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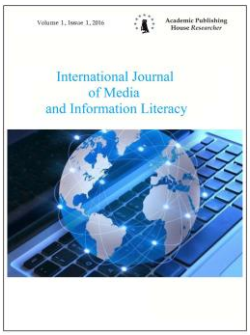

Digital Competence and Family Mediation in the Perception of Online Risk to Adolescents. Analysis of the Montenegro Case Study

Ida Cortoni [a, *]

[a] Sapienza University of Rome, Italy

Abstract

For several years, international scientific and political debate has shown increasing interest in digital literacy and digital education as tools to protect minors from the risks associated with the unmonitored and unaware use of various media. At the same time, various strains in the scientific literature have more deeply analyzed the themes of the risks and opportunities associated with using the web; this has often resulted in the promotion of political, awareness-raising, or educational interventions on the local level, to contain the potentially harmful effects and augment the positive ones linked especially to the opportunities for individual growth and sociocultural inclusion that these technologies can help bring about. This paper enters into this framework to explore how whether or not digital competence is possessed can influence young people's media use behaviour, while increasing or not increasing the risk of media exposure within a circumscribed sociocultural context. To undertake this kind of reflection, this paper focuses its attention on the Montenegro case study and analyzes some results of the 2016 Global kids on line research work, to consider the relationship between digital competence and the exposure risk level of children between 12 and 17 years of age within circumscribed sociocultural areas.

Keywords: safety, digital literacy, digital competence, social capital, child.

1. Introduction

In light of some research results in recent years on the use of digital media by young people and the ever increasing risks associated with this exposure (such as, for example, *Eukids on line, Net Children go mobile*), the idea is now well established in the international political and scientific debate that digital literacy and digital education are areas of experimentation and education to be invested in, in the various socialization environments like school and the family, in order to activate strategies for prevention and for protecting young people from online dangers, through the active involvement of educators, and of teachers and parents above all (Livingston et al.; 2014, Buckingham, 2007).

Investment in media education and, above all, in the development of digital competence in young people – but in adults, too – seems to be framed more and more as a European-level strategic policy to deal with such problems as cyberbullying, sexting, and, generally, forms of online violence, and to achieve a broader objective of disseminating the principles underlying digital citizenship.

The issue of digital competence, however, is highly complex to analyze and apply as a sociocultural intervention in a socialization setting, for a number of reasons: first of all, this

* Corresponding author
E-mail addresses: ida.cortoni@uniroma1.it (I. Cantoni)

concept is still too generic, and has to be broken down into dimensions and sub-dimensions, so as to make it observable and analyzable in terms of type and intensity of manifestation; secondly, indicators observable in the behaviours of individuals within specific contexts must certainly be identified; and lastly, digital competence proficiency levels capable of categorizing the type of digital behaviour on an assessment scale must be constructed. These activities for making competence operative are preliminary to any intervention of assessing and certifying digital competence, as well as educational activities – curricular or cross-disciplinary – that take this shared methodological structure into account (Celot, Pérez Tornero, 2009).

In the current state of affairs, the international scientific debate now shares an international framework on digital competence, the European Commission's "DIGCOMP" (Vuorikari et al., 2016), which is giving rise to experiments in translating and adapting this model to national policies on the inclusion of the digital world into educational processes. In light of this framework, research for detecting and measuring digital competence is also being activated, in addition to experiments in assessing it with respect to different targets and, lastly, planning – in the curriculum and cross-disciplinarily – that takes into account its transferability into educational settings like schools, up until entering the university (such as for example the trials linked to UNESCO's MIL) (UNESCO, 1999, 2006, 2008).

Precisely in light of this brief introduction, we will be presenting here a path of reflection and analysis of the digital competence of young people and their families in Montenegro, starting from some results that emerged in the 2016 study, *Global Kids Online,* conducted by UNICEF[1]. Although research was oriented towards studying the behaviour of youths between 12 and 17 years of age when going online, in order to comprehend the degree to which the youths were at risk of deviant phenomena on the internet, a part of the research focused on analyzing digital competence. The assumption was in fact that a greater awareness of use, resulting from knowledge of and socialization with the medium at home and school, could reduce the young people's risk of online exposure.

