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The Faculty of Philosophy and Social – Political Sciences
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PhD THESIS

The online behaviour of children and the *online grooming*.

The profile of the Romanian minor - user of social networking sites

(*summary*)

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CONTENT

Introduction

We chose the research theme thinking at the opportunity to deepen our previous interest on the topic of European protection of children's rights by taking into consideration the challenges induced by the new social interaction environment: the Internet. We documented on subjects related to children's relation with the new communication and information technologies finding that, as previous researches revealed, the Internet has two sizes and the prevalence of the positive or the negative one is influenced by the utility given by its users.

The online behaviour of children's theme captured our attention due to its complexity as allows the research to be developed on various aspects. The excessive use of the computer and the Internet can generate especially for children not only psychological risks (isolation, bad peer relations or inability to adapt to real life conditions) but also risks that can affect their personal safety including the online grooming or cyber bullying.

Before choosing and setting the research theme we identified in the international literature the following dilemma regarding the child as user of the information and communication technologies and the Internet:

- *on one hand,* the child is considered a "digital native" (Palfrey, Gasser, 2008), a "Net generation" representative (Tapscott, 1998), an "expert" of computer and Internet (McMillan, Morrison, 2006), a person which integrated both in the learning and growth process;

- *on the other hand*, the child continues to be at risk in cyberspace, compared with adults, considering the vulnerabilities of their own behaviour (Fogel, Nehmad, 2009) or external factors, because he/she deems the Internet as a personal space where he/she may feel free to experiment various things, including risk—taking behaviours.

Having in mind this image of the child we focused our research on three elements: features of the online behaviour of children which underline their "visibility" and "accessibility" in cyberspace (Yar, 2005), the social networking sites (as spaces of interaction with strangers) and the online grooming (the level of children's online risks awareness).

We started with the following questions: *How is children's online behaviour considering disclosure of personal data and their protection? Are there different profiles of minors users of social networking sites considering those elements? Are children equally vulnerable in cyberspace? How do children react to the online approaches from strangers and which would be the reasons for each type of reaction?.*

Thus, we established the following main objectives:

1. *To evaluate children's behaviour on social networking sites considering vulnerable actions which might be exploited by the online offenders, such as: disclosure of personal data and their protection and the overall safety measures in these environments.*

2. *To establish the types of children's attitudes and actions towards the online approaches from strangers.*

3. *To shape the general profiles of the minors users of social networking sites considering their behaviour's features on the elements detailed at point 1.*

4. *To bring into attention the online grooming, as a serious form of child abuse by using the Internet, and to underline the connection between the first stages of this offence and the vulnerable traces left by children in cyberspace.*

We rely on two main elements of originality in our research: the specific aspects we investigated in children's online behaviour and the methodological construction (detailed in the Chapter III of the thesis) especially the online asynchronous focus group via e-mail and the "provoked" observation. We approached the methodological construct as a logical structure, in stages that are influencing each other and also have their own role in supporting the objectives of the study.

Separately, the issues concerning online disclosure, online protection, online risks' awareness and exposure to inappropriate online approaches from strangers (especially sexual ones) have been previously studied. Our own research focuses on two elements of the online behaviour of children (especially on the social networking sites) which can contribute together to their online victimization, namely: the disclosure and protection of their personal data on the Internet and their attitude (reactions) towards the online unknown approaches.

Building a profile of the minor user of social networking from the perspective considered in our research - disclosure, protection, risk awareness, self-determination, behavioral differences real/virtual – represents a novelty, especially for the Romanian research. This multiple perspective on children's online behavior represents the novelty aspect.

Also, the research is original by its complete qualitative approach including some elements of "qualitative counting" that were introduced in the analysis of the data collected by "provoked" observation and the interpretation of data from Facebook profiles. The exploration of social networking sites as important sources of collecting and interpreting data for research purposes was done previously by other researchers but especially through quantitative methods and analysis (Patchin, Hinduja, 2010; Nosko et al., 2010).

The objectives we outlined at the beginning of the doctoral study resulted in findings that have novelty respectively the general profiles of minors users of social networking sites (the *cautious*, the *moderate*, the *imprudent-rebellious* and the *imprecise*) corresponding in fact to some behavioural profiles characterized by different levels of vulnerability in terms of the five elements.

