FAMILY DYNAMICS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: MEDIATING CHILDREN'S ACCESS TO DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES

ALINA BĂRBUȚĂ*,
MARIA ROTH**,
COSMIN GHEȚĂU***

ABSTRACT

DINAMICA FAMILIALĂ ÎN PERIOADA PANDEMIEI COVID-19: MEDIEREA ACCESULUI COPIILOR LA TEHNOLOGIA DIGITALĂ

This study is based on the European project "The Impact of Technological Transformations on the Digital Generation" – DigiGen (financed by the European Union's Horizon 2020[1]) and has the scope to present the implications of the accentuated usage of digital technologies (DT), by children aged 5–6 and 8–10, during the period COVID-19 pandemic, on parents' and children's perception of family dynamics. Based on the methodology of the DigiGen consortium, we analyse interviews conducted with twelve children and two family members for each child, with the purpose of understanding their family interactions related to DT. The findings of the Romanian part of the DigiGen report[2] indicate that both children and parents actively use mediation and negotiation strategies to be in control over their DT usage. Generally, both parents and their offspring acknowledge the role parents have in monitoring children's digital activities and competence development, though parents often fail to impose rules and offer the necessary support.

* Doctoral Student, Babeș-Bolyai University, e-mail: *alina.barbuta@ubbcluj.ro*.

** Corresponding author, Emeritus Professor, Babeș-Bolyai University, e-mail: *maria.roth@ubbcluj.ro*.

*** Doctoral Student, Babeș-Bolyai University, e-mail: *cosmin.ghetau@ubbcluj.ro*.

[1] DigiGen – The Impact of Technological Transformations on the Digital Generation, project coordinated by OsloMet University, Financed by EU Horizon 2020, 870548. *https://www.oslomet.no/en/research/research-projects/digigen*. The research methodology has been elaborated within WP3 of this project by Olaf Kapella, Merike Sisask in collaboration with the team of WP3.

[2] Barbuta, A., Ghetau, C., Mitroi, C., Peter, E., Roth, M. (2022). Case study: Romania. In: Kapella, O., Sisask, M. (Eds.). Country Reports presenting the findings from the four case studies– Austria, Estonia, Norway, Romania. DigiGen Working paper No. 6: 117–147. *https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.19070090*.

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INTRODUCTION

The health and economic crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic had a profound effect on families around the globe, including Romanian families (Androniceanu & Marton, 2021). Forced by the lockdown period to broaden their communication strategies and allow children's participation to online schooling, families have been compelled by the context to accelerate their own and their children's access to digitization (Nicolau, *et al*., 2020; Berceanu, Nicolescu, & Dincă, 2020). Even disadvantaged and low-income families – where digitization was more difficult to penetrate family life due to the lack of access to technology (*e.g*., inability to purchase the necessary devices or possession of obsolete devices) – have eventually become digitized, due to support by the government for children's online education).

However, it would be wrong to believe that all the current progress of the digitization processes is only due to the current COVID-19 pandemic context. The steps that were taken before the pandemic are obvious, so it can be said that the effect of the pandemic was only to accelerate an existing process and not to develop a completely new one.

Detailing the effects of the pandemic on the use of technology, the transition of the education system to the online environment seems to have directly influenced the perception of adults regarding the use of digital technology (DT) for daily family activities. It has moved from a mere alternative use of technologies in the family to a form of compulsory use, to ensure the children's participation in online classes. The use of DT in the family is related to two important aspects: (1) the family members are aware of the advantages and benefits of accessing technology and (2) the monitoring of children's access to DT and the ways rules are built in and respected in the family life. For children in the age range discussed in this article, parents are simultaneously mediators, facilitators, and models (Kapella, *et al*. 2022), as well as gatekeepers and scaffolders (Dias *et al*., 2016) in what concerns the use of digital technology.

This analysis looks at parental roles and mediation modalities, as well as the children's views on the opportunities of the DT, in relation to education and family life, during the lockdown period of the pandemics (in Romania between March and May 2020, and December 2020–March 2021).

GLOBAL AND NATIONAL CONTEXT

The specific roles, responsibilities and day-by-day functioning of families in the professional, educational, and social spheres have changed during the COVID-19 period, in the context of concentrating all these functions into the family home. The activities usually taking place in specific social institutions suddenly fell back onto the family, creating important changes in their routines and social lives (Wang *et al*. 2021). These changes affected the entire family ecosystem, in particular the family relationships, and required new technology to mediate these challenges. With the inclusion and expansion of the diversity of digital devices used in the family, there are changes in what we can call "doing family" – understood as the way the daily activities of family members maintain the family climate via their social interactions (Kapella, *et al*., 2022). Due to the interconnection of all family subsystems and the likelihood of transferring family practices, the pressure of the pandemic on some family subsystems has influenced the functioning of daily family life.

According to the analysis of Weeland *et al*. (2021), during the COVID-19 crisis, similar to other crisis periods, caregivers might manifest – at least temporarily – a more authoritarian parenting style and less support for autonomy. Parents might have become more knowledgeable of their children's behaviours and everyday activities and mobilised their parenting skills to counteract the effects of the pandemics; on the other hand, families with preconditions as low socio-economic status and mental health issues have been disproportionately affected, due to limited material and relational resources (Bülow *et al*., 2021).