From this perspective, this paper has two main objectives:

1. To reflect upon the socialization strategies, activated in the family setting, that are closely connected to developing the digital competence profiles of the interviewed youths. An analysis of this kind must inevitably take into account the ascribed family cultural and social capital, which is to be understood as:

- the family's social and cultural background, which the child inherits from birth, and the web of social relationships built over time by the parent and transferred to the child at when he or she joins that family nucleus,
- the background of the network of strong and weak relationships (Granovetter, 1995) that the youth builds on a daily basis with his or her parents and with other players in the socialization process. These relationships, characterized by the bond of mutual trust and by the set of values and principles that define their social capital (Portes, 1998; Bourdieu, 1980; Loury, 1977; Coleman, 1990), can influence the development of digital competence in young people. The style of use, media perception, and the emotional relationship that parents and teachers, or educators in the more general sense, build with media can be reflected in the behaviour and perceptions of young people in the process of socialization – in transmission or relations – with the peer group (Morcellini, 1997), thereby conditioning their relationship with the media in terms of knowledge and attitudes.

2. To reflect upon the relationship of influence between the development of a certain type of skill and the type and level of exposure risk in encountering deviant situations through online media use.

[1]A survey including children 9 to 17 years of age, their parents, and school representatives was conducted. The survey was designed in accordance with the Global Kids Online project and jointly coordinated by researchers at the London School of Economics and Political Science and the UNICEF Office of Research-Innocenti. The aim of the project is to learn from children's experiences to help policy makers, educators and governments make the internet better for children everywhere. Cf. UNICEF, *Children online – opportunities, risks and safety,* Montenegro scientific report, July 2016, Ipsos.

2. Materials and methods

The *Global Kids on line project* works in continuity with other similar research efforts done in recent years in 10 countries around the world[1], and was coordinated by researchers at the London School of Economics and Political Science. The overall objective was to provide policy makers, educators and government with recommendations to protect children on line, starting from the experience of children, socially disadvantaged youths (children from Roma families, economically deprived families, children in institutional care, and children in correctional institutions), parents, and teachers (Livingstone, 2008). To achieve this objective, the project called for using a quantitative and qualitative research approach. In the first case, questionnaires were administered to all the target categories involved; in the second case, focus groups were led on the same topics.

The areas of argument used in quantitative and qualitative surveys of children were the following:

- Access: how children access and use internet-enabled devices in their everyday lives.
- User practices and skills: what children do online and how, what children can/can't do or what they know/don't know.
- Opportunities: what activities they pursue online, why, and what benefits they report and how they respond to them.
- Risks: what problems or challenges they encounter online, and what harm they report and how they respond to it.
- Well-being and rights: how using the Internet contributes to or undermines their well-being, and their rights to provision, protection and participation.
- Social factors: in using the Internet, how they are helped or hindered by family, educators, peers or community.
- Digital ecology: what digital sites and services are available to children and how they engage with their specific features (UNICEF, 2016).

The subject areas in the parent survey were the following:

- Parental worries: what the main sources of parents' worries about the child's wellbeing are (health, school performance, exposure to violence, alcohol, and drugs, sex and crime, and online risks)
- Parental internet use and digital competence: whether parents use the internet, where they use the internet, what devices they use to go online, what they can do online
- Parental mediation: active mediation of internet use (talking to the child about what he/she does on internet, staying close by while he/she is online etc.), restrictive mediation (online activities that children need a parent's permission/supervision to perform), active mediation of internet safety (discussing safety issues/suggesting ways to use the internet, etc.), technical mediation (utilizing different technical means to control children's internet use)
- Parental monitoring: checking the various actions children have been taking on the Internet (contacts added to social network profiles, e-mails, websites the child has visited, etc.)
- Parental perception of child's online harm and risk: parents' insights into online occurrences that may have bothered or upset the child during the previous year
- Sources of information: where parents obtain and where they would like to obtain information and advice on how to help and support their child on the internet (UNICEF, 2016).

In this paper, our attention will focus exclusively on the research results related to the following investigation areas: "access," "User practices and skills," and "Risks" in the case of young interviewees; and to the "Parental internet use and digital competence," "parental mediation," and "parental monitoring" areas in the case of parents. The paper's objective is in fact to reconstruct the digital competence profiles of the young interviewees, using DIGCOMP as an interpretative model of reference, and their social capital.

