. From this perspective, enga-

ging in dangerous activities can be seen as beneficial for children, because it may allow the self to develop in ways that are restricted by an individual's everyday environment. Moreover, engagement in risk could lead to the development of a positive reputation as daring or skillful, and risk takers might develop a sense of belonging to a particular group (Hope, 2007, 89).

The few studies – mainly quantitative – dealing with Internet use and risks conducted in Romania generally emphasized that youngsters are intense Internet users who go online mostly from their homes and perceive this medium as being very important in their daily lives, indicating a strong need of research focusing on the outcomes that this relationship might bring (Chirita et al., 2007; Barbovski and Diaconescu, 2008; Stefanescu et al., 2009; Stefanescu, 2009; Runcan, 2010; Munteanu, 2010; Safe the Children Organisation, 2011; Virtual Stages Against Violence, 2012; Abraham et al., 2013). They declared young people as being intense Internet users who spend at least three hours online in a normal day. This could be associated with having pathological problems leading even to depression, according to Chirita and colleagues (2007). Some recent European results show that overall, the number of children who show pathological problems due to excessive Internet use is rather low and that the most vulnerable are those who are older, who have emotional problems and high levels of sensation-seeking (Smahel et al., 2012). The large amount of time spent in the digital world is believed to compensate feelings of insecurity, family and peer problems, even a poor social life for Romanian youngsters (Runcan, 2010). It was also associated with a need to be alone with the computer, resulting in giving up their social or family duties, and even school abandonment (Chirita et al., 2007). More interesting was the finding pointing to the 15-18 years old students who appeared to manifest psychological problems such as losing control quite often while being on the computer, and having very often and often the feeling that they were pre-occupied for this device while being away from it. The participants confessed using the Internet

in order to avoid unpleasant moods or feelings, showing an anchorage into this medium that helped them feel comfortable and safe. Moreover, they could easily cancel a meeting with friends or other activities, including time spent with family, time for learning and having fun, considering that this behavior could not affect their personal relationships. In spite of these findings, no additional attempts were made in order to explore the ways teenagers perceived the role of the Internet into their lives, why did they need to spend so much time online, or how they understood the outcomes that this medium was standing for.

Another result pointed out by the Romanian studies showed that the age of the first connection has a decreasing trend, children going online for the first time at significantly younger ages, which shows that the Internet has become an integral part in their lives starting with small infancy (Virtual Stages against Violence, 2012; Munteanu, 2010). According to Diaconescu, Barbovschi and Baci (2008), and Barbovschi and Diaconescu (2008), the age at which young people started using the Internet was around 12, which, as compared to recent European data and trends (Holloway, Green and Livingstone, 2013; Ofcom, 2012; Livingstone et al., 2011; Kotilainen, 2011), was rather high. In what concerns the Internet use – children – parents relationship, findings have pointed to the fact that there is a weak parental implication in their infants' online activities, most of it being concerned with setting limits regarding the amount of time spent in the virtual environment (Diaconescu, Barbovschi and Baci, 2008; Barbovschi and Diaconescu, 2008). Teenagers speak very rarely or not at all with their care-takers about their online experiences, meaning they are independent while exploring the World Wide Web and free to engage in any activity they want without being supervised and limited. International findings show that when parents actively mediate their child's Internet use (parents talk to their child about the Internet, stay nearby or sit next to them while they go online, encourage them to explore the Internet, and share online activities with them), they engage in lower risk activities and face lower harm (Durager and Livingstone, 2012).

With regards to children's opinions about the Internet, they feel this is a necessity, an indispensable instrument in people's lives and absolutely essential for their daily routines (Stefanescu, 2009). These perceptions show the positive relationship between respondents and this medium, which is likely to become stronger as youngsters reach higher levels of explorations and experiences. This tied connection is also emphasized by the broad use of social networking sites which are some of the most employed applications of the Internet. While in 2008 adolescents presented a low engagement with risky activities (Diaconescu, Barbovschi and Baci, 2008; Barbovschi and Diaconescu, 2008), in 2012 participants manifested a great opening towards these, indicating that the Internet and its related characteristics and experiences have become central in their lives, and probably, the sensations it offers – good and bad – make youngsters want to explore it even more, in order to discover as many various situations as possible. They confessed being careful with the activities they undertook, even though Romanians seemed to be in the first line when it came to engaging in bullying behaviors, sending or receiving sexual messages and having their computers infected by viruses, as compared with countries such as Germany, Austria and Italia (Virtual Stages Against Violence, 2012). This emphasizes again the fact that youngsters in Romania have a different online behavior than the other surveyed participants, which needs to be studied more, since it might account for different experiences and understandings of Internet and online threats.