Finally, the research's findings emphasized new elements of theory. The availability of

children to accept unknown persons in their friends' lists revealed new types of socialization that we called "null socialization" and "reserve (or postponed) socialization". These forms favour the potential aggressors which gain access to the virtual world of children where they ca navigate freely (using the status of "friend") and build strategies to abuse them.

On the other hand, we bring into attention a new a type of vulnerability that characterizes the child as an Internet and social networking user, namely what we called "aptitude-applied vulnerability" because is being influenced by his/her knowledge about a safer use of the Internet and by the availability to apply it.

More detailed interpretation of the data and of the novelty and originality elements is included in the *Section 3* and *Section 4* of the Chapter IV and in the final *Conclusions*.

Chapter I – The online behaviour of children. Theoretical and empirical approaches

1. Introduction

This chapter was structured in four main sections aiming to introduce the reader into the theme by presenting previous results of the international research about the online behaviour of children combined with our own point of view about social theories which can explain them and allow us to shape the sociological dimension of the thesis. We introduced in this chapter examples from our own research from the focus groups with children and adults.

2. Conceptual explanations

In this part we explain why we used in the title of the thesis and in its content certain terms ("minors", "children and adolescents" or "online grooming"[1]) and we are analysing some concepts that are generally imported from English by stressing those meanings encountered in the international literature which are relevant for our research.

Generally, issues related to the newest information and communication technologies and the new social virtual environments involves working with a number of terms of the same nature (very new), mostly imported from Anglo-Saxon literature, some of which are losing the intensity of their meaning when translate into Romanian.

Therefore, before deepening the theoretical part of the thesis we insisted on concepts such as risk, cyberspace (virtual space), virtual community, anonymity, vulnerability, social networking, computer-mediated communication, moving from traditional explanations in relation to real space to the new visions, adapted to the new medium of social interaction: the Internet.

3. Online behaviours and attitudes of children in research

This section is concerned with previous empirical findings about the relation of children and adolescents with information and communication technologies, Internet, online socialization, behaviours which could expose them to virtual risks, motivations for online disclosure of personal data, online protection and the management of the online relations with strangers.

The development and unprecedented expansion of new information and communication technologies is related more and more in recent years with the risks to children's safety.

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[1] We explain also why we used the term "online grooming" in English.

Researches on this topic revealed that the level of children's awareness of the negative side of online environment is directly influenced by their ability to identify, select and apply – based on the accumulated information through social interaction, learning, self-education – appropriate measures of protection in this space almost impossible to control even by adults and which is characterized by uncertainties, risks and vulnerabilities.

The general idea of those research was that the new information and communication technologies have changed the lives of young generation in greater proportion than other generations (Wilska, Pedrozo, 2007) and their influence has two sides: a negative and a positive one.

In the same section we have brought into attention the issue of social networking as a new space for social interaction that has drawn in a short time a significant number of users, especially among children and adolescents. Facebook, MySpace or Friendster have become the latest trends in communication online as points Pfeil et al. (2009, p 643).

Social networking sites were also studied as new potential sources of risks because trying to fully exploit the entertainment, the social interaction and the possibility of easier communication which these sites can provide, users are tempted to fill out a detailed profile by disclosing a lot of personal data. Thereby, these data can be used in their disadvantage by different other members of the network.

The reasons for which children and adolescents are choosing the computer mediated communication and the online socialization are various: to overcome their shyness and to improve communication skills, to study perceptions of others about themselves and to experiment with different identities. The grounds for engaging in experiments on identity can be: self-exploration, social compensation or social competences (Valkenburg et al., 2005, p 383).

In our research we were interested in social networking sites as spaces of social interaction where an excessive disclosure of personal data, a poor protection (determined by negligence, ignorance or rebelliousness) or interactions with strangers can generate for children as many sources of risks to their own safety according to the interests of the strangers which approach them in these spaces.

4. Factors encouraging self-disclosure in cyberspace. Multidisciplinary theoretical approach

In this section we performed an analysis of the main reasons causing the disclosure of personal data in cyberspace by explaining specific behaviours and attitudes through theories applied in social sciences (psychology, communication, education, social psychology, etc.). We consider the main factors influencing children's disclosure behaviour on the Internet in general

and especially on social networks which were emphasized by De Souza and Dick (2009, pp. 256-257). We adapted the analysis to our research using as background some social theories (which we considered most relevant) and including examples from focus group interviews conducted in our research.