To better understand how family dynamics have changed in the context of the pandemic in Romania, it is relevant to review the pre-pandemic situation of Romanian families and their interaction with Information and Communication Technology (ICT). The particularity of the Romanian digital context is the duality of lower competencies compared to the Western European countries but also an accelerated pace of digitalization (INS, 2020; Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2020; Velicu *et al*., 2019), starting prior to the pandemics, but accentuated during the lockdown context, home office, and online schooling due to COVID-19. Internet platforms and social media became paramount sources of news, with more than two-thirds of the population using Facebook, YouTube, and other platforms to get informed or entertained (Holdis, 2019; Radu, 2018). Cartoon Network Romania's YouTube channel became very popular among kids, having already reached a record number of subscribers in 2019, compared to the previous years (Holdis, 2019, p. 83). Romania seems to become one of the European countries with higher percentages of users paying for the digital content, data showing a variation between 15 % in Slovenia and 17 % in Norway, to 29 % in Romania and Germany, as reported by Vuorikari *et al*. (2020, p. 9).

One of the most recent studies conducted by the Romanian Institute for Evaluation and Strategy (IRES) takes a look into the first year of the pandemic glancing particularly over the online education aspects of the situation. Carried out in April 2020, during the state of emergency, it provides us with data on the parents' reaction within the COVID-19 context. According to IRES data, 93 % of the parents reported they have had internet access, 2 % that they did not have access, and 5 % did not answer the question. Asked if their children have had access to online courses, 9 % of the parents reported their children do not have access to DT (Romanian Institute for Evaluation and Strategy, 2020). The 2 % discrepancy may be due to either a weak connection or problematic devices (slow internet connection or other technical issues).

The device most of our respondents own and use is the smartphone, 77 % of kids owned it as a non-shared device, according to their parents. On the other hand, 7 % of the adult respondents said that only some of their children have had access to online classes, 13 % said that none of their children has access and 7 % did not answer. The second most popular device is the laptop, followed by the computer with 54 %, respectively 50 % of households owning such a device per family member, while 29 % of the respondents having reported that they do not have a laptop, respectively, 37 % not owning a personal computer (Romanian Institute for Evaluation and Strategy, 2020). These data confirm previous reports showing that smartphones are an accessible option (Institutul Național de Statistică, 2019; Radu, 2019) and seem to have been preferred by parents as a solution to the COVID-19 crisis (Santi, Gorghiu, & Pribeanu, 2020). The preference for smartphones is understandable, as it allows cheaper access, *via* subscription or pay-as-you-go internet, than cable service or an in-house Wi-Fi router.

The researchers found that children often do not have exclusive access to an internet-connected device of their own, sharing them with siblings or caregivers. Compared to the other percentages presented earlier, for 2020, the data of IRES indicated an alarming 32 % of school aged children enrolled in compulsory education not having an individual device with internet access (desktop, laptop, smartphone or a tablet), which resulted in forcedly staying apart, or in having a low presence/attendance in the online classes. This percentage was even higher for the families with several siblings, those living in poor Roma communities and in rural areas (IRES, 2020). The real lack of access to online schooling has been difficult to be revealed by data, especially for the primary school level, as those children from rural areas and poor communities, who did not have access to online schooling, would not be well represented in the sampling of quantitative studies conducted during the pandemics. For example, in a quantitative study on school climate during the online schooling period (David-Kacso, *et al*., 2021), targeting schools with high social educational risk – as defined by Marin *et al*. (2020), the percentage of 85 % children from 3rd and 4th grade, who responded to be in possession of a personal device (computer, tablet or phone) that can be used for the remote

schooling, only refers to those responding to the online survey, which represented 58 % of the children enrolled in the classes involved in the study, leaving us to believe that the rest of 42 % have a much higher percentage of children not accessing DT. On the other hand, only 32.8 % of the responding school children indicated that a parent or someone else in the household regularly helps him or her with online schooling tasks, 40 % get occasional support, and 27.5 % indicate that they do not have any support (David-Kacso *et al*., 2021). These data show the difficulties children face in managing online school tasks during the compulsory online schooling and raise questions about the dependence of children's school success on their parents' capacities to manage such challenges.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Parental mediation is seen as the use of interpersonal communication by parents with the purpose of mitigating the negative effects they believe different behaviours have on their children (Clark, 2011). In recent times, the concept mainly addresses the use of interpersonal communication by parents in various aspects related to the digital usage by children, as can be seen in the literature reviews (Nielsen *et al*., 2019; Chen & Shi, 2019). Although much emphasis is put on this specific application of parental mediation, a recent literature review found that its influence is far less than originally thought on mitigating the negative effects of excessive technology usage. It seems that the parent's understanding of the digital world (Naab, 2018) and the way parental mediation is applied (Jiow, Lim & Lin, 2017; Chang *et al*., 2019; Chen & Shi, 2019), could greatly contribute to the success in mitigating the negative effects of children and adolescent's digital usage, reduce screen time and increase the positive effects of technology usage. Including children in the discussion on the rules for using DT within the family has proven to be an approach that favours compliance with the rules. The perspective of including children in the collaborative negotiation of the rules is based on looking at them as active and competent actors, both for the advantage of their own development and for modelling their family and peer interactions (Honig, 2017).