In spite of all these similarities presented by the afore-mentioned studies, very little focus was put on the factors associated with encountering and engaging in online risks. Moreover, no attempts to understand in-depth adolescents' online behaviors and representations of dangers were done, nor the actual incidence of online threats was analyzed. Therefore, this paper aims to explore Romanian children and adolescents' perceptions and attitudes towards the modern means of communication and information, their characteristics of Internet use, along with the

associated risks, and the child – parents – on-line environment relationship. Even though the recent technological advances are considered to be mingled with risks, little account has previously been taken of youngsters' views in the social analyses of risk. In spite of the fact that research startles the variety of online dangers that threaten young user's proper development (Helsper, 2013; Haddon et al., 2012; Ofcom, 2012; Hasebrink et al., 2011; Livingstone et al., 2011; Valcke et al., 2011; OSTWG, 2010; Livingstone and Haddon, 2009; Dooley et al., 2009; ACMA, 2008; Byron, 2008; Cho and Cheon, 2005), they are not a topic of much concern for children as they are for adults (Optem, 2007), and so far, little evidence has focused on teenagers' personal views and experiences (Ponte, Simoes and Jorge, 2013; Hundley and Shyles, 2010; Davidson et al., 2009; Stefanescu, 2009; Dunkels 2008). Building on the assumption that experiences of risk are central to the construction of identity, this study aims to explore how children understand and deal with risky situations in relation to their Internet activities. Parental restrictions and supervision were also taken into account for the topic of this chapter, since they might be able to influence youngsters' online explorations and experiences. While the implications of online dangers resulting from children's activities are reflected in media and public discourses as topics of concern regarding young people's safety (European Commission Digital Agenda, 2013), the current pages provide insights into teenagers' perspectives of risks and Internet use, pointing to the manner in which they understand this relationship. Therefore, the following research questions will be addressed in the lines of this paper: *How do children and adolescents themselves perceive the relationship between Internet use and risks in an environment governed by new means of communication and interaction? What is that worries them on the Internet and what safety measures do they employ for that? How do teenagers perceive the child – parent – Internet relationship?*

Discussion on the method

The focus-group method was employed for the purpose of this paper. A number of three group discussions were conducted in May-June 2013 and were undertaken in one of the national colleges from Cluj-Napoca. After asking for human subject approval from the school's principal, parental consent was requested by the school's counselor before including the pupils into the study. A number of 8 youngsters (4 girls and 4 boys) were selected for each group (9-10 years old – the first group; 11-13 years old - the second group; 14-16 years old – the third group). Due to the fact that they accepted to take part in the study, and that they were familiar with each other ensured that respondents were feeling comfortable in each other's company and offered, therefore, important information for the purpose of the study – an essential advantage of the focus-group method, as Ilut (1997) points. Also, another positive aspect of the fact that they were previously known to each other was related to the way the topics were covered. The situations through which they had passed required no further explanations in front of the group, facilitating an open and enjoyable discussion that did not imply laughter, insults of mockery when some delicate topics emerged. Therefore, the discussions were animated and dynamic, facilitating long and in-depth focus on the key themes of the interview guide.

In order to be eligible for the discussions, youngsters were screened so as to ensure they knew how to use the Internet and, consequently, they had a personal evaluation on the benefits or dangers it might stand for. In this sense, they had to have the proper age required (9-16), to have access to the Internet at home or in a public or private space, and to use it at least once or twice a week for various purposes, including searching for information needed for school, watching online movies or video clips, searching for general information, games, entertainment, reading/watching news and/or for interaction with others. The discussions took place in a familiar location that kept the pupils away from teachers,

administrators, other children or authority figures. In this sense, school counselor's office was used, while the children were at school. No incentives were used for the participants, and the discussions were audio-taped. Respondents' names were kept anonymous, and only their ages and appellatives such as "girl" or "boy" will be mentioned when presenting the results.

The interview guide was made out of four parts useful for understanding children's perspectives and positions in relation to Internet use, online risks and parental restrictions. In the first part, some general discussions meant to release the tension between the participants were conducted. In this sense, they spoke about the things they enjoyed doing in a usual day of their lives, such as hobbies or passions. The aim was to see whether the Internet and its related activities were mentioned spontaneously as habitual and important instruments of spending time. The following section focused on the Internet and its usage. During the conversations, young respondents were asked to define the Internet in their own terms, which was an important task for the purpose of this study, since it searched to extract children's personal understandings and perceptions related to this medium. Additional issues that this part focused on included the amount of time spend online daily, the number of years since their first connection – which might offer indications over their "digital natives" position (Helsper and Eynon, 2009), and the places from where they access the Internet – which produces great concerns among researchers regarding the paths these offer for increasing the incidence of risk (Durager and Livingstone, 2012; Valcke et al., 2011; Hasebrink et al., 2011; Staksrud and Livingstone, 2009).