We insisted on following reasons: signalling, peers pressure, excessive confidence in some networks and other members, the awareness of risks to privacy and network interface. We considered the disclosure in cyberspace as an action of providing identification data (name, age, school), visual exposure (photo), visibility of friends' list or sharing emotions, aspects which can be exploited by potential offenders.

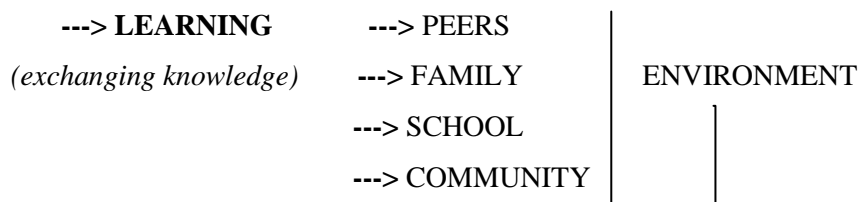### 5. Sociological concepts in explaining the online behaviour of children

This section includes our vision on the sociological aspects of the theme by referring to concepts and theories that can explain online behaviours and attitudes related to identity experimentation, self-presentation, self-disclosure and socialization. In a general vision, behaviour comprise individual's actions and reactions which are influenced by personal beliefs, features, values and principles, by environmental factors. From sociological point of view, behaviour emerges in the socialization and interaction process with others which could include symbols based on language, written text or image. From the perspective of symbolic interactionism, human behaviour is defined by its active components and creative influences that are stimulated by social constraints (Giddens, 2001, p 610).

In studying the online behaviour of children we considered the last definition which presents it as a "product" of the interaction with the environment, with components that can be designed under the influence of others (family, peers, school, church, community) and can be perfected through individual decisions of compliance or resistance to the collective trend. We researched the online behaviour of children having in mind two main issues: on one hand, the online disclosure of personal data and protection and on the other hand, the attitudes towards the online unknown approaches.
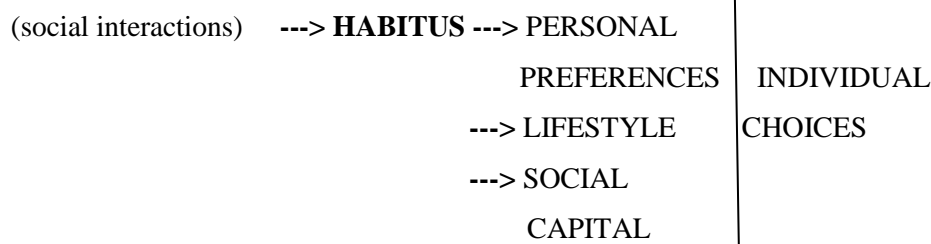
Considering this two main elements we developed the following logical scheme on sociological influences and interactions which lead to the final individual decisions of children on the Internet and the level of their online protection:

BEHAVIOUR – can be influenced by:

● **EDUCATION ---> SELF-EDUCATION ---> EXPERIMENTING --->NEGATIVE** (failure)

                                                      --->POSITIVE (success)

                       ---> other's EXPERIENCE (conditioning: *what's good, what's wrong*)

                ---> LEARNING   **--->** PEERS

            (exchanging knowledge)   **--->** FAMILY   ENVIRONMENT

                               ---> SCHOOL

                               ---> COMMUNITY

● **ENVIRONMENT ---> INTERACTIONS ---> PRIMARY SOCIALIZATION** ---including **symbols**

               (social interactions)   **---> HABITUS --->** PERSONAL

                                           PREFERENCES INDIVIDUAL

                              ---> LIFESTYLE   CHOICES

                              ---> SOCIAL

                                     CAPITAL

(Goffman: „impressions management" - Giddens, 2001) **---> SELF-PRESENTATION** (symbols)

                                          ---> INDIVIDUAL IDENTITY

                                          ---> SOCIAL IDENTITY

We considered the following elements which influence each other and are sociologically relevant: (social) interaction – socialization – self/identity - behaviour. As sociological approach we chose the symbolic interactionism because the aspects of the online behaviour that we studied are naturally related to symbols or can be explained through symbols (picture, friend's list, personal identification data, messages etc.).