With these observations as a starting point, the paper will look at how qualitative research can contribute to enhancing our knowledge on the family context of using DT in the pandemic period by children of ages 5 to 6 and 8 to 10. The analysis will present interview data grouped around the following research questions: how pervasive DT became for children this age in the investigated families? How do parents and children see the usefulness of DT to family life and education? Do parents and children perceive conflicts related to DT? And finally, what means do parents have to monitor children's use of DT?

METHODOLOGY

The research methodology followed the precise guidelines developed through the DigiGen project consortium, which collected qualitative data from children aged 5 to 6 and 8 to 10 and their adult family members or caregivers, to understand the place and functions of digital technologies in the economy of the family lives and the ways parents and children in this age range negotiate their access to devices. To interview children, a set of 20 show-cards and methodological, as well as ethical guidelines were developed by researchers collaborating in this study[3].

RESEARCH METHOD AND INSTRUMENTS

The study used *Photo-elicitation*, a method of interview used in visual sociology but also in other fields of social research and characterized by using visual images to elicit comments on specific topics (Harper, 2002; Epstein, Stevens, McKeever, & Baruchel, 2006). The benefits of using images in increasing involvement by elicitation have been proven useful in the past (Harper, 2002; Clark-Ibáñez, 2004; Epstein, Stevens, McKeever, & Baruchel, 2006), and served us well in the present research, in terms of its capacity to raise and maintain children's interest and attention along an extensive interview (Ghețău & Roth, 2021).

Following the research questions, for this paper, the objectives are: **1.** To understand how frequently children in the age range of research use DT in family context; **2.** To reveal the perspective of both adults and children on the benefits and dangers of DT in the period of COVID-19, for family life and education; **3.** To learn what are the most common issues that cause conflicts in family life related to the use of digital technology; **4.** To understand how parents managed to monitor children's DT use in the period of COVID-19 pandemic.

DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURE AND SAMPLING CHARACTERISTIC

The Show Cards intend to mirror real-life aspects from children's digital worlds, grouped in two categories: **1.** drawings representing commonly used devices and/or digital applications, meant to explore children's knowledge and ownership of such devices; **2.** drawings representing family situations involving the use of DT by children and / or adults. The second series of cards has been designed in such a way that it allowed children to formulate their answers according to their understanding of the situation, as freely as possible and at the same time to keep them involved with the topic of the research (Ghețău & Roth, 2021; Barbuta *et al*., 2022).

[3] For more information on the research methodology consult Kapella, Schmidt, & Vogl, S. (2022).

Individual interviews were conducted with 12 children (six of them aged 5 to 6 years of age, and the other six, aged 8 to 10) and 22 of their adult family members. The 11 families whose accounts we analysed in this article were recruited with the snowball procedure, starting with four families known to the interviewers, living in Cluj County, North West region of Romania, having different social statuses*:* one living in the impoverished Pata Rat Roma community, another one in a medium income family of Romanian ethnicity, one single parent low-income family, and one, a family with an IT professional parent. In each family, interviews were performed with children in the targeted age range (marked with 1 in our records), and with two adults in the family, mostly parents or another close relative (marked with 2 and 3 in our records). Families were recruited to cover a wide range of social contexts: nuclear families with both parents living in the household, single parenting households, multi-generational households, and divorced parents; diverse educational profiles of parents, from professional IT parents to those with any more than elementary education; high and also very low-income families; ethnically diverse families: Romanian, Hungarian, multi-ethnic and Roma families (*see Table 1*). There were no children with disabilities in our sample. All adults gave their written consent for taking part in the research, to be recorded and for allowing children to be interviewed. All children consented to the interviewing, acknowledged that they are not obliged to respond to the questions and can stop responding at any point, and agreed to be recorded.

Table 1

Socio-demographic data of the family members

Child			**Interview partner**					**Educational background of parents**	**Area**			**Family form/ living arrangement**
Age	♀	♂	mother	Father	Sibling (age)	Grand parent	Aunt/uncle		Urban	Suburban	Rural	
5		✔	✔			✔		H	✔			Multigenera-tional household – grandparents in the same house
5	✔		✔					H	✔			Divorced parent, child lives with mother

Table 1 (continued)

6	✔		✔					H			✔	Two parents with children
6		✔	✔	✔				H	✔			Two parents with children
6	✔		✔	✔				H	✔			Two parents with children
6	✔		✔		✔ (9)			M			✔	Two parents with children
9	✔		✔					L		✔		Divorced parents, the living conditions are poor, below a normal and a decent living.
9		✔	✔					L		✔		Divorced parents, the child lives with his stepmother. The living conditions are poor, below a normal and a decent living.
10	✔		✔					L	✔			Two parents with children
8		✔	✔	✔				H	✔			Two parents with children
9	✔		✔		✔ (6)			M		✔		Two parents with children
8		✔	✔					H	✔			Two parents with children

Source: generated by the authors.

**Note.* Parents' educational level: H = University / Tertiary education; M = secondary education; L = below secondary education.

DATA ANALYSIS

A preliminary analysis of the qualitative interviews of families, illustrated by quotations, has been presented in the research report. Interviews were audio recorded and transcripts were submitted for a thematic analysis performed in

NVivo 10. A more detailed presentation of the qualitative data is presented in the Digi Gen Romanian Country Report (Barbuta *et al*., 2022). Some of the aspects of the family dynamics and the examples presented in this analysis are also discussed in the synthetic report of the DigiGen project by Kapella *et al*. (2022) from the perspective of four different European countries (Austria, Norway, Estonia and Romania).

