

‘Babeş-Bolyai’ University Cluj-Napoca
Faculty of Sociology and Social Work

**Assessing a Risk Profile of Social Networking Practices and Internet Use
among Children and Teenagers**

Doctoral Thesis – Summary

Supervisor:

Professor Traian Rotariu, PhD

Doctoral candidate:

Monica Barbovschi

Cluj-Napoca
September 2010

Contents

PART 1. THE CHILDHOOD REVISITED IN THE CONTEXT OF ONLINE RISKS – DISCOURSES AND SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS

Introduction

Chapter 1. Framing the discourses and representations about risks: perspectives on child, childhood and the online environment

1.1. Sociology of childhood – theoretical framework for assessing risks and discourses about children’s risks online

1.2. Discourses and social representations – mix approach in contextualizing the topic of online risks for children

1.3. Bridging social representations and discourse theory

1.4. Scope and argument

Chapter 2. Children’s Internet use, social networking sites and sociability

2.1. Children’s Internet use

2.2. Social networking sites

2.3. Sociability in context: technophobes and techno-optimists

2.4. Social networking and sociability. Risk implications

PART 2. ONLINE RISKS AND CONCERNS ABOUT RISKS

Chapter 3. On risk and risk assessment

3.1. Types of Risks: Content, Contact, Conduct

3.2. Exposure to sexually explicit content

3.3. Online predators

3.4. Bullying

3.5. Privacy Risks. Disclosure versus dissimulation

Chapter 4. Concerns about risks and mediation – parents

- 4.1. Introduction
- 4.2 The relevance of parent-child relationship for child wellbeing online
- 4.3. Parental concerns – data from the Flash Eurobarometer 2008
- 4.4. Parental mediation of children’s online activities– strategies and regulations
- 4.5. Conclusion to concerns and parental mediation – the case of Romanian parents
- 4.6. Quick note on media coverage of online risks

PART 3. RESULTS FROM THE EMPIRICAL RESEARCH: SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS ABOUT CHILDREN ON-LINE IN CONTEMPORARY ROMANIA

Chapter 5. Online and offline survey research on children: prevailing social representations and attitudes of children while online and offline

- 5.1. Description
- 5.2. Data from the survey- measures
- 5.3. Mediating factors
 - 5.3.1. Parental mediation
 - 5.3.2. Social networking tools: SNS, IM, online contacts
 - 5.3.3. Psychosocial factors
- 5.4. Problematic activities online – analyses and results
 - 5.4.1. The Use of Internet, E-mail and Instant Messenger Related to Active Searching for Sexual Information and Romantic Partners
 - 5.4.2. Unwanted Exposure to Sexual Materials and Sexual Solicitations Online
 - 5.4.3. Identity management (disclosure and dissimulation)
 - 5.4.4. Online-offline dating
 - 5.4.5. Cyber-bullying
- 5.5. Conclusions

Chapter 6. How do children and teachers think about online risks? Data from the qualitative study

6.1. Discussion on the methods

6.2. Data selection

6.3. Analyses and results from qualitative data

6.4. Discussion and limitations

Chapter 7: Discourses of stakeholders and advisory bodies

7.1. The views of national stakeholders on the issues of online risks - Consultations with the Romanian advisory board for the project EU Kids Online II (April 2010)

7.1.1. Description

7.1.2. Data from national consultations

7.2 The views of international stakeholders and advisory bodies as incorporated in media messages and industry regulation practices

7.3 Linguistic analysis of European Commission's Safer Networking Principles

7.4. Visual analysis of materials aimed to regulate Internet practices (SaferInternet.org)

Discussion and conclusions

Bibliography

Appendices

Summary

Across Europe, the heightened concern for children's activities and safety online has stirred up both panic recommendations and, more recently, a balanced approach that tried to offer children a sufficient amount of protection while still allowing them a certain degree of autonomy.

However, panic-driven reactions that further trigger restrictions and interdictions are still considered a solution in terms of adults' mediation of the online activities of young people. These dissonances in representations of "children at-risk", and moreover, the dissonances between different discourses about risks, as well as children and adult interpretations of the situations as risky and the responses to the adversity render problematic safety interventions and effective mediation strategies. Some of the myths that circulate regarding children's relation to online technologies, such as the myth of the innocence (Meyer 2007) which further perpetuates the image of the victim-child in need of adult supervision and regulation (Livingstone 2002), or the myth of the cyber-kid, fail to capture the nuances of the various situations and roles children might find themselves in. The first position does not take into account the insufficient development of children social competencies and ability to assess complex social situations (including online), while the latter reserves the child only the role of passive recipient of content, without taking into consideration numerous situations where children have an active role or they even initiate problematic conduct online (e.g. Online aggression towards other children).

The purpose of this paper is twofold, theory and policy driven: it aims to identify different perspectives/constructions of child and childhood, promoted explicitly or implicitly by different „stakeholders” influencing discourses and policy/interventions on children's Internet use (mainly government and international regulatory boards, media, academics and parents) and to inform on how these specific constructions might possibly hinder regulatory approaches and interventions. Secondly, perceptions that adults and parents, especially, have about online risks equally ascribe a set of activities and behaviors desirable for children and finally define what constitutes the child. The perceptions and representations of parents are being contested on a frequent basis by what children are really doing online. Moreover, the academic discourse has a high contribution to this contestation of prevalent myths about risks online.

This paper aims to clarify from the sociological perspective of childhood the concept of child and childhood as they appear in various discourses about online risks, of international stakeholders and academic spheres. An important contribution in setting up the theoretical framework was made by reviving the concept of social representation, which allowed for a dynamic assessment of parental views on online risks and children's behavior online. Moscovici (1984) and Abric's (1994) contributions regarding the development of the concept were revisited. Representations of "children online" and "online risks" are central concepts. Also, the relation between representations and how they are conveyed in discourses about risks online was investigated using Teun van Dijk's (1998) generous cognition-discourse-society theoretical model. Challenging parental representations referring to online risks also reframes the opposition between children's desirable versus real activities, thus making a repositioning and reassessment of the concept and condition of the child imperative.