● Behaviour is influenced by the interaction with others which occurs in the process of socialization (considered to be an elementary one for the children). For the symbolic interactionism, the (social) interaction involves an exchange of symbols (Giddens, 2001, p. 607).

● Socialization implies living in a socialized world and the social spreading of knowledge (Dubar, in Borlandi *et al.*, 2009, p. 746).

● The knowledge derives from education which can be realized through experimentation (self-education) or learning, by selecting and incorporating the needed information encountered in the environment (family, acquaintances, school etc.).

● Accumulated information return to the environment through social interaction, socialization, communication with others as personal actions (influenced by the same environment, the personal values and features).

● In the process of interaction with others each individual has to present a personal identity and a social identity, results of social development and of impression management as named by Goffman (Giddens, 2001, p. 92). These two processes are determining for each person a different way of self-presentation including the use of symbols (especially in cyberspace).

CHAPTER II - Online grooming: a form of child abuse by using the Internet

1. **Introduction**

In this chapter we have brought into attention a serious form of children's victimization via the Internet, the online grooming (that has been already studied at international level), because in the first stages of this abuse the offender uses the data he gathered from the Internet and disclosed by the victim and exploits her availability of interacting in cyberspace with strangers.

The empirical part of the research was indirectly relayed to this topic as we focused on vulnerabilities of children's online behaviour by emphasizing those aspects which could act as a "signal" and put them at risk of being regarded, at least in the initial stages of the online grooming site, as potential victims.

2. **Defining online grooming**

In this section we insisted on defining the online grooming and delimiting the concept from other forms of children's victimization via the Internet by bringing into attention the main main theoretical discussions on these issues. Through the synthetic analysis of the main attempts to define the online grooming in the international literature we aimed to outline a complete picture of this aggression. We encountered a diversity of opinions reflected also in a variety of the terms assigned to the phenomenon: grooming (Phoenix, Oerton, 2005, p 183), enticement (Britz, 2009), sexual grooming (Gillespie, cited by Ost, 2009, p 34), Internet seduction of children (Quayle, Taylor, 2003) or child luring (Savona, Mignon, in Savona, 2004, p 14).

We identified two main trends: on the one hand, defining the grooming in the face to face version and adding the Internet as a mean of committing the offence (Davidson and Gottschalk, 2010), and on the other hand, attempts to define directly the online grooming (Dombrowski et al., 2007).

Without insisting on this aspect, we introduced two legal definitions of the online grooming, from the United Kingdom and Australia, countries where this type of aggression is criminalised, for the reason of having a minimum comparative perspective with those from the social sciences literature.

Given the (in)direct attempts of defining the online grooming which we analyzed we tried to gather all the specific elements in a comprehensive definition as follows: *identifying and enticing child on the Internet, through concealment and grooming on long or short term, by establishing an emotional connection with the victim before the abuse, with the final gold of sexual exploitation (in real space or via the Internet).*

3. Structure of the online grooming offence

In this section we analyzed views on online grooming' s stages and emphasized on the initial ones to assure the connection with the first part of the thesis namely the online behaviour of children on disclosure of personal data and protection (''visibility'') and the attitudes (reactions) towards strangers' approaches (''accessibility''). This traces of children's presence in cyberspace are sensitive and can play a significant role in initiating the online grooming as it can lead to the identification of virtual locations ''frequented'' by them, can facilitate the selection of the victims and the initiation of the contact (on the way to the final goal: the sexual abuse).

We also analysed the typology of online grooming' s victims and the vulnerabilities of their behaviour which are usually exploited by the offenders to choose from a variety of options.

4. The child: between a victim and an aggressor in cyberspace

In this section, based on the results of previous research and of our own, we made a short presentation of the potential position of the child as aggressor in cyberspace in relations with peers which is enhanced by the anonymity that allows a much easier change of roles.

In our thesis we focused on the children as victims in cyberspace without ignoring the risks they can generate to one another via the Internet. Thus, we presented the child as a potential perpetrator with the intention to balance the association frequently made with a ''vulnerable'' person and to underline this kind of influence of the Internet on children, to import/achieve negative behaviour and to apply it in relations with peers or others.