Results:

1. The presence of ICT in the family life, during the lockdown

The researchers in this qualitative study invited parents and children to reflect on their use of DT and their interactions in this topic. In our sample, we had parents with different levels of education and competences, technology-wide, who offered us explanations on certain technologies, operations, applications, and devices, according to their knowledge and experience with the devices and apps we were talking about. Depending on their understanding of the opportunities offered by DT, parents also varied in their attitude on controlling or encouraging access for their children.

The aspect we analyzed first was the expanse of time kids are allowed to use DT in their daily activities, respectively how digitally competent do parents perceive their kids to be.

Families with low usage of technology. Family members have a few devices and applications, the most used ones being the smartphones – though the phone might not always have access to the internet – and the television sets. Their main purpose in using these devices is to keep in touch with each other and for entertainment, and collaterally accepting that sometimes these are useful devices for accessing information. (RO_F1; RO_F2; RO_F3; RO_F5).

In our sample, this category overlapped with the most disadvantaged Roma families, who have had few experiences with gadgets other than mobile phones, tablets and TV sets. Devices owned by families were used in common between children and parents, brothers / sisters in the form of intergenerational sharing of the insufficient devices that thus turn into vehicles of family solidarity. For example, in one of the families, a tablet is used alternatively by two sisters for schooling; in another family, one telephone was used by a boy, aged 9, for school and for entertaining his little brother aged 3, and also by his stepmother, to communicate with other family members and friends. In such families, the negotiation of usage time for educational purposes and of an adequate space for home-schooling is not easy, as well as caring for the device and charging it in a community deprived of electricity. The children and parents we have interviewed also talked about the dilemmas they have – either keeping the device or trading it for other necessities that remain uncovered in situations such of increased hardship, for example, during the COVID-19 quarantine period. Some parents – usually from

well off families – refuse to allow their children the access to DT under a certain age, usually 10, but in our small sample we did not encounter such families.

Families where children use DT with a moderate frequency. The variety of digital devices in this category is broader, children and their parents using computers or laptops in addition to the phones, tablets and TV sets. On average, in the homes of these families there are between two and five digital devices, but they still need to share some of them, especially the laptops. (RO_F4; RO_F6; RO_F9; RO_F10).

For example, a mother living with her husband and with two children in a two-room apartment, mentioned the challenges of sharing the two laptops of the family between the two adults and two children enrolled in the primary school (RO_F10).

Families where children use DT often (with high frequency). These families own various devices, and are competent in using various applications. On average, these families own three to eight digital devices (RO_F7; RO_F8, RO_F11). According to one father, their problem comes from *"having too many devices"* (RO_F11_3), but his children still fight for the preferred device, because both siblings prefer the smartphone, with the most functions.

In family RO_F7, the mother works on the laptop for her job, uses YouTube for listening to music, has a social network account on Facebook and uses WhatsApp: the family has a smart TV for entertainment, for watching music channels and for accessing Netflix. The father uses YouTube for music, WhatsApp and Facebook for communication, the smart TV to watch movies, TV series and documentaries and the app Waze, for driving. Parents use their devices also for online shopping. The older sister of the child we interviewed said she was using almost all the apps mentioned above. The devices owned, but that are not used by this family are the robots and the PlayStation.

Parents with a high educational level often encourage their children to develop skills and invest in gadgets and in learning IT skills. They are often less marked by concerns related to going online, the parents with advanced knowledge of the DT mentioned a conscious approach not to limit their child's use of technology, but to encourage the development of digital skills.

*"We do not want to make this (*use of digital technology*) a problem, because we have seen many parents punish their children by depriving them of devices and children becoming problematic." (RO_F8_2)*

2. Children's and parents' views on benefits and risks of DT in times of COVID-19

To understand the relevance of the digital for young people we asked the question "*How would the world be/look like without digital devices*?" Except for one girl, who said the world would be "less complicated, and clearer", with more

face-to-face communication and playing together, the majority responded with negative feelings: “boring”, “monotonous”, “sad”, “without anything to do”. The most common reaction of the children revolved around disliking such a world that lacked electronic devices.

When the online education period was (intermittently) over, Romanian educational institutions introduced restrictions for children to phones and tablets on school premises, and did not encourage pupils to seek information online any more. Children explained that they had to leave “tech-enabled lives” behind them as soon as school resumed offline, but only apparently, as their discussions during breaks, their social status among peers and even their school success continued to be strongly influenced by their access to DT.

During the pandemics, parents were concerned with the effects of DT on their children and family life. Thus, in the interviews, they revealed its advantages they see for family communication, and from an educational point of view, as well as the dangers they are foreseeing.

Some of them emphasized on the negative influences of DT for family relationships, the main risk coming from the time both children and adults spent with their digital devices, that could be better invested in the growth and development of family relationships:

“I think we spend more time on devices than with family members. We need a good set of rules so that we can spend more time physically interacting with each other.” (RO_F7_2)

Other parents see the benefits of DT also in the facilitation of communication and common activities of family members via social media, such as using some applications and digital contents together. For example, selecting enjoyable series / movies together within the family, regularly, which *“would become quality time with the family, the other types of online activities being just a waste of time”* (RO_F7_3).