The first part has a descriptive character and it analyzes modern perspectives on child and childhood, with an emphasis on the current trend in literature about online risks that fall into the recent path of the new sociology of childhood, which recognizes a more active role for children. Also in the first part, the concept of social representation is discussed in relation to the topic of online risks. Several types of Internet use by children are listed and discussed, with a focus on social interaction (especially Social Networking Sites – SNS), as well as specific social functions of SNS in connection with sociability, uses and possible risks.

The idea that childhood is a social form and that children are actively co-constructing, not only reproducing their social environments and internalizing society and culture, allows for a certain degree of social agency (Corsaro in Qvortrup, 2005: 232). However, the position that children should be looked upon as social actors, as complete beings "with ongoing lives, needs and desires" (Corsaro 1997: 8), which flourished as a result of a positive trend in debates about agency and structure (James & Prout, 1997: xii) needs to be nuanced by the fact that children's lives cannot be disconnected from their relationship with adults nor can they be analyzed without taking said aspect into account. However, the condescending adult position which deems children to be incomplete beings has proven to be highly problematic and counterproductive, as pointed out by Wyness (2000), who speaks about a crisis in the understanding of childhood, which requires a reframing that incorporates agency, children responsibility and growing

independence. This position builds on the idea that children form a separate exploited and subordinated class (Thorne, 1987, 1993) and acknowledges the disruptive potential of the previous status-quo regarding power struggles between adult authority and children (Ito et al., 2008: ix).

The position of childhood appears to be increasingly problematic in the context of the online environment and social media. Also, the term “empowerment” which has been a favorite in the policy discourse about safer Internet usage appears to be a nebulous concept that is rarely put into practice to its full extent and intent. While a number of academics and practitioners use it to propose the extended right of children to determine and act according to their own needs, the real application of “empowerment” rarely diverges from a clear path envisioned by adult regulations. As Lavalette (in Qvortrup, 2005) notes, empowerment has become a part of the welfare “managerial lexicon” and reflects strategies aimed at privatizing and marketing services, giving ‘customers’ the ‘power’ to choose from a rather limited range of available services. Likewise, I fear that ‘empowerment’ might follow a similar trend in the context of discourses and policies about Internet use for children.

Therefore, the necessity to focus on how discourses frame the topic of online risks appears evident. Building on Teun van Dijk’ s (1998) discourse- cognition – society, rich conceptual triangle that he used for his ideology theorization, I tried to investigate how social representations are constituted, validated or even challenged in several competing discourses about ‘online risks’ and ‘children online’. The core of this thesis is a social-cognitive approach to the analysis of the changes in SR related to children online and children at risk, with an interest in discursive interventions from institutions like academia, media and international bodies.

Following the advice of Sonia Livingstone (2002), I tried to consider three major research principles:

1. Avoid moral panic, normative or value-laden judgments, to the point where research is heavily descriptive of the nature and contexts of Internet use.
2. Contextualize children's Internet use, thus denying the popular opposition between children's online and offline lives. Children’s virtual communication or relationships shape and are shaped mostly by the practices and routines of their everyday lives.

3. Emphasize the fact that children are to be seen as agents and not victims of Internet-related practices. They use both online and offline communication intentionally to sustain their social networks, moving freely between different forms of communication using their online relationships to forge their offline ones and vice-versa (Livingstone, 2002).

The first part continues with a consideration of children's use of social media and possible problematic areas related to use of social media, especially Social Networking Sites (SNSs). Children's extensive use of social media, especially Instant Messaging and SNSs is not longer a discovery or a surprise for any researcher in this field. The concept of *genres of participation* (Ito et al., 2009) is a useful one in describing various types of youth involvement with new media. Some of these types of participation, for example *hanging out*, are viewed by adults, parents and teachers, as a "waste of time", rather than a learning experience/ process. In response to the restrictions and regulations imposed on them by adults, most children find "subversive" strategies for addressing the technical and social barriers to their hanging out and social practices. This push - pull tendency, of adult regulation versus children subversion, supplemented and supported sometimes by children having the technical expertise required to escape adult restrictions, feeds the adult's reoccurring fears related to the risks their children expose themselves to while engaging in online social activities. A very important finding in terms of policy recommendations is that facilitating entertainment and communication online might later benefit children, by encouraging them to broaden the purposes for which they use the Internet and favoring more socially-valued activities, such as education and career enhancement (Livingstone & Helsper 2007: 693).

One major area of concern is the relation between the use of ICT, especially 'social media' and sociability. Theories building on Kraut's (1998) Internet Paradox theory had fearfully emphasized the replacement of 'authentic' communication and social relationship with the volatile, unrewarding, furtive, inauthentic online communication and relationships. Also, the Internet replaces other important parts of life. The assumption the social displacement effect theory makes (Lee and Eddie, 2002) is that time spent on technology-mediated activities will displace others, more important activities, such as social interaction, that are essential to children's psychosocial development (Neuman, 1991).

However, research that had taken into consideration contextual and mediating variables has found the Internet to have a positive impact in some types of sociability as well. Long-term users develop more social contacts in comparison with short-term users. Internet access was found to have a positive impact when it comes to some measures of social contact, and cultural integration.