The third section of the interview guide dealt with the topic of risks emerging from the use of Internet. It started with a request to talk about the things that made the participants feel worried about. It was a good introduction into the next questions which asked directly about the key online dangers identified in the literature (experiences of bullying, sexual solicitation and pornography, meeting strangers, personal information misuse, accessing wrong or untrustworthy advi-

ce and information from various websites and pages) and about the ways they were handled by the surveyed pupils. The second and the last questions from this section were elaborated on the suggestions of Ponte, Simoes and Jorge (2013) who showed in their study that the way questions are posed matter on children's answers about Internet risk and safety. They were related to respondents' understandings of what it means to use the Internet in a safe way, and to the advice they would give to other children of their age on how to keep themselves unharmed by the online experiences they pass through. The last section put under discussion the relationship between the child, the parents and the Internet. In this sense, participants were required to evaluate their Internet-related knowledge, and to compare it with their parents' skills. Parental restrictions, monitoring and supervision were in-depth discussed in this part, as factors that might contribute to reducing the incidence of risk among the young users.

Results and discussions

While it is possible to identify, classify and analyze online risks according to various perspectives and assumptions arguing they might be either beneficial or rather damaging for children, listening to young people's insights and experiences on this topic might reveal considerable horizons and perspectives over the online environment, and might open room for valuable considerations related to teenagers' relationships with the Internet and its related perils. In what follows, each of these dimensions will be described and analyzed.

Section A. Introduction

Even from the introductory part which was designed to clear away participants' possible holdings back, the question of the role of the Internet and its associated features was raised. The respondents spoke about Internet and computers as normal and common aspects within their daily lives. Interestingly, they were enumerated

next to some cultural and educative dimensions, showing that these new technologies have become more than simple recreational instruments:

I like music, dancing and using Facebook – girl, 12 years old.

I like going out with my colleagues and I don't like not having Internet – girl, 14 years old.

I like playing on the computer and I don't like Mathematics – boy, 14 years old.

When presenting a typical day from respondents' lives, once again the computer, the Internet and their related activities came into evidence as key instruments of usual performance, sometimes appearing to be more important than school, learning or homework-doing, especially for older adolescents. With regards to older participants, they reported that they tended to disregard parental authority, and just pretend to behave according to their will, doing anything else instead. This is an interesting outcome which, if connected to children's acting according to their own wishes at these ages of psychological developments and identity formation, might reveal a different perspective of risk, pointing to the fact that they need such escape attempts in order to explore various situations and experiments, and construct, therefore, their self-images and personal identities.

In a usual day I spend time on Facebook – boy, 11 years old.

I arrive at home, eat, sleep, pretend in front of my parents to do my homework, I play on the computer and during school breaks I do my homework – boy, 14 years old.

Section B. Focus on the Internet and its usage

The aim of this section was to explore children' and adolescents' own understandings of the Internet and their relationships with it. In the first part, they were asked to explain the meaning of "Internet" for someone who did not know anything about this medium, with the purpose of identifying their subjective perceptions related to it. Generally, it was defined in terms of "a place from where you can find out anything you want", "a pot containing lots of things", "the

most powerful source of information that ever existed", or "the coolest thing ever invented, the greatest, you can never get bored with it". The 11-13 years old children were, in fact, amazed by the fact that there could possibly exist someone who has not heard about it until these days. This shows how much embedded and natural the Internet is in their lives, even at these young ages: *Seriously? How strange! Because everyone knows about it! I have never met a person who did not know about it! All youngsters living nowadays know about it!* – girl, 12 years old.

Other opinions spontaneously emphasized the bad things that might occur while being online, showing that children and young people were informed about the dangers gliding in the virtual space that might threaten their and others' safety. This outcome might be an important source to take into account by public representatives, parents or teachers who are interested in creating the best measures of safety for youth. These strategies should be age-oriented in order to have better results, rather than generally applicable. They are in line with the objectives of the Insafe Good Practice Guide (2012) that aim to provide age-appropriate safety support for children:

I would explain to him [to the person who knows anything about the Internet] that it is full of dangers but also of advantages, which are always balanced – boy, 12 years old.