In this line of reasoning, the first step to be taken involved constructing digital competence profiles, with respect to which the sociocultural frameworks of reference were reconstructed in terms of the family's cultural capital, social class of reference, and human capital (Coleman, 1990). This datum was then intersected with the type and level of the child's exposure on the web by

[1] Argentina, Brazil, Bulgaria, Chile, Ghana, Montenegro, Philippines, Serbia, South Africa, Uruguay

calculating the risk index and with the socialization strategies activated by the families and characterized by a type of digital expertise of the parents and by a type of cultural mediation underlying the development of a certain type of digital competence in the child, and of a proficiency level.

3. Discussion

To achieve the objectives just described, it is appropriate to initiate two types of reflections: the first regards the scientific and political debate on digital competence; the second regards the family social capital within which perceptions are built, aptitudes are consolidated, and visions and processes for interpreting reality mature.

The Digital Competence Framework for Citizens, known also as DigComp (Kluzer, Rissola, 2015), was published in 2013 by the European Commission as the theoretical pattern of European reference regarding digital competence. It has 5 areas of competence, all cross-disciplinary in nature[1], and for each of them, micro-competences and indicators of reference have been defined (Vuorikari et al., 2016).

This model was subsequently adapted to the individual national situations, and reinterpreted, reread, or supplemented in the international scientific debate. This paper reports the adaptation of DIGCOMP to the interpretative scheme proposed by the minors' Media Monitor at Sapienza University of Rome and represented hereunder:

Table 1. Adaptation of DIGCOMP to the digital competence scheme of Sapienza University of Rome

DIGCOMP		**Digital competence model**
Aree	**Micro-competence**	**Dimensions**
Information and data literacy	Browsing, searching and filtering data, information and digital content	Critical competence
	Evaluating data, information and digital content	
	Managing data, information and digital content	
Communication and collaboration	Interacting through digital technologies	Citizenship competence
	Sharing through digital technologies	
	Engaging in citizenship through digital technologies	
	Collaborating through digital technologies	
	Netiquette	
	Managing digital identity	
Digital content creation	Developing digital content	Creative production competence
	Integrating and re-elaborating digital content	
	Copyright and licences	
	Programming	
Safety	Protecting devices	Awareness competence
	Protecting personal data and privacy	
	Protecting health and well-being	
	Protecting the environment	
Problem solving	Solving technical problems	
	Identifying needs and technological responses	
	Creatively using digital technologies	
	Indentifying digital competence gaps	

Source: Cortoni I. in Scarcelli C. M., Stella R., ed, (2017). *Digital literacy e giovani. Strumenti per comprendere, misurare, intervenire*. Milan: Franco Angeli.

[1] These areas are: 1. information and data literacy; 2. communication and collaboration; 3. digital content creation; 4. safety; 5. problem solving.

This conceptual scheme sums up the scientific debate on the theme, already gone into in greater depth elsewhere (Cortoni, Lo Presti, 2015), and is this paper's starting point for contextualizing DIGCOMP for the Montenegro case study. In specific terms, starting from this interpretative framework, some behavioural profiles of the interviewed youths were identified in the context of the *Global kids on line* research effort, which may be ascribed to the dimensions of digital competence as reported above. To obtain this initial output, we analyzed the research questionnaire's queries regarding the "User practices and skills" area, within which items on the following skills were constructed:

1. Operational, which is to say regarding basic reading literacy, media access, or the degree of knowledge of certain aspects of digital media by the sample;
2. information/browsing, on the critical dimension of our conceptual scheme;
3. social, referring to the citizenship dimension;
4. creative, related to creative production;
5. mobile, related to the awareness area.

Through K-means cluster analysis, three digital competence profiles of the interviewed pre-adolescents were constructed, closely connected to the medium's frequency of use; these profiles are:

1. digital operational users (40,9 %);
2. not digital users (19,9 %);
3. informational and creative digital users (39,2 %).