The first part ends with considerations about SNSs and risk implications. Some of the practices associated with these SNS, e.g. “collecting” friends or “Friending” (as illustrated by danah boyd, 2006, in her analysis of Friendster and MySpace, or Ito et al., 2009a: 37), apart from questioning the whole idea of friendship, might trigger some parental fears. Having a loose definition of friendship might result in having lots of so-called friends, from which some might not have the best intentions. In spite of popular fears regarding teenagers disclosing personal information, evidence shows that the need for concern is in disproportionate response with what is actually going on. In their investigation of MySpace profiles, Jones et al. (2008) found that users exercise a high degree of control over private information, with very few users posting personal information such as telephone numbers and addresses, although younger users (18-19) engage in significantly higher disclosure than adults. However, their study did not find any evidence of widespread disclosure of information that could easily be used for stalking or other forms of offline harassment. Furthermore, Ito et al. (2009a) found that, in spite of the claim that these sites are environments where young people establish new – and potential harmful – relationships, teens tend to stick to the relationships they've already established at school, in summer camps or through sports activities. These places are defined as peer spaces, as teens often view adult participation as odd, undesirable and “creepy” (p. 39). The parent's participation is often viewed as an invasion of privacy, since children consider them oblivious to acceptable social norms in these peer-defined spaces of interaction and lacking the most basic clues about the function and scope of SNS use as teens understand it.

Moreover, peer-related social practices on SNSs, such as commenting (as a form of mutual gratification), have positive effects on self-esteem. Valkenburg, Peter & Schouten (2006) discovered that publicly visible feedback, which works as “a form of cultural currency” (boyd, 2007) on teenagers’ profiles had a direct, positive effect on their self-esteem and well-being.

The second part is centered around specific risks related to children's Internet use and practices that have, for a while, been at the center core of adults' concerns and regulatory attempts from a legislative, as well as, social or technical point of view (site architecture related regulations and restrictions – technical features of web sites and web-based applications). As the fear of the dangers that children might encounter grows exponentially and the tolerance threshold for abuse lowers, adults have systematically limited their kids' opportunities for spontaneous, autonomous, non-supervised play, organizing their time around activities that ensure and reinforce parental control and regulation, as Corsaro (1997: 38) eloquently points out. This tendency is evident also in the case of Internet use and online practices of children.

First, I revisited the concept of moral panic as an underlying recurrent theme for topics related to online risks. When it comes to assessing real harm, it appears that the risk of harm is greater when children are exposed to content inappropriate for their age. However, the relationship between risk and actual harm needs to be continuously assessed by empirical research, since evidence shows uneven effects and sometimes the lack of harmful effects, altogether. Therefore the assessment of a 'risk profile' of children is extremely problematic and highly difficult. The distinction between content, contact and conduct risks, developed by the EU Kids Online research network, is useful in providing some structure when thinking about potential risks children face online, in spite of obvious overlaps and different roles children can play at different times:

- 'content' refers to a situation in which the child is the passive recipient of inappropriate content (e.g. pornographic, violent, hateful, self-harm content)
 - 'contact' refers to a situation in which the child is the recipient of the communication/ message (the 'victim')
 - 'conduct' refers to a situation in which the child is the instigator of the inappropriate behavior (the 'perpetrator')
- (Byron, 2008)

Second, I reviewed some international literature related to children's exposure to sexually explicit/ pornographic materials, dangerous – undesirable contacts online (the "stranger danger"),

aggressiveness towards other children online (behavior that has been referred to as *cyber-bullying*) and also related to privacy risks, i.e. disclosure of private or personal information online. A definition of harmful materials should take into consideration today's standards, norms and values, but also formal regulations (which denominate illegal material, such as child abuse images and child pornography). However, a clear distinction between what is considered "tasteful" or "decent" (or their counterparts, offensive, indecent), according to mainstream standards or tests of public tolerance should be kept in mind, as Millwood Hargrave and Livingstone (2006) suggest. If harm and harmful materials or contacts (which might be different from offensive) are difficult to pinpoint, the measurement techniques for objectively assessing harm, receive even more contestation and disagreement (Introduction: 21). Therefore, strong evidence for content (and contact) related harm is needed in order to draw sensible and effective policy interventions.

A substantial proportion of minors are exposed to sexually explicit materials intended for adult consumption. Moreover, new modes of accessing pornographic materials have become available to adults and children: web-enabled mobile phones, PDAs and games consoles increasingly allow access to the Internet, with few age-related barriers in accessing any type of content. Children have been curious about sexual material for a long time but today 'the process is easier, faster, more anonymous, and likely to bring anything a child wants to the computer screen, and sometimes things the child does not want (Strasburger and Wilson, 2002: 308–9).

Discussions about the possible effects of pornography exposure should refrain from making monolithic statements that automatically assume that all instances of minors' exposure to sexually explicit content must have negative effects. However, existing research on children's experience of exposure to Internet pornography does suggest that youths' exposure to such content will produce a range of identifiable and measurable negative effects, especially where this exposure is unwanted or involves violent content (Flood and Hamilton, 2003a: 36–52). Among these effects, the development of more liberal sexual attitudes and more factual knowledge are the least problematic. Younger children, on the other hand, might be shocked, upset and disturbed by premature or unintentional exposure to sexually explicit content or they might even be exposed to behaviors that are outside cultural normative boundaries (e.g. sex involving multiple partners, sadomasochism etc.).

Despite public concern over children's exposure to sexually explicit content, there is spurious and little evidence that a connection between such exposure and actual harm really exists, with the exception of materials that combine sexual and violent content. As Millwood Hargrave & Livingstone (2006: 18) notice, methodological limitations of this research area make the matter even blurrier, but the lack of evidence might also suggest that the images are not harmful to children, though they might be disturbing on a short-term basis.

Among contact risks, the risk of grooming is the one that triggers the most concerns and parental fears. Research conducted by (Livingstone and Bober, 2005) shows that 31% of 9-19 year-olds who weekly go online, report having received unwanted sexual comments via email, chat, instant messenger or text message. Peter, Valkenburg and Schouten (2006) found that 12-14 year olds tend to talk to strangers online more than older teenagers. This finding curtails the assumption that children this age display little discrimination regarding social relationships and interaction.

Studies show there is a significant percentage of youngsters meeting strangers offline, strangers they had first met online (e.g. 22% in Norway; Millwood Hargrave and Livingstone, 2008, 33% in the project '*Risks and Effects of Internet Use among Children and Teenagers*'¹).