On the Internet you can find information that you don't know but it can also get your mind harmed, somehow – girl, 12 years old.

The next question of this section asked the participants about the things they liked and disliked on the Internet. Responses were mainly centered on the idea that this medium is easily accessible, has multiple functions of information, communication, entertainment and spending time, but it is also posing some technical problems, it is too crowded with useless information, or too slow for multiple tasks. Going further to the good and the bad parts that the Internet stands for, besides having the opportunity of accessing useful information, of socializing or benefiting from its complexity, some dangers and negative physical consequences were also iden-

tified, pointing to the fact that youngsters were aware of the negative experiences that might occur. Regarding these latter aspects, respondents seemed to know how to handle them, and in the situations when they got scared or afraid, they went and asked for help or talked with their parents or siblings. This was prevalent mainly among younger children, the older ones not even mentioning the idea of risk and harm, probably because of their confidence in their own skills and digital knowledge, or because they did not perceive the online perils as risks, but rather as normal emerging activities.

It is addictive and harmful. If you use it very much you cannot stop doing it and then you forget about everything, about the things that you were supposed to do – boy, 10 years old.

It is bad for the health, it has radiations that enter your body – boy, 10 years old.

You might think it is something safe but actually it isn't. You enter a virtual world that normally it shouldn't exist. Many children find the Internet as a world where they can be whoever they want to be – girl, 14 years old.

Table 1: *Internet evaluation by the focus-groups participants*

Likes	Dislikes
There is a site for everything	Technical problems (it blocks up, jerks or shuts down)
Easy to be accessed	Not too fast for doing multiple things at once
Allows for various forms of access (telephone, other devices)	You have to search through many sites until reaching the one of interest
You can play games	It gets you addicted
You can do multiple things at once	Contains wrong and untrustworthy information
It has an answer for everything	Contains misleading information
It is fast	
You can find any information you want	
You can never get bored	
Contains a large array of complex information	
You can talk with/call someone for free	
Good things	Bad things
It gets you informed	It is addictive
It is free to call/talk with someone	Bad for the health (contains radiations)
Allows you to socialize/communicate	Bad for the eyes
You can get acquainted with the news	Strangers can approach you
	You can get manipulated by others
	Allows for dissimulation/lying about one's identity
	You can lose your personal information/data
	Other people can use you
	You can be asked for intimate/sexual details
	You can lose your privacy
	You can lose your passwords or card numbers
	Allows for the creation of a virtual inexistent world
	Contains false information and lies

Base: Focus-group participants' responses to the questions: "Which are the things that you like/dislike the most in the Internet?" and "Which are the good parts of the Internet? And the worse?"

In spite of the fact that the participants identified a visibly larger number of bad things that might happen on the Internet, rather than good (Table 1), when asked whether they were scared or afraid to go online because of these dangers, they confidently all together gave a negative answer. Moreover, they presented some methods used for staying safe, showing that they were well informed about this, and prepared to handle difficult and negative situations:

I have blocked the access on my page for everyone who is unknown to me, only my friends can see it – girl, 12 years old.

There are ways to prevent [dangers], there are settings meant for that – boy, 12 years old.

The next question of this section strived to identify how much embedded the Internet was in participants' lives by asking them about the number of years since they first went online, about the time spent online and about the places from where they access the virtual world. These aspects were also analyzed in the EU Kids Online questionnaire¹ and appeared to be important predictors for encountering risks (Livingstone et al., 2011; Lobe et al., 2011). In the present focus-groups, most of the respondents declared they first went online when they were 4 years old. Some of them were even younger when they had this kind of experience for the first time (3 years old) and a few of them first connected at 8 years old. Those who went online at 7-8 years old belong to the 14-16 years old group, showing that the Internet started to become such an important medium for children only during the last years. This descending trend seem to lead to the creation of a new generation of digital natives (Helsper and Eynon, 2009) who will get to include the media culture in their developmental processes starting with birth, as already happens in Finland (Kotilainen, 2011). Regarding the amount of time spent online, it seems to increase by age. This result is in line with previous

findings, even if they were collected using quantitative methods (Duerager and Livingstone, 2012; Virtual Stages Against Violence, 2012; Ofcom, 2011, 2012; Livingstone et al., 2011). While the 9-10 years old participants at the focus-groups declared they spent between half an hour – an hour a day online, the older ones aged 11-13 reported an increase until 2-3 hours a day, and the oldest adolescents reached even 7 hours a day. All of the respondents go online from the privacy of their own rooms, at home, showing a "domestication" in this sense, as Hasebrink and colleagues (2011) concluded in their report.