One of the responding fathers acknowledged the generational gaps in using DT, and mentioned his way of reducing it, by joining his son in his gaming activities or by using different apps that could help him bridge the intergenerational gap. He was saying: *“I feel like we speak the same language”* (RO_F8_3).

Also from an intergenerational perspective, but from the point of view of a Roma child living in an impoverished family (RO_F2_2), having digital devices and competencies represent not only a possibility to communicate with his father working abroad, but also an asset he could trade for food, and also a means to gain a higher position in the family and neighbourhood, as a digitally competent person.

Caregivers in all three mentioned groups were able to understand the opportunities DT offers for educational success and described them as indispensable tools for acquiring new knowledge and social skills:

RO_F4_2: *"He learns a lot, even from cartoons… It is like an encyclopaedia. A lot is learned from cartoons, it is a good opportunity to develop one's vocabulary, to access accurate information about the world."*

One parent told us that even non-educational digital content might have some educational value.

RO_F4_2: *"They develop different skills from school context, such as independence, problem-solving, collaboration skills or hand–eye coordination."*

One parent (with university studies) also mentioned that the benefits can be interpreted also in a political and philosophical dimension, as by using DT, children can enjoy the freedom of accessing information and the right to self-expression, apart from the official transmission of information via the mainstream educational channel:

RO_F7_2: *"An example of an advantage may be the fact that it allows all of us, including children, to have free access to information, we can find whatever we want, apart from what school offers."*

Parents also saw the negative effects of too much DT during the pandemics and worried about them and about the inappropriate contents children could access:

RO_F7_2: *"Inappropriate images can cause all kinds of emotions such as fear, anxiety."*

RO_F4_2: *"…There is also the risk that the child will end up with films that are not suitable for him. For the kids, the visual impact is very high."*

The transfer from face-to-face schooling, to online schooling was in itself a great source of anxiety for several parents. Their approach depended on their evaluation of the quality of this transfer, many parents considering it inconsistent and of "poor quality".

RO_F2_2: *"I don't think this online school is Ok…"*

Interviewer: *"What makes you believe that?"*

RO_F2_2: *"They do classes only 2, 3 hours a day, don't do all the classes. Sometimes the teacher doesn't even log in to the meeting. When he went to school physically, it was better."*

Some parents reported that they felt compelled by the inconsistencies of the online schooling to find alternative educational activities to make up for the time that in the past was spent by the children in the afterschool programs which remained "unoccupied" during the restriction period.

CONFLICTS AND NEGOTIATIONS IN FAMILIES DEALING WITH DT

Technology presents more and more challenges to parents who try to control their children's digital activities and this control acts against their tendencies of becoming autonomous technology users. Family conflicts and negotiations

between parents and their children were reported on two dimensions: a vertical one, between children and parents / adult caregivers, and horizontally, between siblings.

When asked about conflicts, the main aspects considered by children in relation to the use of DT in the family are:

– Sharing devices with the others in the household, often with their siblings.

In our sample, several children have had only one digital device that had to be shared with the other siblings, and conflicts arise when parents offer more support or prioritize one sibling, usually the smaller one. (RO_F1; RO_F2; RO_F3; RO_F11)

Interviewer: *"How do you get along with your sisters when using the smart TV, do you argue over it?"*

RO_F3_1: *"We sometimes argue, because everyone wants to watch different things, but the smaller ones win because if they don't get to watch what they want, they start crying."*

Some of the siblings might form an alliance like in RO_F11 family, where the two sisters often agree to watch together a popular blog, but their younger brother prefers cartoons, and when he cannot have it, "he starts crying, screaming, and hitting", which results in the mother's interference in his favour, and everybody expecting that the older girls would understand and comply.

– Spending too much time using digital devices.

Too much screen time is rated by adults as affecting children's health. During the lockdown, parents' worries were redoubled, as on-screen schooling time added to the free time spent using gadgets. Another source of conflicts between parents and their kids was the children's access to age-inappropriate contents. During the interviews, mentions were often made of family conflicts, due to children not responding to parental rules and ignoring their concerns and worries. When asked about such conflicts, the RO-F1-1 boy admits to them, some of these being related to the lack of resources and poverty, as for charging the phone: "A *bit, when I watch TikTok too much and deplete the batteries."* (RO_F1_1) [F1 family had to recharge the phone batteries in the community-centre, as they were not connected to the grid, where they live].

RO_F8_1: *"Mother argues with me because I'm watching things for older people. And sometimes when I sit too close to the TV while playing on the PlayStation. If I stay too close, I will have to wear glasses, she says, and I don't like it."*

– Parents not allowing children's involvement in common gaming activities online.

An important source of conflicts is around gaming, as parents try to limit it even if it involves creativity, socializing and some learning.