For the consistency of the presentation we inserted examples from our own research from focus group interviews with children and adults

5. The online grooming, the paedophilia and child pornography

In this section we tried to integrate the online grooming in the larger category of child sexual abuses from both perspectives: theoretical connections and relevant studied issues. This section was justified by the fact that during the process of documentation on the online grooming' s theme we found that there does not exist a prolific literature on this topic to exceed the issues of defining the offence or identifying its stages. In general, online grooming topic is related to those of paedophilia or child pornography with at least a link: the offenders considered to be paedophiles or producers, consumers or distributors of child pornography. The three topics are closely joined in the literature thus we chose to approach them in the same form with the intention to briefly explain the connections.

6. Social theories explaining the online groomers' behaviour

In this section we have brought into attention several social theories that have emerged, have been developed and used in various fields – psychology, sociology, biology, criminology or victimology – to explain criminal or aggressive behaviour. Considering our research, we emphasized those theories that we considered useful in explaining the behaviour of online groomers and, where possible, that of the victim. We chose the following theories: lifestyle exposure theory, routine activities theory, rational choice theory, dislocation theory, opportunity theory, self-control theory, social learning theory or labelling theory.

These theories reveal a diversity of factors and contexts that can influence the online groomer' s behaviour and his decision to commit the abuse from childhood experiences to community pressure.

7. European measures for the online safety of children

The last section of the chapter includes brief references to attempts to increase child safety in cyberspace, particularly at European Union level, objectified in legislative measures, cooperation, information and prevention, including funding of major thematic research projects.

CHAPTER III – METHODOLOGY

1. Introduction

In this chapter we detailed the methodological approach of the research and the specific tools (methods) which we designed and implemented in order to collect the necessary data for achieving the objectives set at the beginning of the research' s project.

2. Research' s objectives

In this section we briefly resumed the general objectives of the research which were detailed in the *Introduction* (together with the operational objectives). This time, for each objective we mentioned the data collection instruments, as follows:

a) *to evaluate children's behaviour on social networking sites considering vulnerable actions which might be exploited by the online offenders, such as: disclosure of personal data and their protection and the overall safety measures in these environments*

To achieve this objective we used data collected in focus groups face to face with children, in online asynchronous focus groups via e-mail with adults and from Facebook profiles to which we gained consented access by implementing the instrument designed for "provoked" observation.

b) *to establish the types of children's attitudes and actions towards the online approaches from strangers*

To achieve this objective we also used data collected in group interviews, both with children and adults, and for a comparative perspective with the specific reactions of adolescents to online unknown approaches we added the data collected in "provoked" observation.

c) *to shape the general profiles of the minors users of social networking sites considering their behaviour's features on the elements detailed at point a).*

In achieving this objective we used data collected in focus groups and *"provoked" observation*.

d) *to bring into attention the online grooming, as a serious form of child abuse by using the Internet, and to underline the connection between the first stages of this offence and the vulnerable traces left by children in cyberspace*

This objective was largely covered at theoretical level with some observations included also in the analysis of the findings.

We applied the following methodological approach: an inductive research because the type of data collected was determined by the objectives; a descriptive study because describes common characteristics of minors users of social networking sites within the same categories

(i.e., dimensions of the same behaviour profile); an exploratory study because we investigated the common features of each user's general profile; "grounded theory" research as we tried to invalidate, confirm or generate new elements of theory and not to test hypotheses or theories.

3. Argument for the qualitative research

For justifying the choice of qualitative research we started with three main features mentioned by Bryman (2008, p. 22) presenting them from our point of view and by reporting them to our own project:

● lends to an inductive approach, focusing on generating elements of theory and not on testing them;

● highlights participants own interpretation of the theme based on their experience and information;

● embodies the changing social reality due to participants individual experiences.

Overall, we chose the qualitative approach because we felt that an analysis of words is more suitable and effective than an analysis of numbers reported to the objectives of our research. We focused on children's opinions about their own behaviour on the Internet and tried to complete them with adults' perceptions on the same issues.