The first case prevalently includes females from 15 to 17 years of age from the northern regions of Montenegro, with a low sociocultural status. These users make less use of digital devices outside of the traditional mobile phone, and possess digital access skills of varying complexity – especially social skills and some mobile skills. In specific terms, most of their knowledge focuses on the media's codes of operation or on digital languages, such as for example "saving a photo online" or "opening downloaded files" or "using short cut keys (e.g. CTRL -C for copy, CTRL-S for save)." As the complexity of digital skills and knowledge grows, the amount of knowledge shown by this cluster decreases; this cluster instead proves to possess intermediate-type competence on the content and the syntax of the online messages (for example, "they know which information is shared online" or "how choosing the best keywords for online searches (Google or some other browser)"), and very little advanced competence connected with the digital instrument and the communicative context.

In the second case as well, users are prevalently *females* from 12 to 14 years of age who do not use digital devices except for mobile phones (not smartphones); they come from the southern regions, possess a low sociocultural status and, even if they use Internet on a daily basis (41.1 %), 1 or 2 hours a day, they do not do so with friends.

As for access, the most-used apps or websites are Google, Wikipedia, and Viber for live communication, while they use Internet for "doing work groups with other students." As for digital environments, they are little acquainted with the social network's safety systems; so for example, they know how to block contacts but are unfamiliar with and have never seen block reports, Help Centres, or links to a helpline (to contact someone who can help you) and Safety centre (to get information or advice). It follows that they distrust new online friends, so they accept friendships only if they have friends in common or if they know them very well (16 %).

Lastly, in the third case, the users employing more diverse digital devices (smartphone, tablet, laptop, TV set…) are above all *males* from 15 to 17 years of age, from central regions and with high sociocultural status.

Students in this cluster share the access skills and social skills of cluster 1, but present certain exclusive characteristics, such as:

- Critical analysis competence (they are likely to check whether the online information they find is true)

- Creative production competence (- they know how to create something new from video or music found online, or how to design a website)

- Competence in sharing their products on social media (- they know how to post online video or music they have created on their own)

- Fruitful awareness competence (they know how to find photos, music, video clips, etc., unprotected by copyright laws, that they can use for free, – they know how to keep track of the costs of mobile app use (check mb use), and find it easy to check whether online information is true

They make daily use of internet at school (31.7 %) and at home with greater frequency (52.7 %) to make presentations write, practise what they are learning (maths, language, music…), check information on school websites, chat on line, and produce pictures.

In particular, the students in this cluster are more acquainted with internet than their teachers are, to the point of teaching the teachers how to use it. As for access, they use internet every day with friends everywhere, and the average time spent exceeds 7 hours a day.

As for digital environments, they do not adopt particular restrictions or measures when using social networks; here, they enter their real data into the profile (real age, last name, clear photo) and accept all friend requests. But they know how to take action to protect their own data if there are undesired friendships: for example, they have used the Blocking button (to block contacts) and have seen the Report button (to tell someone if you are being mistreated online) (63.1 %), Help centre or link to a helpline (to contact someone who can help you) (76.8 %) and the Safety centre (to get information or advice) (68.1 %), although these services were little used.

Reflection on digital competence cannot neglect analysis of social capital as an influential factor. This concept is to be understood as the set of resources – real and potential – that a network of social relationships can bring to the individual, offering opportunities for integration or social inclusion (Bourdieu, 1985). These resources, according to Coleman, may be material in type (physical capital), or immaterial (human capital) (Coleman, 1990), while relationships (or bonds) can be strong (that is, characterizing the family nucleus) or weak (characterizing the surrounding community) (Granovetter, 1995). The knowledge and abilities developed thanks to the resources available in the family nucleus and the aspect of trust underlying relationships are the founding elements of socialization (including virtual socialization) built through interactions within a variety of settings (Portes, 1998). Socialization inevitably conditions the subjects' mnemonic, perceptive and cognitive capabilities as well as emotional attitude and predisposition towards a situation requiring the use of digital technologies. In this sense, it becomes particularly important to more deeply analyze the social capital of the family and of the school, in order to identify the styles of digital consumption, as well as the types and levels of competence within a generation, such as that of pre-adolescents, that is the object of the investigation discussed here (Cortoni, 2016).