Section C. Internet use – related risks

The first question of this section asked participants to speak about the things that worried them on the Internet. Responses were diversified, varying from health problems, to being bullied, being stolen, lose money or get computer viruses (Table 2). These are in line with the findings of Livingstone and colleagues (2013) who identified as well a long list of concerns among youngsters, the most prevalent being pornography and violent content. When speaking about what it means to use the Internet in a safe manner, participants showed, again, that they were aware of various settings and instruments of online protection, and that they actually made use of them. Moreover, they appeared to be careful with the personal information they posted on their social networking profiles. Going further to the following question addressed in this section, respondents did not mention about many situations in which they received or saw unpleasant contents on the Internet, such as intimate pictures or sexual images. Even in the situations in which they mistakenly received such information on their e-mail addresses or on their social networking profiles, they deleted, hid or ignored them, without feeling harmed or affected by such content. These actions prove, once more, that children and adolescents knew how to use the Internet in such a way so as to reap its benefits, and protect themselves from, or even avoid the negative online situations.

Table 2: *Overview of respondents' answers related to the things they worry about on the Internet and the safety methods they employ*

Things to worry about	Methods of using the Internet safely
One's health	Use protection settings
Become addicted	Use anti-virus protection
Misuse and damage the connection	Post un-provocative pictures
Accept unknown persons in their friends list	Be sure and confident on what you are doing online
Being asked for the e-mail account	Use passwords
Be approached by unknown and suspicious persons	Ask for help if there are things you do not understand
Lose money	Block the access of unknown people on your profile
Being tracked	Do not post your personal information
Seeing violent sites	Use only the official sites
Hackers	Use privacy settings
Have problems with the police for nasty comments	Do not write down on your personal profile every detail of your activities
Having the personal information stolen	
Someone else using their account	
Viruses	
Receiving nasty messages	
Having the account broken	
Having intimate pictures posted without their permission	

Base: Focus-group participants' responses to the questions: "Is there anything on the Internet that worries you? What exactly? Tell me about this" and "What does it mean to use the Internet in a safe way? How do you proceed?"

All participants, no matter the age have met someone unknown on the Internet with whom they met offline afterwards. They seemed satisfied about how the meetings went and declared to be not afraid that something bad could happen, showing that such activities are perceived as normal at their ages, and not as something that could turn out bad for their physical or psychological states. This is in line with the arguments belonging to the advocates of Internet use who consider that new technology stands for the creation of a complex, more creative and innovative young generation (Buckingham, 2008; Hope, 2007; Madge and Barker, 2007; Marcia, 1980) who needs to experience vario-

us situations, including risks, in order to define its identity (Erikson, 1968, cited in Buckingham 2008; Marcia, 1980). These kinds of experiences were perceived as rather beneficial than risk-averse, since they turned, in some cases, into meaningful friendships, in spite the public fear that bad outcomes could arise (Barbovschi, 2013; Hasebrink et al., 2011, 50-51), pointing to the inseparable bond and "migration" between the online-offline spheres (Livingstone et al., 2011; Barbovschi, 2013). In most of the cases, participants did not tell their parents about such plans, and actually did not understand why their care-takers had to be informed about that, showing that young people willingly cross boundaries

of safety in order to experiment various situations within their processes of identity formation (Hope, 2007; Lyng, 1990, 2004; Cohen and Taylor, 1992):

Many times do people whom I never met face-to-face ask for my friendship [on Facebook]. And it happened to me once or twice to really meet those persons and go out. When I was younger I went once with my mother, and after that with a friend – girl, 10 years old.

Some time ago I met a girl [on Facebook] and now I'm in love with her. I was alone at the offline meeting and she was with some friends, we went out together for shopping. [Moderator: Wasn't you afraid?]. No, why? Can someone steal you while doing shopping? [Moderator: Did you tell your parents you went on to meet someone unknown?]. Yes and no, in the sense that they knew I went on to meet someone but I didn't tell them with whom – boy, 12 years old.

I met a girl with whom I spoke through e-mails, a girl named Julie. I was alone when I met Julie. I told my parents I would go. It was awesome! – boy, 12 years old.

I met them on Facebook firstly, while playing some game. I went to meet them several times, either alone or with a friend of mine. [Moderator: Wasn't you afraid that something bad could happen?]. What, someone could steal me in the middle of the town? I wasn't afraid, why should have I been? [Moderator: But what about your parents? Did they know you were going to do that?]. Why should they? – boy, 14 years old.