Another risk investigated in the paper is cyber-bullying. Bullying has moved from the school yard to the online environment, with serious implications due to potential anonymity, a lower degree of engagement with the victim due to the distance technology allows for between the victim and perpetrator, a lower assessment of the damage being done, due to lack of non-verbal cues such as facial expression or body language, and less fear of repercussions. Cyber-bullying is basically bullying behavior that takes place through electronic means, for example sending threatening text messages, posting unpleasant things about people, and circulating and sharing with others unpleasant pictures or videos of someone.

Cyber-bullying can be particularly dangerous since it spreads quickly, can sometimes receive great visibility, and can have a pervasive nature, by its ability to infiltrate, what are

¹ The '*Risk and Effects of Internet Use among Children and Adolescents; the Perspective of Evolution towards the Knowledge Society*' project, sponsored by the Romanian Ministry of Education, type A CNCSIS grant scheme (no. 1494/2007); research team coordinated by Maria Roth, PhD, Babes-Bolyai University, Faculty of Sociology and Social Work. Project leaders: Maria Diaconescu, Monica Barbovschi. Other team members include: Imola Antal, Cristina Baci, Diana Damean, Bogdan-Mihai Iovu and Eva Laszlo.

usually considered to be 'safe zones' like someone's home. Megan Meier's recent case, the teenager who committed suicide in 2006 after being the victim of a cyber-bullying campaign organized by one of her classmate's mother, who pretended to be a teenage boy online— brought even more attention to the issue.

Last in the section dedicated to predominant concerns about risks, I reviewed the literature related to privacy risks, namely disclosure of personal information online, but also dissimulation practices, which might underlie to more risky behaviors, such as sensation and thrill seeking.

In their investigation of MySpace profiles, Jones, Millermaier, Goya–Martinez and Schuler (2008) found out that users exercise a high degree of control over private information, with very few users posting personal information such as telephone numbers and addresses, although younger users (18-19) engaged in significantly higher disclosure than adults. However, their study did not find any evidence of widespread information disclosure that would be easily used for stalking or other forms of offline harassment. Also, according to a recent Ofcom (UK) report (2010), about one in six children state that "it's easier to keep things private or secret on the Internet than it is in real life" (16%) and one in seven children age 8-15 say they "feel more confident online than they do in real life" (14%), or that "it's easier to talk about personal things on the Internet" (14%).

For adolescents, the relation between the offline and online self has a particular nature. As members of certain online/offline peer groups, their visibility (and accountability) restricts their dissimulation possibilities, at least within their circle of friends or that of their friends' friends. In addition, teenagers employ various strategies to optimize the process of selecting their trusted contacts (through referrals, e.g. friends or colleagues who give „credentials” and who can certify that the other person is trustworthy). For example, *warranting* elements (Walther & Parks, 2002) - the connection between the self and the given self-presentation- might reduce the deception. Photographs on SNS profiles and referrals might work as warrants.

Nevertheless, identity experiments on the Internet might prove to entail several benefits. Valkenburg and Peter (2008) report that adolescents who engage in online identity experimentation also communicate more often with a wide variety of people, with no negative consequences for their self-concept unity and social competence. On the contrary, they found

evidence that communication with a variety of people online might even enrich their offline social competence. In addition, their comprehensive study of both antecedents (social anxiety and loneliness) and consequences (self-concept unity and self-competence) of online identity experimentation, underlines the importance of taking mediating effects into account.

Furthermore, disclosure practices, due to their visibility, are opportunities for learning social norms and etiquette on SNS. Social status and relationship negotiation are made public and explicit, providing teens with a context for peer-based learning, by observing their peers' appropriate or acceptable social behavior (Ito et al., 2009: 38).

Occurring with increase frequency in adolescence, risk taking is both an imperative for identity formation (Hope, 2007), growing process (Pardeck & Pardeck, 1990), and growing autonomy, as well as a way of distancing one's self from adult authority. The developmental function of risk taking (Byron, 2008 chapter 2) is in direct correlation with the much needed self-actualization. Youth's online practices and experimentations might require a certain degree of autonomy and independence which, on one hand, are necessary for developing various digital and social skills, but may trigger their parents' safety concerns, on the other. Moreover, they can specifically target the activities they perceive as restricted or forbidden (Byron 2008: 38) therefore, an increased awareness of risks doesn't necessarily curtail young people's risk taking behavior. Millwood Hargrave and Livingstone's research (2008) showed that an increased awareness of potential risks does not seem to prevent the majority from children engaging in risky situations. Therefore the strategies parents employ in order to ensure a safe online (and offline) environment for their children must balance these push and pull tendencies, namely children trying to gain more freedom and parents trying to hold on to their control over children's activities for as long as possible.

Furthermore in the second section, I reviewed the main parental concerns related to children's Internet use and tried to pinpoint some of the implications of parental styles on parental mediation strategies with a contextualization for the Romanian parents, building on the results of the 2008 Flash Eurobarometer on Internet safety with parent respondents.

With this perspective in mind, parental mediation and adult intervention in general have are problematic. Parents are still being held accountable for their children's activities, actions and safety online, even though a series of factors undermine the efficiency of their influence.

Moreover, the particular situation of Romanian parents, inadequately prepared to handle the problems arising from the complexity of the ever-changing online environment, must be taken into consideration. Academics have started to call for research that informs adequately about risks, while advocating for the preservation of a safe online environment that still allows children to explore all available opportunities.

Several approaches to parenting styles can be taken into consideration in relation to different degrees of control that parents can exert over their children, two of them being: controlling versus autonomy-supportive parenting (Grolnick & Ryan 1989), authoritarian versus authoritative, based on dichotomies like responsive/unresponsive and restrictive/permissive (Baumrind, 1978 and the typology extension brought by Maccoby & Martin, 1983, with the introduction of the disengaged parenting style, characterized by neglect and lack of involvement). Also, different understandings of the term control have led to questions whether control is beneficial or detrimental to children (Grolnick 2003: x-xi), with the latter gaining increasing support in light of recent perspectives on children's agency. Advances in the socialization theory have moved the discussion from a unidirectional perspective to a bidirectional one which builds on transactional models of relationships and where the agency of the child is recognized (Kuczynski 2003).