RO_F7_2: *"Sometimes he looks at something useful from which he has something to learn, other times he looks at the Minecraft tutorial from which he learns nothing."*

Mostly, parents complain about the time children spend using devices:

Interviewer: *"Do you ever have quarrels or disagreements about using the internet or devices?"*

RO_F4_2: *"Yes, when it seems to me that he is watching too much TV... it ends with fights. Even after he already is allowed to watch TV for an hour or a maximum of 2 hours, I find it difficult to detach him from the remote control. He doesn't accept to end the game or watch cartoons; he rebels, which seems natural to me. I would rebel, too… because the cartoons are nice."*

3. PARENTAL MONITORING STYLES IN THE PERIOD OF COVID-19

Responding to the challenges to mitigate family conflicts, parents respond the best they can to the disruptions that occur in the periods of crises (Walsh, 2015). The effects of the pandemic can be felt in all family subsystems (parent-child relationships, marital conflict, and sibling relationships). Pandemic-related stressors negatively influenced the marital relationships and the parenting behaviour, causing spill-over effects in the family system and its subsystems. The resilience mechanisms are also activated in situations of social pressure, such as pandemics (Prime *et al*. 2020), by building up and maintaining those family relationships that reduce the distressing situation and by providing a consistent framework for understanding and managing the events related to the crisis caused by COVID-19. In the interviews, we saw parents' effort to maintain the rules and maintain control over their children's use of DT, while granting them more or less autonomy in using digital devices.

The qualitative analysis on managing family conflicts caused by children's digital activities revealed the existence of *three types of families*: families that establish and follow rules; families that create rules but do not enforce them; and families that do not impose restrictions on the use of technology. This is likely to be related to the pre-pandemic parenting styles of the interviewed parents, but without a longitudinal perspective we did not ask such a research question and did not follow up this issue, which might be one of the limitations of this study and a topic for future research.

– ***Families with rules, managing to live by them*** (especially related to the time allocated to the use of DT) (RO_F3, RO_F6, RO_F9).

For this type of families, rules are established by parents, according to their views on the usefulness of DT, clearly specifying the actions the adults would take when the rules are not followed through. One important issue regulated by parents is the time allowed for gaming or other ways of accessing DT.

RO_F6_2*: "She (daughter) is not allowed more than one hour on the tablet and this is only allowed after doing the homework. Sometimes, after sitting on the tablet for one hour, she goes and turns on the TV. If I notice her doing so, I go and turn it off."*

Rules are often acknowledged and accepted by children, especially girls. One of them told us that *"…rules are imposed for our own good, so it is a normal thing that children should be limited from devices when they behave badly."* (RO_F6_1)

Besides the negative consequences for disobeying the rules, these families also reward compliance

RO_F9_1: *"I am allowed for two hours a day, or if I abstain from Monday to Thursday then I get Friday, Saturday and Sunday unlimited."*

– ***Families having rules, without enforcing them*** (RO_F1, RO_F4, RO_F5, RO_F7, RO_F10)

This group was identified following the interviews with the children, who explained to the researchers that there are family rules for using DT, but they are not followed through in the family.

RO_F7_1: *"When they allow me to use the smartphone, they say '10 minutes. But I use the smartphone for much more than 10 minutes..."*

To explain why children do not obey the rules, parents often blame the circumstances that are caused by exceptional situations linked to the COVID-19, which do not allow them to impose the rules.

RO_F7_3: *"Yes, we established some rules, we tried to follow them, but we didn't manage to stick to them. We make many exceptions that eventually lead to a total removal of the rules."*

In such families, children know there are rules, but do not hesitate to break them.

RO_F5_1: *"I secretly disobey them (the rules) sometimes."*

Some children tend to underestimate the harmful effects of technology resulting in an evasion of the rules imposed by adults. The differences between the way parents and children perceive the parental mediation strategies were also observed by Lwin *et al*. (2021). While parents might feel that they have explained the rules for using DT and their reasons, their children often felt the instructions they received were one-way directives.

– ***Families without restrictions on the use of technology*** *(RO_F2, RO_F8, RO_F11)*

As noted by Helsper and al. (2013) in the *EU Kids Online* research, we could also notice that there are families with a more passive approach toward the digital world, these families either underestimating the risks or ignoring them altogether. In our sample this passivity is true for some cases, but is not necessarily linked to a lack of digital knowledge or education. Some families with considerable digital skills also showed a passive approach. This can have significant harmful effects when the risk assessment approach to DT is missing. The apparently passive approach to DT sometimes hides a monitoring style which is more confident in the

child's digital competence and self-regulation skills, without underestimating the harm the DT could cause. These families correctly assess the risks and discuss them with their children, reducing the possible harmful effects.

In those families without any such rules, or with less effective ones, children opt for having rules that they can relate to; they would prefer that rules would be there for the adults, too. Such is the case of the RO_F11 family, where the daughter said that some rules would be very useful. If she could establish the rules, she would set them for all family members:

RO_F11_1: *"I would forbid the use of the phone in the morning and in the evening and would allow the use of the devices only a maximum of two hours/day. The rest of it must be family time. Parents should play with the children, talk to them and cook together."*

In another case, in the absence of rules, the child told us that he sets his own rules, as in his family there are no clear limits concerning DT. Even in the absence of the family rules, caregivers expect children to avoid contents not appropriate for their age, without providing them with clear guidance. Adults' behaviour in such situations is viewed as inconsistent and unforeseeable by children:

RO_F11_1: *"Mom doesn't let me watch YouTube videos… I mean… she allows me, but sometimes when she is upset, she does not allow me, and then she yells at me if she sees me, but I like to watch funny videos. Sometimes grandma comes and asks me why am I looking at this stupid video, and right then she's shutting down the computer. I tell her it's interesting for me, but she won't let me and if I talk a lot, she punishes me, taking away my phone for the whole day."*

In one of the families, with a more liberal and participatory approach, the father explains the family's preference not to impose rules but to give the child the opportunity to make his own decisions about using technology.