In this case as well, in the sphere of research, through the use of cluster analysis, various social capital profiles were distinguished, starting from the type of prevalent sociocultural mediation as a factor conditioning the interviewed sample's choices and decisions. These profiles were broken down as follows:

1. Lack of sociocultural mediation (41,4 %);
2. Family sociocultural mediation (26,5 %);
3. Sociocultural mediation of school or friends (32,1 %).

Analysis of the initial results showed that the family appears to be more present in the choices of the youngest individuals, while, as age increases, this agency's role is replaced by the school or peer group (cf. table 2).

Table 2. Social Capital Cluster

			Age range		Total
			12-14	15-17	
Social Capital Cluster	Lack of sociocultural mediation	VA	99	121	220
		%	41.8%	41.0 %	41.4 %
	Family sociocultural mediation	VA	74	67	141
		%	31.2%	22.7 %	26.5 %
	Sociocultural mediation of school or friends	VA	64	107	171
		%	27.0%	36.3 %	32.1 %
Total		VA	237	295	532
		%	100.0 %	100.0 %	100.0 %

From the geographic standpoint as well, the weight and role of the socialization agencies (family, school, and peer group) appears to be particularly present in the areas of central and southern Montenegro as opposed to the northern ones (cf. table 3).

Table 3. Social Capital Cluster from the geographic standpoint

			Region			Total
			North	Centre	South	
Social Capital Cluster	Lack of sociocultural mediation	VA	80	96	44	220
		%	52.6 %	38.4 %	34.1 %	41.4 %
	Family sociocultural mediation	VA	31	72	37	140
		%	20.4 %	28.8 %	28.7 %	26.4 %
	Sociocultural mediation of school or friends	VA	41	82	48	171
		%	27.0 %	32.8 %	37.2 %	32,2 %
Total		VA	152	250	129	531
		%	100.0 %	100.0 %	100.0 %	100.0 %

Lastly, the level of family socio-cultural mediation is more present in families with a high socioeconomic status, while school and friends appear to play a more central role in low-status families (cf. table 4).

Table 4. The level of family socio-cultural mediation

			Socio-economic status			Total
			Low	Medium	High	
Social Capital Cluster	Lack of sociocultural mediation	VA	56	89	47	192
		%	44.1 %	41.4 %	42.0 %	42.3 %
	Family sociocultural mediation	VA	26	56	33	115
		%	20.5 %	26.0 %	29.5 %	25.3 %
	Sociocultural mediation of school or friends	VA	45	70	32	147
		%	35.4 %	32.6 %	28.6 %	32.4 %
Total		VA	127	215	112	454
		%	100,0 %	100.0 %	100.0 %	100.0 %

4. Results

With regard to the first hypothesis on the processes of influence of social capital on the development of the digital competence of the interviewed youths, it may be noted that family mediation is higher in users with operational competence, or who do not possess digital competence. Similarly, the more competent users may be broken down into those who use the media directly with no type of mediation, or those who are supported by the school and friends (cf. table 5).

Using a PCA (principal component analysis)[1], we outlined a space for placing certain media practices of parents and children, in order to comprehend significant relationships, interpretable in intra-family socialization strategies. As the following graph shows, the media practices oriented mainly towards entertainment and play – videogame console, TV, tablet- (Component 1) and those that are exclusively digital (that is, characterized by traditional PC or laptop consumption) (component 2), are closely correlated. In specific terms, analysis of the results for the entire sample of parents and children involved in the research shows a strong correspondence between parents' and children's digital and analog consumption; in other words, the parents' media consumption is

[1]A data simplification technique used in multivariate statistics

reflected in that of the youths, and the family's cultural mediation in socialization dynamics appears to be very strong and of central importance. This transmission process cuts across the families' socioeconomic status, in the sense that the strong intra-family bonds condition the chidrens' media orientation regardless of the family's physical and human capital and of the type of media used, which often depends on the economic resources available to these families.