Some time ago I was approached on Facebook by a black person, we kept talking and he told me he was from France. In the beginning he was asking me whether I wanted to go and meet him in France but I refused. It was just before my vacations with my parents and I told him I was going in a trip, I told him where exactly and at which hotel we were staying. He told me we might meet there and we actually met, we became friends and we are still in touch with each other. [Moderator: Did your parents know you were going to meet him?]. No, in the beginning, until we got to know each other, I was alone and

after that with my parents. [Moderator: Wasn't you afraid?]. No, not at all – girl, 14 years old.

At the next question all pupils declared having experienced a situation in which they were approached by someone unknown on the Internet but seemed not to have taken it into account. They said they did not respond, or closed the conversations with those contacts:

A stranger wrote "Hi" to me in English but I didn't answer back – girl, 11 years old.

It just happened to me last evening. A guy on Facebook, I don't know who he was, told me he was from Cluj but he lives in Spain. And he started asking me for pictures, asking about the neighborhood in which I live, about my phone number, and other stuff like that. I cursed him and told him to leave me alone. I closed the conversation afterwards – girl, 14 years old.

Going further with the interview guide, participants were asked whether they had their passwords stolen and their accounts broken. It appeared that younger children were more likely to go through that situation, but as they explained, it happened because of their inattention and lack of experience. Older adolescents seemed to have learned from their mistakes and created harder to guess and break passwords.

It happened to me but with a person I knew. She noticed my password because I used to type very slowly. She could therefore see my messenger password – girl, 10 years old.

I used to have another Facebook account that was broken. I dropped it out and made another new one – boy, 10 years old.

No, usually I use strong passwords of 20 characters long – girl, 14 years old.

Regarding cyber bullying, it was indeed experienced by the focus-group participants while using the Internet. They again declared they knew how to handle things and either deleted the comments, messages or pictures, or asked for help from their parents. This latter aspect is in line with the findings of D'Haenens, Vandoninck and Donoso (2013) who argue that talking to somebody and asking for advice is the most popular employed strategy, regardless of the

type of risk, especially among girls and younger children.

I was cursed and then I deleted the post, it never appeared to me again – boy, 10 years old.

A girl cursed and offended me, and she kept telling me nasty things. She was a friend of my friend, I didn't have her in my friends list but she saw I made a comment and started talking dirty. I told my parents and they said I should delete that post – girl, 10 years old.

I was talking to someone and suddenly she started to curse me. I deleted her from my Facebook account and never talked to her again. [Moderator: Did you tell someone? Like your parents, friends, teachers?]. No, I was thinking it happened just once, I deleted it, I never thought again of that, I forgot about that – girl, 10 years old.

It happened to me that a guy [...] sent to me and to many others a message saying that if I do not spread that link he will appear into my house at night and kill my mother. Stupid things like this! [Moderator: What did you do next?]. I closed the conversation and logged out. I laughed with tears: how idiot does one have to be in order to spread such stupid things? – girl, 14 years old.

When asked about the negative user-generated risks, the youngest respondents declared they did not access that kind of risks. Instead, the older pupils (girls only) were aware of them, actually accessed such sites even if it happened unintended, but they generally considered them as being hilarious and silly, rather than useful. This shows that such information is not perceived as a risk in itself but rather as a bad and useless directory.

I searched once for information on how to calculate the normal weight, I mean the healthy one. I found useful information everywhere.

There was a site which according to your height and gender was able to tell you whether you are healthy or not – girl, 14 years old.

I like music and I noticed that there are some fans who call themselves "haters". They have clubs and speak nasty about pop-stars. I find them hilarious. If you don't like, you don't listen and that's it! – girl, 14 years old.

There are hate groups everywhere. I don't know whether they have their own websites but I know about those groups. For instance, they have pages on Facebook. I didn't explore them but I noticed they existed – girl, 15 years old.

At the end of this section, participants were asked to give some advice to other youngsters of their ages on how to use the Internet safely. By being placed in the role of an experienced user, it automatically gave them a sense of responsibility and maturity in relation to the others. Table 3 shows a summary of focus-group participants' responses. Both 11-13 and 14-16 groups mentioned addiction as a problem arising from Internet usage. Still, when asked whether they considered themselves addicted to the online sphere, they offered a clear positive answer. Because they were confident in their skills of using this medium, or because they had created their personal strategies of dealing with the negative online experiences, it was evident that they were not afraid that something bad might happen to them: *Even while I'm doing my homework I stay logged in on Facebook. This is something I like even though I know this is not necessarily healthy. Two hours is not little, not little at all and I'm aware of it but this thing is like a drug! That's why it becomes addictive. It is something that you like and you know it is not healthy, but still... – girl, 15 years old.*