RO_F8_3: "When rules are established, it is done together with the children. Their opinions matter and we take them into account. We noticed that if you value their opinion, it is very easy for them to respect certain rules. This way there are no conflicts."

In one family, the parents participated in parenting classes which helped them learn the digital competences they needed and develop rules to regulate their children's digital behaviour.

Interviewer: *"So, you made up the rules, following some parenting programs… How strict are these rules? Are there any exceptions?"*

RO_F5_2: *"Sort of… since M. was a baby. Yes, there are some exceptions…"*

In the majority of families, forbidding the use of the preferred gadgets as punishment causes conflicts between children and controlling parents.

RO_F5_2: *"Use of gadgets depending on the activities she has done… if she accomplished them or not... as a reward or as a punishment. If something bad has happened, it's over, I forbid it… If I want to reward her, I let her watch another episode on TV… of those shorter shows."*

In this sense, our analysis shows that parents have adjusted their parenting style in an attempt to adapt to the "new normal". In some cases, the rules have been adapted according to the needs of children of different ages. For example, in the case of RO_F3, in the first part of the day the devices were used by children who had classes and after lunch by the smaller children. The mother insists on rules, to build a consistent and organized family climate, she doesn't "give in" when children disobey; there are no exceptions to the rules. In another family, children also take turns in using the phone, all of them being granted the same time of using it. Regarding how strict these rules are, the mother claims:

RO_F1_2*: "I still allow some exceptions occasionally, especially now when all children are home, because I feel sorry for them in this crisis period."*

Some of the parents from our sample mentioned a period of "adjustment" to the new situation and a change of their parenting rules. These are related to the perceived reasons for using *DT.* As parents are always in the proximity of their children during the pandemic times, they have been able to notice in more detail the purpose for which certain devices and apps are used by their children and thus developed rules to monitor children's access according to the distinction between the use of DT for schooling and for entertainment. For example, the mother from family 5 changed some of her rules, to allow the child to use technology for entertainment.

RO_F5_2: *"Now, during the pandemic, I used technology as a reward. Using technology for school is one thing and using it to watch what you like is something else. She (the child) needs time for playing."*

Looking at the gender distribution of parents involved in the decisional process of establishing rules for using DT, in most of the families we interviewed the rules have been established by the mothers, and only seldom by the fathers. Parents mentioned different rules for the older children than for the smaller ones. When asked who set up the rules, most of the children named the mother. Fathers are rarely involved in establishing and negotiating rules. Participation of children in establishing the rules has not been reported in our interviews.

At the same time, we registered one more democratic opinion, the RO_F4 parents, who consider that the rules should not be very strict, while the children need autonomy and should have the right to choose what they want to see on the TV set. In this family, there are no strict rules imposed by the mother, only the father imposes a time limit. Before the pandemic, this child wasn't allowed to play on the phone, but this rule was "cancelled" during the pandemic period.

In spite of the assumption that the lack of rules is linked with a low educational level of parents, this is not necessarily true for all cases. Thus, a single Roma mother living in a poor community proudly reported that she managed to impose rules for their children's use of the mobile device:

RO_F1_2*: "The children were arguing with each other. I made the rule – to enter (*use it, our note*) one by one… There are children here (in the community)*

who stay for hours on the phone, until late at night. If I left them, mine would do the same. And having the socket, she would stay with it, she wouldn't even leave it to be charged… (here the mother refers to having access to electricity, unlike other families in the community, who don't, researcher's note).*"*

In some cases, especially in disadvantaged families, the rules are set by older children. In the case of RO_F2*,* the child establishes the rules for all family members. The child says that there are no arguments between his family members about ICT use. The other two children are too small to bother him and the mother supports his decision.

Apart from the situation when parents manage and mediate children's use of DT, an important aspect revealed by the current research is the reverse mediation, from children to adults. There are families (RO_F1; RO_F2; R_F6; RO_F11) where the rules established in the family are governed by the older child, who is in charge of providing technical support for the younger children, but also for the parents. Thus, lacking the knowledge that would enable them to use the technology, parents turn to children to be guided by them on their path to the digital world. As a result, we can expect that in families where adults appeal to children's digital knowledge, their views on technology will be influenced by what children explain to them, and this includes the rules established in the family regarding the use of technology. This phenomenon of "reverse mediation" has been described earlier as a consequence of the digital gap between generations and is more frequent in families where parents are materially deprived an /or have a lower educational level and refers to situations where children's competencies are more advanced than those of adults, and therefore parents depend on what children can digitally do with different applications (Nikken & Opree, 2018; Benedetto & Ingrassia, 2020).