4. Methods: argument, description, construction, implementation
4.1. Focus groups face to face with children

At the beginning of this section we present general discussions about the definition of the focus group by revealing the multitude of approaches in this regard because we considered necessary to specify the meaning of this method in our research.

We opted for the focus group as a group interview because being the main method of the research it was essential to obtain a wide variety of views so that we insisted for all participants' answers without sacrificing the interaction between them.

We adopted for focus group the definition that was given by Hennessy and Heary (in Greene, Hogan, 2005, p 236): a discussion involving a small number of participants, led by a moderator (usually the researcher) that aims to explore their experiences, attitudes, perceptions and beliefs on the topics of interest.

We chose to implement focus group as the main method of research in two ways: face to face (with children) and online asynchronous via e-mail (with adults). In the thesis we detailed the reasons for our choice based on the theme and research's objectives or our level of experience in research.

The sampling for the focus groups with children was based on the following criteria: the age between 10 and 17 years old, the daily use of the Internet or at least every two days, minimum use of social networking sites, holding a profile on at least one such network, to connect to a social network at least once a week, to be communicative, regardless of ethnic origin, religious orientation or social condition. We have detailed the strategy for selecting the participants from this age group in section 4.1.3 of the Chapter III of the thesis.

We considered important to insist on the rules of the focus groups with young people because there are some individualities that distinguish it from the access to participants, the connection between the researcher and the participants to the discussion itself and the ethical issues (detailed in Section 5 of Chapter III). We intended an original presentation of the main rules of the focus groups with children as we used those recommended by Krueger and Casey (2005, pp. 211-215) and explain them by reporting to our own experience and by assigning to each a level of difficulty: hard, medium or easy.

In the section 4.1.5. of the chapter we described how we prepared and implement the focus groups with children: the structure of the semi-structured interview guide, pre-testing strategy, the place and time of the focus groups, the recording procedure etc.

4.2. The online research

We emphasized this section because we tried to design and implement the online instruments (e-mail focus group and "provoked" observation) as original as possible. We chose to introduce in the doctoral project an online part of the research with the intention to overcome the traditional patterns of sociological research and exploit the Internet in both forms:

- as an useful tool in social studies which allowed us to adapt traditional methods to the online environment (Jones, in Jones, 1999, p 2);

- as an object of social inquiry and new social environment extensively used for work, leisure, entertainment, purchasing goods, communication and socialization, which influenced behaviours and attitudes especially of the adolescents and children.

As face to face research, the online one has

● *advantages*

- it cancels the distance between the researcher and the participants being necessary only a computer and an Internet connection even though the quality of the interaction could be affected by the lack of visual contact (Bryman, 2008, p 632);

- it saves valuable time for the researcher allowing a faster collection of the data as, for example, the online focus groups does not involve further transcription (Bryman, 2008, p 632).

● *disadvantages*

- the lack of visual contact in the first stage of the research can complicate the procedure because the majority of Internet users has the tendency to ignore the unknown messages or e-mails (Bryman, 2008, p 632).

Based on the empirical findings of our research we can promote the online research to be as valuable as the traditional one given the opportunity to use an important communication channel to select and to interact with the participants and to study aspects which were intensely investigated by traditional methods, such as behaviours, attitudes, reactions, in new ways and contexts adapted to the changes caused by technology (Lundh, Ess, 2003) and the Internet.

We applied the online asynchronous focus group via e-mail with adults and the "provoked" observation which we detail below.

The online asynchronous focus group via e-mail with adults

This method has its own advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, it cancels emotional barriers and reduces the intimidation that a participant might feel while in the presence of the researcher and of the others (Bloor *et al.,* 2001, p. 83), it encourages the approach of sensitive topics (Gerich, 2008, p 358) and it generates more in depth responses as everyone can complete the answers on his/her own time without feeling pressure from the researcher or the other participants. On the other hand, for the online asynchronous version of the focus the feedback of the researcher is delayed (Gaiser, 1997, cited in Mann, Stewart, 2000, p .107) and so the participants do not have the certainty that they understood the procedure and completed their role in the research. To reduce this advantage we constantly sent e-mails to encourage the participants to ask for guidance in case they needed before answering the questions.