Based on earlier typologies related to online mediation strategies, Kalmus and Roosalu (2010: 6) developed four sum indexes of parental mediation:

- *Social mediation* (staying near the child when online; sitting alongside the child when s/he goes online; asking/talking to the child about what s/he is doing or did online;
- *Monitoring mediation* (checking the computer at a later time, to see which sites the child has visited; checking the messages in the child's e-mail account / instant messaging client; checking whether the child has a profile on a social networking site / online community);
- *Restrictive mediation* (not allowing the child to spend a lot of time online; to talk to people they don't know in real life; to use e-mail / instant messaging tools; chat rooms; to create a profile in an online community; to access certain websites; to download / play music, films, games; to shop online; to give out personal information);

- *Technical solutions* (filtering software; monitoring software).

Many parents feel un- or inadequately equipped to protect their children from online harm therefore sometimes, their lack of understanding and skills when it comes to online spaces and practices might trigger overprotective/ 'block' strategies (i.e. complete, general interdictions, which protect children from risks but also hinder their ability to take advantage of valuable opportunities). On the other hand, children are growing up with more sophisticated digital knowledge, which they often use in their online and offline lives, swapping effortlessly between the two.

In the typology developed by Kalmus and Roosalu (2010), Romanian parents were included in the restrictive and socially-oriented parental mediation categories, which points towards two different parental styles. Romania represents a distinctive case in the two researchers' analysis, being characterized by a very high proportion of parents practicing the restrictive strategy on the one hand (the highest score of restriction), and a great proportion of 'socially-oriented' parents on the other hand.

Different cultural and institutional factors may play a role here. Among post-socialist countries, Romania is the one with the lowest kindergarten attendance (Roosalu & Täht 2010, apud. Kalmus & Roosalu, 2010) and the lowest female labor force participation. Thus, parental supervision in childcare, in general, and in mediating Internet use, in particular, may be more feasible and normalized as part of parental responsibilities. This assumption completes the results of the 2008 Flash Eurobarometer on parents, where Romanian parents had lower scores than their children in terms of general Internet use², they also had the fewest monitoring and filtering software in place (EC, 2008: 48) and they were also the ones who most often indicated (30%) lack of knowledge as a reason for not using filtering or monitoring software (in comparison with the rest of the scores for the 'lack of knowledge' response) (EC, 2008: 49),

² In most countries, the number of parents using the Internet was higher than the number of children; at the European level, this difference was of 9 percentage points (84% of parents vs. 75% of children). As for each country's level, the largest difference between these two proportions was seen in Italy (82% of parents vs. 45% of children), followed by Belgium (92% vs. 71%) and Luxembourg (92% vs. 75%). As an exception, children were more likely to use the Internet than their parents in Malta (88% of children vs. 63% of parents), Romania (70% vs. 58%), Poland (89% vs. 82%) and Hungary (88% vs. 80%). Eurobarometer (2008). N=12.750, approx.500 in each country.

which explains the smallest overall proportion of ‘technically-oriented’ parents in Kalmus and Roosalu’s model.

Measures of parental mediation from the ‘Risks and Effects of Internet Use among Children and Teenagers’ project (2007-2008) further elaborated on the characteristics of parental involvement in a child’s online activities and speculates on its connection to parenting styles in the context of the child’s activities, including offline.

The third part contains the main methodological and analytical corpus. The perspective of child as passive recipient of content or partner in interactions seems to have received far more attention than the cases where the child is an active initiator of online (and offline) interactions or even engages in problematic conduct, such as cyber-bullying, where the roles that one can play are not always clear-cut and distinct.

In order to explore the prevailing social representations about children’s online interactions and the processes of their emergence in contemporary Romania, I conducted empirical research on the main categories of agents which, through their discourses, generate and induce these social representations. The variety of these agents, and the variety of the methods they use in the production and dissemination of their discourses, led to my choosing different methods of empirical analysis. In children's case, quantitative methods (survey) and qualitative methods (interviews and focus-groups) were combined. In teachers' case, qualitative interview methods and focus-groups were used. For the major Romanian stakeholders in the regulations concerning children’s activities online, I have conducted expert-interviews and participated in several workshops and consultations, which allowed me to engage in informal discussions and get better insight into their opinions and attitudes. For the international discourse (seen as an explanatory factor in my research, that shapes domestic social representations) I have done linguistic analysis on policy documents (the European Commission’s Safer Networking Principles) and on the video materials produced for children and parents, that reflect the vision and concerns of these international advisory bodies (most notably, SaferInternet.org).

The multi-method approach also offers multi-perspectival analyses. The multi-perspective comes from taking, not just the voice and positions of the actors, into consideration but also the relevant groups of actors and the interaction between them. This aspect is a salient

point, since sociological studies often present unidirectional viewpoints, neglecting other valuable or less visible perspectives.

Data collection included:

1. The “Risks and Effects of Internet Use among Children and Teenagers’ project (2007-2008) – online pilot survey, in-school offline survey with children respondents, in-depth interviews with children, focus groups with children and focus groups with teachers
2. Consultations with Romanian national stakeholders for the project EU Kids Online 2009-2011 (April 2010) – online questionnaire and meeting
3. Linguistic analysis of Safer Networking Principles of the European Commission agreed on by 25 signatories (SNS providers).
4. Visual analysis of video advertisements for Internet safety (saferinternet.ro)

First, I have investigated some of the online activities currently perceived as high-risk, in which children take on a more active role: Internet use for accessing sexually explicit materials, Internet use (including IM, e-mail, accessing dating sites) in order to contact and talk to strangers online, setting up and going to face to face encounters, children engaging in aggressive conduct towards other children online (cyber-bullying), dissimulation and disclosure of personal information online (especially on their personal profile on SNSs). The assessments put forth in this thesis are based on a social survey applied to 1806 children, age 10 to 18, conducted in 101 classrooms from secondary schools and high schools in Cluj-Napoca, in November 2007, followed by in-depth interviews with children, online and face to face, focus groups with children and teachers as well.