CONCLUSIONS

The COVID-19 pandemic, which hit the whole world in 2020-2021, when data were collected for this research, besides shaking the health system and the economic welfare, also struck the sense of stability of the families, and forced them to change their views on the role of digital technologies in the family dynamics. The ability of families to incorporate the new technologies and strategize to use them for the benefit of its members is an important aspect for family resilience (Black & Lobo, 2008). Being responsible for the family functioning, parents were compelled to generate novel solutions in providing for their children's education and emotional security, as well as in negotiating new family rules and routines around DT during lockdown. In analysing the interviews with children and their parents, we have noticed a variety of modalities of parental practices, negotiations, and adaptation processes, reflecting the diverse needs of the children, and their

parents. The respondents (parents and children aged 5–6 and 8–10) have demonstrated efforts to adapt to the sudden increase in online demands and opportunities. Families with limited resources have adapted to the situation by sharing devices between family members, and allowing more digital time for their preschool and primary school children. In our sample, we had parents with low education levels who acquired digital competencies alongside their children; parents with no digital competencies and no means to access devices, who recognized their children's need to master the only device they had and gave them the freedom to manage themselves during the online schooling; parents with high competencies in the digital area, who co-created digital play with their offspring; parents who worried more, and those who worried less about the increased screen-time of their children. Children, themselves, were just so diverse in their strategies of respecting and internalizing the rules, bypassing them, negotiating and eventually changing them. We also learned that some children from disadvantaged families took the lead in their families, by mastering the digital devices easier than the adult(s) of the family. This phenomenon is indicative of a reverse learning process, which we have noticed in children barely 9–10 years old, who are able to instruct their parents how to manage the digital devices, and to find the content that their parents were looking for. The interviews revealed the agency of children from disadvantaged backgrounds who, becoming knowledgeable of the digital world, exceeding the competences of their parents in this area, become the key family members to manage the technology and mediate digital issues for the benefit of the family.

COVID-19 massively impacted children and determined changes in parenting styles and strategies, but it also potentiated digital inequalities (Beaunoyer, 2020). In our sample, we could see that in the relatively privileged families, children have had access to alternative educational platforms, and parents were able to organize common activities with children with or without the help of technologies. But parents in underprivileged families created fewer alternatives for children, who were left to manage by themselves the challenges of their new tasks.

Although we recognize the limits of our qualitative research, knowing that we cannot generalize the results, one surprising finding was that we could not identify very polarized attitudes that would deify or demonize technology – as described by Shuck (2004, p. 112). Though, we identified some anxieties and uncertainties among parents, who felt rightfully disconcerted about what would be the best use for their children's DT in a world where, because of COVID, online communication and education became paramount.

Parent's willingness to establish and enforce rules for their children's use of digital devices shows their wish to master the risks of the digital world. The same lack of polarization was true for children, whose accounts showed awareness of the risks and benefits of accessing DT. The major difference between adults and their offspring seems to be that parents have experienced their own childhood partly free

of gadgets, and imagine it in a similar way for their children, while the young ones cannot imagine a world without DT. Though children demonstrated, during the interviews, that they appreciate talking face-to-face, playing with cards, and would like to play traditional games, outdoors or indoors, they also wish to be included in their peers' online games and have their parents join in or become partners within their online educational activities.

The methodology adopted did not allow us either to evaluate their digital competencies, nor to assess their actual digital behaviour. Nevertheless, we could identify the desire to master DT in children of both genders. We saw some differences in the contents accessed by boys and girls, though there were no explicit gender differences in frequency of using DT or in negotiating access with parents. Although literature (UNICEF, 2020; The Web Foundation, 2020) warns of gender differences in using technology, in our small sample we could not measure competencies, but we have seen no indications of such differences in DT agency.

Data of the family interviews were collected during the online schooling due to the pandemic. They confirm the findings of other studies (for example, Florian & Toc, 2020) that the majority of the families struggle with children's access to DT and, consecutively, with access to education. What this research added to the existing data is that, beyond the discussion on the access to devices, electricity, internet, and specialized platforms, the integration of DT into the family lives is an ongoing process. Monitoring access, while encouraging children's agency to become competent, can lead children to successfully master DT. Our interviews have shown the mobilization of personal resources of parents, respectively the changes in parenting attitudes and the negotiations between children and parents to better respond to children's needs during the pandemics. We could also notice the awareness of children aged 5–6 and 8–10 of the opportunities for acquiring information and of the dangers of digital life for their health and security. This does not imply that parents and their children could navigate the lockdown period and easily immerse themselves in online learning just by themselves. Relating to the research of Tabone and Messina (2010), who found one decade ago that children don't perceive parental presence in their online practices, our data show that in the pandemic period, in Romania, parents wanted to be present in their children's digital life, but not always knew how to do it. Tabone and Messina's findings also emphasize that often the children share or are influenced by parents' fears, and our interviews confirmed this. The interview fragments we recorded about the interest of the children in this age-group to acquire information via DT and to counteract the dangers of DT show their need to get support from adults in the development of their competencies.

One possible direction for further research could be to collect data on whether the general parenting styles overlap with the digital monitoring styles.

Further research should be also directed to quantitatively test the effects of parental support in acquiring competencies and the effects of parental control in avoiding the risks of the digital world.

Both children and parents acknowledge parents' role in monitoring children's digital activities and competence development, though parents often fail to impose rules and offer the necessary support. Parent's fears that their children can face many pitfalls while using DT and their limited knowledge to teach them how to avoid the risks are indicators of the need for guidelines and other forms of support, that would reduce concerns of risks, and strengthen trust in their capabilities to master DT together with their children.

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