Table 3: Summary of focus group participants' pieces of advice for other youngsters of their age on how to use the Internet safely

	Pieces of advice on how to use the internet safely
Age 9-10	Don't access unknown information
	Don't be curious to explore things you don't know about
	Don't upload nasty images
	Don't speak dirty with your friends
	Don't buy an iPhone if you don't want to be tracked
	Be self-confident while exploring the Internet
Age 11-13	Don't expose your personal information on Facebook and other SNS
	Don't become addicted
	Don't use Facebook and the Internet daily
	Don't upload important information
	Don't upload inappropriate pictures
	Ask for parental help
	Don't have secrets from your parents
	Be attentive because some people can do much harm to others
	Use protection settings
	Have limits in what concerns the Internet use
	Learn when it is time to stop using the Internet
	Make a program for computer – no more than 1 hour daily
	Don't lose personal control
	Don't accept unknown persons as friends
Don't think of suicidal	
Age 14-16	Don't make friends on Facebook, mail, messenger or Skype if you don't know them from the offline world
	Don't trust unknown persons because they might lie about their identities
	Use an anti-virus and safe mode
	Use strong passwords
	Don't leave open your sites or accounts
	Don't create a virtual life
	Don't give your personal information to anyone even if you know them
	Don't become addicted
	Learn when it is time to stop using the Internet
	Live in the real world

Base: Focus-group participants' responses to the questions: "We have talked until now about the good and the bad parts of the Internet and about the best ways in which to use the Internet safely. Is there something related to these aspects you would like to say to the other youngsters of your age?"

Section D. The child – parent – Internet relationship

Since the literature speaks about the important role that tutors have in keeping their children away from the online dangers (Duerager and Livingstone, 2012; Ofcom, 2012; Cankaya

and Odabasi, 2009; Liau, Khoo and Ang, 2008; Livingstone, 2007; Nikken and Jansz, 2006), it was considered important to analyze this aspect within the focus-groups discussions, using participants' own voices and opinions. When asked about the knowledge they had about Internet and computer and how they handled these instruments, participants declared they were very

skilled in this respect. While the youngest group appreciated themselves as being good enough on this topic for their ages (*There are other people who can handle it much better. We are still kids of only 10 years old. For our age we can handle it very well* – boy, 10 years old), the older ones evaluated themselves in terms of knowledge and self-confidence. They differentiated between these two dimensions which implied different evaluations based on separate criteria. In this sense, they placed themselves on a 0-10 scale, where 0 means “having no knowledge” and 10 means “having very much knowledge”. A similar scale was used for self-confidence (0= not confident at all; 10= very confident). Respondents’ answers revealed very high values for self-confidence and medium values for Internet knowledge. Girls evaluated themselves as being better than boys in terms of confidence (mean= 8.6 vs. 5.6), which is opposite of what the EU Kids Online survey found (Hasebrink et al., 2011, 30). With regards to knowledge, boys situated themselves on a better position than girls (mean= 8.6 vs. 6.8). Generally, their evaluations were rather high, showing they considered themselves able to deal reasonably well with the online experiences. When compared with their parents, they also appreciated as better their competencies (this perception is in line with the findings of Hasebrink et al., 2011, 30):

I can access faster some sites. My mother types more slowly and needs more time when searching for something – girl, 10 years old.

My mother uses the Internet only when she needs to buy things, she doesn't know how to use it as better as I do – boy, 10 years old.

[I can handle it] perfectly! I know way too many things about the Internet than them. I mean, when I see my mother typing using only one finger... (she laughs) – girl, 15 years old.

Much better because it is harder for them to get adapted to something that appeared so late. Also, they spend less time than me and others of my age on the internet – boy, 14 years old.

In spite of the fact that parental skills were not perceived as being as good as theirs, the youngest respondents recognized that their tutors

helped and gave them advice on how to use the Internet. The oldest participants received only recommendations on how to behave online (*My parents have very much faith in me. They consider me a responsible person, which I think I am* – girl, 14 years old). Adults were described as rather permissive and trusting their children, and started monitoring them only in the situations in which their school results were affected. Even when that happened, they were not consistent, and therefore, youngsters did not take them seriously:

In my case it happens sometimes that they don't let me log in but I keep insisting and they allow me to go online for like 10 minutes – girl, 10 years old.