The picture that the actual online activities of children draw is fairly different from the one that seems to be envisioned by parents. Even though moderately few children engage in frequent active search for pornographic materials, this activity seems to be also connected with the active search for violent content and cyber-bullying behavior. When it comes to making contact and talking to strangers online, it is the dissatisfied/ indifferent children that engage in this practice more. The indifference and dissatisfaction appeared relevant for almost all problematic activities that were investigated, raising signs of concerns about the deficit in

provision of or even complete lack of alternative and adequate pastime for young people. Also, loneliness and depression are significant variables in predicting young people's dissimulation and disclosure online. Another problematic practice that usually is seen by adults only from the victim perspective is that of cyber-bullying. We collected a few measures of children's engagement in problematic behavior towards other children. Again, items like irritability correlated with the investigated behavior, which might lead to the conclusion of more detailed research dedicated to the phenomenon, which is that online bullying is not disconnected from the offline classic bullying.

Among the classic risks that populates the imaginary of adult fears, for example unwanted exposure to inappropriate materials and solicitations online, I found little evidence for concern. Not only children receive a small number of unpleasant solicitations, but there are also very few that reported being bothered by the incident. Even though exposure to sexually explicit content has moderate levels, again the number of youth being bothered by the exposure is relatively small. On the other hand, this might be also a sign of desensitizing, an attitude for which we have not included measures.

I also discussed some of the possible predictors of the teenagers' decision for online-offline encounters, i.e. online interactions transferred offline at a certain point, which seemed one of the most interesting active practices of young people.

Although causal interpretations of statistical correlations must always be received with a reasonable amount of caution and skepticism, some of the findings deserve our attention. I first looked into the surfing behavior and its connection to the online-offline dating practice. Surprisingly in both girls' and boys' cases the active search for pornographic material does not influence the decision for the offline encounters. However, the active search for advice related to sex life and surfing on dating sites showed positive relations in boys' case. Moreover, the unwanted exposure to sexual solicitations online seems to have an impact on the investigated behavior of boys. This might be explained through the general surfing patterns of boys who engage in online-offline dating. However, in line with previous research (Wolak et al., 2007), wanted and unwanted exposure to sexually explicit content is more relevant for the boys behavior than for the girls'. We can presume there is still a great deal of self-restraint from the adolescents in admitting to socially undesirable practices. At the same time, the lack of impact of

sexual solicitations on the overall model of analysis (correlated with the minimized importance of these incidents), might represent an alarming indication of teenagers' attitudes towards sexuality and sexual relations (instrumentalization of sexual relations, uncommitted sexual explorations, a phenomenon revealed by Peter & Valkenburg, 2008). Even the high frequency of On-Off dating (33% from our sample) might indicate a similar transformation.

Parental mediation was one of the main factors included in the analysis. The parents' generalized lack of knowledge and control of their children's online activities is in itself an issue of concern. It should be mentioned that numerous parents of Romanian teenagers are digitally illiterate or have little knowledge of social media, especially Instant Messaging or Social Networking Sites. It is not surprising that the impact of parental monitoring on the dating decision (online and offline, general and SNS specific) is almost null. Far from me the idea of preaching more parental control over children however, I found it really alarming that parents have little clue what their children are doing online and with whom. Several items of general offline monitoring, general online monitoring and SNS specific were included in the analysis and they revealed ambiguous relations with the investigated behavior. Consistent with previous research (de Groof, 2008; Fleming et al., 2006), SNS monitoring seemed to reduce the incidence of on-off dating, more for boys than for girls. However, regression models showed a counterintuitive impact of content and time monitoring on teenagers' on-off dating. Last, offline monitoring showed only negative associations with girls' dating, but it had no predictive value in the regression models.

Moreover, results show that offline mediation seems to have a negative impact on children's accessing pornographic materials and also on girls' decision to go on online-offline dates, while online mediation shows ambiguous results: restrictions seem to have exactly the opposite of the intended effect. The idea of the „forbidden fruit” or children's tendency (especially adolescents) to rebel against parental authority provide two potential explanations for this particular phenomenon. Regarding different forms of aggressive behavior towards other children, only offline mediation seems to have a significant reductive impact. However, in light of recent studies (Gallup, 2010), the weak impact of online mediation might underline another fundamental problem, namely the low parental involvement and engagement with children's activities, both online and offline, or lack thereof.

In addition to the quantitative data, qualitative data was collected to further explore emerging themes and allow children to elaborate on their specific activities, opportunities and risks resulted from their use of Internet and social media. In-depth interviews, both online and face to face³, as well as focus groups with children⁴ were conducted in spring 2008. In addition to these, the members of the research team from the project '*Risk and Effects of Internet Use among Children and Adolescents; the Perspective of Evolution towards the Knowledge Society*' conducted focus groups⁵ with high-school teachers from Cluj-Napoca.

The themes explored in the qualitative part involved further elaboration on the quality of online communication and social media use, possible psychological harm from unpleasant experiences (being bothered or upset) with social media (IM and SNSs) and further worries and recommendations. The focus groups with professors focused mostly on their concerns related to children's use of the Internet and social media, as well as on the Internet use for education and in education settings – schools.

Children seem to have an accurate and detailed view on threats posed by Internet use and social media use. They also seem to favor protective behavior and parental regulation strategies. Our respondents reported taking precaution measures before disclosing information on hi5 and exchanging messages on hi5 before moving to ID exchange for instant messaging. Rude and unpleasant messages can easily be blocked or deleted. However, it is importance to notice that all their intervention and regulation solutions actually referred to *other* peers, usually younger children, and not to themselves. The teachers' representations of online risks and harm related to Internet use draw a different picture from that of the children. In the focus groups conducted, they seem to have a more dystopian view on Internet and social media use and acknowledge only limited benefits of the online environment.