Table 5. Social Capital Cluster (Family sociocultural mediation/Sociocultural mediation of school or friends)

			Social Capital Cluster			Total
			Lack of sociocultural mediation	Family sociocultural mediation	Sociocultural mediation of school or friends	
Competency Cluster	Operational users	A	85	64	67	216
		%	38.6 %	45.7 %	39.2 %	40,7 %
	Not digital users	A	38	28	28	94
		%	17.3 %	20.0 %	16.4 %	17,7 %
	Advanced creative users	A	97	48	76	221
		%	44.1 %	34.3 %	44.4 %	41,6 %
Total		A	220	140	171	531
		%	100,0 %	100.0 %	100.0 %	100.0 %

Analysis of the research data shows how family mediation appears to be a two-way affair, and in specific terms the parents of non-digital users or of operational users, albeit rarely, "sit with their child while they use the internet"; however, while non-digital users "ask for their help with a situation on the internet that they cannot handle," the creative users often "help their parents find or do something on the internet."

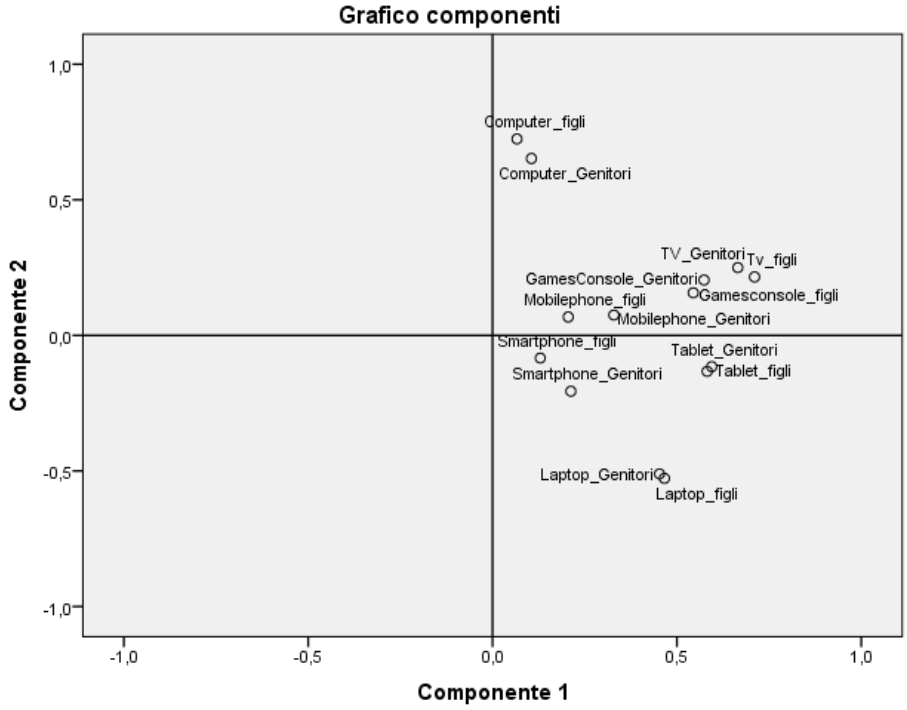

Fig. 1. Digital/analogical practices – Parents and children

But it is not the mother and father who set the home Internet navigation rules so much as siblings and other family members. These rules, in the case of non-digital users, are translated into "let them do it but only with permission or supervision" when using the webcam, posting videos/photos on line and sharing them with other people, and visiting social network sites.

However, increased digital competence corresponds with decreased restrictive mediation, but one which never translates into a total prohibition against navigation; at most, parental monitoring strategies may be activated on the visited web pages or the downloaded apps. As for parental technical control, parents of operational users prevalently employ "means of blocking or filtering some types of website" or "other means of keeping track of the websites or apps your child visits," while families of creative users adopt a "service or contract that limits the time the child spends on the internet," "software to prevent spam or junk mail/viruses" or "parental controls that alert when the child wants to buy content (in-app purchase)."

Lastly, as to the relationship of influence between the development of a certain type of digital competence and the level of exposure risk in encountering deviant situations during online media use, it may be stated that exposure to risk in the use of digital devices increases with the increased frequency of use and competence of students, due to exploratory behaviour and the multiple activities that can be done on the internet. The risk, however, is low when not using digital devices, and average when possessing basic competence, for which even the mediation strategies are many and diversified.