Sometimes, when I have homework to do and I want to play, they block it and I cannot log in until I finish my tasks – girl, 10 years old.

If I take a bad grade they start with threats like “if until now I just told you that I would take out the Internet, you should be sure now that I will do that!”, but of course it doesn't happen. It's only the threat and that's it – girl, 14 years old.

Yes, they tell you that you are allowed to play only for half an hour and you play for like 3 hours – boy, 14 years old.

Sometimes my father turns off the Internet so that we get out from the house because we spent too much time playing on the Internet – girl, 12 years old.

Regarding filters, all respondents reported not having such things installed on their computers by their parents: *No, but they don't even know what that means* – boy, 14 years old.

Conclusions

This paper aimed to understand how children and adolescents themselves perceive the relationship between Internet use and risks, in an environment governed by new means of communication and interaction, addressing the lack of research on youngsters’ discourses related to their online experiences. Since they constitute a group whose voice is seldom heard

(Ponte, Simoes and Jorge, 2013; Hundley and Shyles, 2010; Davidson et al., 2009; Dunkels, 2008), their own reflections were the focus of this paper. Consequently, this research has not only paid attention to the types of risks that involve children and adolescents, but it also allowed these young users to position themselves in relation to these perils and to speak about their own understandings of such experiences. The purpose was to explore whether pupils see risks as potential dangers affecting their activities and safety online, or they evaluate these as normal and natural features of the digital space that can be easily avoided and handled. Throughout the discussions, they were attributed several roles – advisors, receivers of online content, actors involved in risky situations – in order to capture their perceptions and understandings of the virtual environment from different angles and perspectives.

The overall picture of these group interviews reveals the fact that young respondents have positive and strong relations to the Internet, which was emphasized as well in previous quantitative findings (Abraham et al., 2013; Helsper, 2013; Stages Against Violence, 2012; Haddon et al., 2012; Ofcom, 2012; Hasebrink et al., 2011; Livingstone et al., 2011; Valcke et al., 2011; OSTWG 2010), as well as in some qualitative studies (Optem, 2007; Davidson et al., 2009; Hundley and Shyles, 2010). Youngsters appear to be confident and skilled users, rather than naïve and unable to see actual threats. They are, in fact, very aware of these perils, but tend to disregard them and resort to various developed solutions for avoiding them, showing, in this sense, their high levels of responsibility with regards to their safety. In spite their young ages, they seem to be on their own when it comes to their Internet knowledge and strategies for dealing with the negative online factors, as their parents are perceived as occasional and inexperienced users. It was emphasized various times during discussions that participants were reflexive with their understandings of risk, and responsible for their online activities, rather than innocent victims living among a variety of online

dangers that threaten their proper development (Helsper, 2013; Haddon et al., 2012; Ofcom, 2012; Hasebrink et al., 2011; Valcke et al., 2011; OSTWG, 2010; Livingstone and Haddon, 2009; Dooley et al., 2009; ACMA, 2008; Byron, 2008; Cho and Cheon, 2005). Therefore, experiences of dangers are normal and fundamental activities within their identity construction processes (Buckingham, 2008; Hope, 2007; Madge and Barker, 2007; Marcia, 1980), which can help them learn how to better adapt and manage risk in a positive and creative way. Consequently, Livingstone and colleagues' recommendations, as well as European Commission's (Digital Agenda, 2013) purpose to create the paths for every European to become digital should be very much considered when it comes to young users. They should be encouraged to become responsible for their own Internet safety, by developing the appropriate digital skills and confidence needed for this purpose.

Limitations

Even though this analysis has brought into evidence significant aspects related to how children and adolescents understand and handle the digital environment along with its associated risks, it inherently has some limitations that need to be pointed out. Firstly, due to the small number of participants, the results are not exhaustive and generalizable, but rather focused and specific. Another limitation can be stated in relation to the recruitment process. Children and adolescents were selected on the base of a screening questionnaire by the school counselor, who was responsible both for choosing the respondents and asking for parental consent. This process might have been based on subjective selections meant to help the focus-group discussions develop in a positive way, which could have brought other results otherwise. Moreover, no attempts to control for differences in children's socio-economic statuses or parental classes were done, which could as well reveal different perspectives and understandings of how youngsters perceive and use the Internet, and how they con-

ceptualize online dangers as part of the activities they engage in. In the same lines, another important limitation that needs to be pointed out is related to group components. Each group was equally distributed on gender, which might have distorted the results since girls' and boys' experiences and activities might have been different, and therefore, their conceptualization of risk

Note

¹ It can be accessed and retrieved from www.eukidsonline.net.

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