In addition to the interviews with children and teachers, I tried to draw a more complex picture of online risks for children using input form various stakeholders on both national and international levels that can directly regulate the available uses, as well as influence through their position of authority and visibility the place of this particular topic on the public agenda. The perceptions on risk were completed with data from the national consultations for the project EU

³ C. Baci, D. Damean, M. Diaconescu, M.B. Iovu, M. Barbovschi

⁴ M. Diaconescu, M. Barbovschi

⁵ I. Antal, M. Diaconescu, M. Barbovschi.

Kids Online II (2009-2011), which included academia, NGOs, government, media, new media and industry representatives. Consultations were conducted with the aid of an online questionnaire and a face to face meeting in Bucharest, in April 2010. The participants offered nuanced perspectives on youth's online risks, they identified problematic areas in increasing online safety and offered suggestions for possible interventions and recommendations.

Another important actor in framing the international discourse and debate about risks is the European Commission. Early 2009, the Commission compiled a list of recommendations⁶ about safe social networking practices, a document that was signed by 20 SNS providers. The first report on Safer Social Networking was released in the beginning of 2010 and it contains an evaluation regarding the implementation of the principles by the signatory parties. The principles were also included in the analysis. The Principles were designed with the idea of making social networking sites a safer place for children and they are in no means legally binding, but they are supposed to work as guiding recommendations (suggestion: guidelines) for all the providers that signed the agreement and to provide a pan-European set of guiding principles for providers operating at European level. I found the positioning of agents in terms of different types of agency allotted to different parties most relevant.

For the purpose of this analysis, I made several distinctions, between protective, restrictive and enabling/empowering measures. Enabling measures refers to those measures that can offer alternatives to users, even though said measures might not be in their best interest (like overriding default settings such as underage profiles private by default). Protective measures are one-option measures, like denying access to specific SNSs to underage users. Restrictive measures cover protective measures, but also measures that give control to other agents (like parental controls or filters).

The picture of discourses on risk was completed by content analysis of video spots from the safer Internet for children (content from SaferInternet.org) campaign. What is salient about the selected videos is the construction on binary oppositions, some of the central pairs being good/bad, safe/unsafe, cautious/reckless, naivety/viciousness (of both strangers and peers). One conclusion that can be drawn from this analytic sketch is the videos' tendency to offer

⁶ http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/activities/social_networking/docs/sn_principles.pdf

representations of teenagers more in terms of ‘empowerment’ and representations of younger children more in terms of ‘protection’/ need of protection.

The complex representations of “online risk”, “child online” and “child at risk online” were at the core of this paper, even though they are difficult to grasp. They encompass various amounts of factual and evaluative - normative beliefs, such as: children are inexperienced and innocent or children should be exposed to the online environment only within strictly controlled boundaries and protected from any kind of harm. Some of these beliefs are deeply rooted into cultural practices (“children are vulnerable”), others are more susceptible to shifts or are currently being reshaped, as is the case with the “children are techno-savvy” concept. Discrepancies in various discourses and social representations about online risks that children face only render initiatives for efficient intervention and regulation, of both online environment and the way children act in it, problematic.

Last, the academic discourse is treated as such throughout the paper: another voice that shapes up and put forward representations of children online and risks online. By writing this paper about reshaping of competing representations about children online and risks online, I intentionally engaged in academic discourse and hoped to contribute to the social reproduction of knowledge. The new sociology of childhood has already made important steps in considering an increased level of children’s agency and thus opening up the research field of youth and the Internet towards ‘conduct’ activities (with children as actors/perpetrators, rather than just victims). A view on how different discourses shape up representations about children’s activities online and online risks might further expand the field and make room for targeted intervention and regulation strategies (directed towards children, parents, teachers, industry etc.). The image sketched by this thesis, even partial and biased, is a contribution to the understanding of how competing representations might hinder attempts of making the Internet a safer place for children.

Selected bibliography:

- Abric, J.-C. (1994). L'organisation interne des représentation sociales: système central et système périphérique. In Guimelli, C. (Ed.). *Structures et transformations des représentation sociales*. Delachaux et Niestlé: Neuchâtel, pp.73-84.
- Baumrind, D. (1978). 'Parental disciplinary patterns and social competence in children'. *Youth and Society*, 9, 238-276.
- boyd, d. (2006). Friends, Friendsters, and Top 8: Writing community into being on social network sites. *First Monday*, 11(12). Retrieved 25 May 2010, from: <http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/viewArticle/1418/1336>.
- boyd, d. (2007). Why youth (heart) social network sites: The role of networked publics in teenage social life. In: D. Buckingham (editor). *MacArthur Foundation Series on Digital Learning, Identity Volume*.
- Byron, T. (2008). Safer Children in a Digital World. The Report of the Byron Review. Byron Review- Children and New Technology. Retrieved 25 March 2010, from: <http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/byronreview/pdfs/Final%20Report%20Bookmarked.pdf>.
- Corsaro, W. A. (1997). *The Sociology of Childhood*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press.
- Corsaro, W. A. (2005). Collective Action and Agency in Young Children's Peer Cultures. In Qvortrup, J. (Ed.). *Studies in modern childhood : society, agency, culture*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.
- European Commission (2008, December). 'Towards a safer use of the Internet for children in the EU - A parents' perspective'. Flash Eurobarometer, analytical report.
- Fleming, M.J., Greentree, S., Cocotti-Muller, D., Elias, K.A., & Morrison, S. (2006). 'Safety in cyberspace: Adolescents' safety and exposure online'. *Youth & Society*, 38, 135-154.
- Flood, M. and C. Hamilton (2003a) 'Youth and Pornography in Australia: Evidence on the Extent of Exposure and Likely Effects', Discussion Paper No. 52, February. Canberra: The Australia Institute.
- Gallup Romania. (2010, January). *Children's needs for communication and interaction* [Nevoile de interactivitate și comunicare ale copiilor]. Research report, Gallup Romania. Retrieved