For sampling in online focus groups we used simple criteria such as: higher education (as we associated with this an appropriate level of Internet use and knowledge), currently access to a computer, the connection to the Internet at least once a week minimum knowledge about social networks (even if they did not have a personal profile on such a network).

We have not identified many researches that used asynchronous focus groups via e-mail so that we constructed the instrument in an original manner which allowed the interaction between participants (personally mediated by the researcher) in the form of comments and questions between the members of the same group, as follows:

Stage 1 - We sent an email to each participant explaining the procedure to which we attached three documents: genera presentation of the research, the consent application form and the interview guide (customized to each participant with his/her first name)

We used the same guide semi-structured questions as in focus groups with children, with some modifications, for example, question 7 for children was "Discuss a moment when you

interact with a stranger on the Internet (or SNS)" and for adults became "To which vulnerabilities of the online behaviour of children can you think? Comment."

Stage 2: We received the answers from all group members and where we considered necessary we introduced some additional questions in order to clarify issues that were not enough detailed and we returned them to the participants for completion.

Stage 3: All the answers, to the 12 main questions and to the additional ones, were incorporated into one single document and a copy was sent by e-mail to each participant with the request to add comments to others' opinions or to ask questions to each other. Implementation of this phase allowed us to complete the semi-structured guide with questions raised by the participants.

Stage 4: We have received the comments and the questions from all the participants and where necessary we passed them questions received from the other members in order to generate a feedback within the group. However, at this stage, participants were requested their last comments, conclusions and recommendations of interested persons to participate in a similar focus group (to allow us to extend the sample).

The "provoked" observation

We chose to construct and implement this instrument in a form that lies between the participatory observation and a mini-experiment. But we avoided to use any of the two terms in order to avoid confusions about the method we applied and instead we adopted the name of "provoked" observation for a more accurate capture of the intended purpose (observation) and of the way to achieve it ("provocation"). In fact, the "provocation" referred to the engender of a specific context through six fictitious profiles (that were created exclusively for the research purposes) to observe adolescents reactions to unknown approaches ("friend request") on Facebook. We intended to generate a natural context for a social networking site that can not be observed in a simple participatory observation. Thus, the designed instrument for the "provoked" observation regarded two objectives:

- on the one hand, to determine the "availability" of the adolescents to respond in a social network (Facebook) at friend requests from unknown persons;

- on the other hand, to assure to ourselves the consent access to adolescents' profiles from Facebook for collecting and interpreting data in order to add them to those collected in focus groups and to shape the general profiles of the minors users of social networking sites.

We detail below the construction in stages of the instrument:

1. A Facebook profile was created exclusively for research purposes containing real identification data of the researcher.

2. This profile was completed with detailed information of the professional and educational background of the researcher in order to increase the confidence of the potential participants on the seriousness and reality of the research.

3. We sent e-mails with further explanations about the online research to the participants in the face to face focus groups which have agreed to participate also in this part of the research by providing their e-mail addresses to the researcher so that to be contacted.

4. We added to the list of friends the Facebook profiles of those participants which responded positive to the initial e-mails and provided to the researcher the identification data in this social networking site.

5. They were contacted on the identification data from Facebook by friend requests and they accepted.

6. Using the "snowball" method a short message containing information about the research and the invitation to participate was sent to other persons randomly selected from the friends' list of the participants.

The invitation was sent just once to each person because we wanted to avoid the potential harm or tease of those who have not agreed to answer positively at our message. We sent between 50 and 100 messages a day until we completed the list of participants with 100 adolescents – users of Facebook. The consent to participate in the online research ("provoked" observation) valued also the access to the data from the profiles which were added to the final analysis of the general profiles of minors users of social networking sites.

7. Six fictitious profiles were created: A - male (over 18, a general profile picture – the person can not be identified), B - male (under 18, a general profile picture – the person can not be identified), C - female (over 18, a general profile picture – the person can not be identified), D - female (under 18, a general profile picture – the person can not be identified), E - female (over 18, no profile picture) and F - male (over 18, with no profile picture).

8. From the list of participants we randomly selected 60 profiles (30 girls and 30 boys, with coverage in all counties represented in the starting list of friends) who were contacted through the fictitious profiles by a friend request and/or a message with a similar content.