Table 6. Risk index

Risk index (%)	Cluster 1	Cluster 2	Cluster 3	total
Low	12.7	**29.3**	14.6	16.6
middle	**34.1**	41.4	29.3	33.6
high	53.2	29.3	**56.1**	49.8
total	100	100	100	100

Note: 307 units, chi-square: 0,005

Thus, 39.3 % of children who use Internet have a high level of risk of being bothered or upset online or treated in a hurtful or nasty way on various devices, or of receiving sexual messages online and of meeting, face to face, people they have never seen before (figure 2).

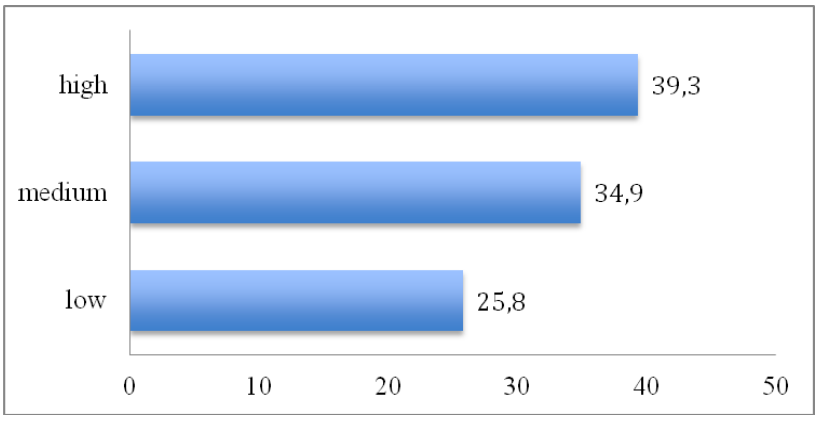

Fig. 2. Index of online risk exposure for children (%)
Note: base: children who use Internet (n. 449). 462 units missing

The level of risk of being bothered or upset improves with age, it is highest for children between 15-17 years old (56,3 %) mainly male (48,9 %), coming from southern regions (45,1 %) with a medium socioeconomic status (48,1 %).

The risk level increases in the absence of sociocultural mediation, while it declines with the intervention of the agencies. It is above all the family that helps keep the percentage of online risk low.

Table 7. Risk index

			Cluster Social Capital			Total
			Lack of sociocultural mediation	Family sociocultural mediation	Sociocultural mediation of school or friends	
Risk index (additive)	Low risk	VA	16	13	11	40
		%	15.8 %	16.7 %	12.8 %	15,1 %
	Medium risk	VA	30	23	38	91
		%	29.7 %	29.5 %	44.2%	34,3 %
	High risk		55	42	37	134
		%	54.5 %	53.8 %	43.0 %	50,6 %
Total			101	78	86	265
		%	100,0 %	100.0 %	100.0 %	100.0 %

As to digital competence, non-digital users do not know or experience any risk (43 %); 46 % of operational skill users are aware of the Internet risk but do not experience it.

In general, the level of risk is low when it is not perceived or experienced, it is medium when it is known but not experienced, and it is high when it is known and experienced. Depending on parental mediation of Internet use, the lack of risk is connected to the low active mediation of parents; awareness of risk improves with the medium activism of parents, and when this activism is too high, the perceived and experienced risk also improves.

5. Conclusion

To conclude, the sample of interviewed youths declares it prevalently possesses basic digital competence, much of which mediated by the family setting that, however, is not fully a guarantor of safety with respect to the dangers of online navigation, likely due to the lack of appropriate skills though which to accompany children's media use. The data provide additional indications on the risk level, which increases in users who are better acquainted with media languages and are bolder explorers of the Internet, without any particular cultural mediation in navigation by these agencies.

The first measure, in terms of policies, in that sense – Parental controls that alert me when my child wants to buy content (in-app purchase) – involves a greater spread of a digital and communications culture for young people within formal educational settings like school, while aiming to strengthen the cross-disciplinary digital skills underlying the development of prudent, aware behaviour during navigation. The second measure regards the training of teachers in these subjects, in order to more adequately perform the role of sociocultural mediator, or to prepare specific professional figures, media educators, capable of accompanying the teacher's work in the classroom when media integration of digital literacy interventions are planned. Lastly, the final measure consists of providing the parents themselves with greater media orientation tools capable of developing the same degree of awareness of how the media system works and of cutting excessive attitudes of prevention and protection down to size.

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