25 April 2010, from:

http://www.timpimpreuna.ro/upload/p00020000_Rezultate%20sondaj.pdf

- Grolnick, W.S. (2003). *The psychology of parental control: how well-meant parenting backfires*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Grolnick, W.S., & Ryan, R.M. (1989). 'Parent styles associated with children's self-regulation and competence in school'. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 81, 143-154.
- Groof, S. de (2008). And my mama said... The (relative) parental influence on fear of crime among adolescent girls and boys. *Youth & Society*, 39, 267-293.
- Hope, A. (2007). Risk taking, boundary performance and intentional school Internet 'misuse'. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 28(1), pp.87-99.
- Ito, M., Horst, H., Bittanti, M., boyd, d., Herr-Stephenson, B., Lange, P.G., Pascoe, C. J., & Robinson, L. (2009). *Living and learning with new media summary of findings from the Digital Youth Project*. The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation reports on digital media and learning. The MIT Press: Cambridge, MA.
- James, A., & Prout, A. (eds). 1997. *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood: Contemporary Issues in the Sociological Study of Childhood*. London: Falmer Press.
- Jones, S., Millermaier, S., Goya-Martinez, M., & Schuler, J. (2008, September). Whose space is MySpace? A content analysis of MySpace profiles. *First Monday*, 13(9). Retrieved 25 May 2010, from:
<http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/viewArticle/2202/2024>.
- Kalmus, V. & Roosalu, T. (2010). *Institutional Filters to Children's Internet Use. An Additional Explanation of Cross-national Differences in Parental Mediation*. Draft paper presented at E-Youth Conference, Antwerp, Belgium, May 2010.
- Kraut, R., Patterson, M., Lundmark, V., Kiesler, S., Mukophadhyay, T., & Scherlis, W. (1998). Internet paradox: A social technology that reduces social involvement and psychological well-being? *American Psychologist* 53(9): 1017-1031.
- Kuczynski, L. (Ed.). (2003). *Handbook of dynamics in parent-child relations*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

- Lavalette, M. (2005). 'In Defence of Childhood': Against the Neo-Liberal Assault on Social Life. In Qvortrup, J. (Ed.). *Studies in modern childhood : society, agency, culture*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Lee, W. & Eddie, C.Y.K. (2002). Internet and Displacement Effect: Children's Media Use and Activities. *Journal of Computer-mediated Communication* 7(2): 1–18.
- Livingstone, S. (2002). *Young people and new media*. London: Sage Publications.
- Livingstone, S. & Bober, M. (2004). *UK Children Go Online: Surveying the Experiences of Young People and their Parents*. Swindon: Economic and Social Research Council.
- Livingstone, S., & Helsper, E. (2007). Gradations in digital inclusion: children, young people and the digital divide. *New Media Society* 2007; 9(4); 671-696
- Maccoby, E.E., & Martin, J.A. (1983). 'Socialization in the context of the family: Parent-child interaction', in E. M. Hetherington (Ed.), *Handbook of child psychology: Vol. 4. Socialization, personality, and social development* (4th ed.). New York: Wiley, pp. 1–101.
- Meyer, A. (2007). The moral rhetoric of childhood. *Childhood* 14(1), 85-104.
- Millwood Hargrave, A. & Livingstone, S. (2006). *Harm and offence in media content. A review of the evidence*. Bristol: Intellect Books.
- Millwood Hargrave, A., & Livingstone, S. (2008). *Harm and Offence in Media Content: An update on the 2005 literature review*. London: The Office of Communications. Annex to Ofcom's response to The Byron Review. Retrieved March 25 2010, from: <http://www.ofcom.org.uk/research/telecoms/reports/byron/annex6.pdf>.
- Moscovici, S. (1984). The Phenomenon of Social Representations. In Farr, R.M. & Moscovici, S. (Eds.). *Social Representations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 3-69.
- Neuman, S.B. (1991). *Literacy in the Television Age: the Myth of the TV Effect*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Ofcom (2010). *UK children's media literacy. Executive summary*. Ofcom Reports. Retrieved 25 March 2010, from: http://www.ofcom.org.uk/advice/media_literacy/medlitpub/medlitpubrss/ukchildrensml/.
- Pardeck, J. A., & Pardeck, J. T. (1990). Family factors related to adolescent autonomy. *Adolescence*, 25(98), 311-320.

- Peter, J., Valkenburg, P. & Schouten, A. (2006). Characteristics and Motives of Adolescents Talking with Strangers on the Internet. *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, 9 (5), pp. 526–530. Retrieved 25 May 2010, from:
<http://www.liebertonline.com/doi/abs/10.1089/cpb.2006.9.526>
- Strasburger, V.C. & Wilson, B.J. (eds) (2002). *Children, Adolescents, and the Media*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Thorne, B. (1987). Revisioning women and social change: Where are the children? *Gender and Society*, 1(1), 85–109.
- Valkenburg, P., & Peter, J. (2008). Adolescents' identity experiments on the Internet. Consequences for social competence and self-concept unity. *Communication Research*, 35, 208-231.
- Valkenburg, P., Peter, J., & Schouten, A.P. (2006). Friend networking sites and their relationship to adolescents' well-being and social self-esteem. *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, volume 9, number 5, pp. 584–590.
- Van Dijk, T.A. (1998). *Ideology. A Multidisciplinary Approach*. London: Sage Publications.
- Walther, J. B., & Parks, M. R. (2002). Cues filtered out, cues filtered in: Computer-mediated communication and relationships. In M. L. Knapp & J. A. Daly (Eds.), *Handbook of interpersonal communication* (3rd Ed.). (pp. 529-563). London: Sage Publications.
- Wolak, J., Mitchell, K., & Finkelhor, D. (2007). Unwanted and wanted exposure to online pornography in a national sample of youth Internet users. *Pediatrics*, 119, 247-257.
- Wyness, M.G. (2000). *Contesting Childhood*. London: Falmer Press.