9. The characteristics of the fictitious profiles that were used to "provoke" a reaction from the participants, the type of the provocation (friendship request or message), the specific date and hour of the answer (where was the case) were recorded in an observation sheet.

10. Initially, the "provoked" observation began in December 2011 and the reactions were monitored and recorded for a month. Due to some of Facebook' s changes that led to the unintentional loss of participants' reactions before recording them, the observation was resumed

in May 2012 and the monitoring was also conducted for one month. The reactions were completed on the observation sheet as "positive" or "negative" response.

11. In the same observation sheet was noted for each participant the "signalling" (self-disclosure) level and the size of friends' list as relevant data for completing the analysis.

4.3. Difficulties of the online research

In this section we present the challenges we faced in the online research and the practical solutions for overcoming them in order to serve as a support for other researchers who might be interested in this type of sociological study. Some of the sensitive moments we could anticipated from the beginning so that to have prepared at least a reaction or a solution. On the other hand, the dynamic of the research environment – the social network Facebook – was also reflected in a similar dynamic of the challenges that we are explaining widely in the thesis.

5. The ethics of the research

The literature indicates as main mandatory ethical principles: the voluntary participation, the care not to produce harm to the participants, the informed consent, the anonymity and the confidentiality (Babbie, 2010; May, 1993). In our own research we respected all of these principles and for obtaining the informed consent we acted differently for each method.

For the face to face focus groups with children for obtaining the informed consent of all the categories (school principles, parents, children) we applied more rules:

- we asked the consents before conducting the interviews;

- in the Annex with the details of the research (the face to face focus groups stage) we detailed all the circumstances of the study: the main goal, the means of recording the discussion (audio-video or audio only), the circuit of the identification data of the participants and of the data gathered for the analysis, practical procedure to ensure anonymity and confidentiality of the participants - so that the consents to be granted with absolute confidence;

- before each focus group we offered additional information and we answered the questions of the participants in respect to ethics of the research.

For the online focus groups with adults, after selecting the participants, in the first stage of this method, we sent to each participant, separately, an e-mail with details of the research to which we attached the interview guide, the Annex with the presentation of the research and the informed consent form. The consent forms were returned to us also by e-mail (signed and scanned or without signature but with the acceptance of an mail or phone contact for the confirmation of the participation).

Some adults were selected while asked for consent for the focus groups with children. Thus, the consent form for parents contained a paragraph through which we gave them the opportunity to become participants in the online focus groups, so they were asked to contact the researcher for details on the e-mail or to provide their e-mail addresses in order to be contacted by the researcher for additional information. Thus, in some cases, parents' consents for the participation of their children in the face to face focus groups were also valued a pre-consent to their personal participation in the online asynchronous focus groups via e-mail.

Some Facebook profiles of the participants were public others were private. Some of them contained fictitious data, others real data. Some contained combined data (real and fictitious) others were partially completed. Despite this situation we decided to inform about the research and to ask for consent to all the participants whether they held a public or a private profile. At the beginning we informed everyone that we intend to conduct a sociological study having as main objective to shape general profiles of the minors users of social networking sites.

As the invitation message had to be short and concise we detailed the research in the Facebook profile created exclusively for applying it. We wrote about the general objectives to shape a general profile of the Romanian minor user of social networking sites and to observe the reactions of the participants in some contexts. We had not described in detail the "provoked" observation so that to not influence participants' behaviour. The intention was to observe natural reactions to the context "provoked" by the researcher namely their reactions to the unknown approaches (the friend requests sent from those six fictitious Facebook profiles).

For the "provoked" observation the consent valued a short answer ("Yes") and the acceptance of the researcher in the friends' list of each participant. As the sample for this stage were adolescents between 16 and 17 years old we applied strictly protection measures: the highest security for the research Facebook profile (private and not accessible for other Facebook members), visible only for the researcher and the participants, restricted the access to the friends' list of the profile only to the researcher, restricted the overall access to the profile.

To be sure that all the participants understood the circumstances of the research and the nature of the consent we offered detailed information at the beginning of the research or during it, individually to those who have requested for it (before or after the consent) or collectively by posting additional notes to the research Facebook profile (which were automatically to all the participants from friends' list). Likewise, before starting the "provoked" observation on the wall of the research's profile we posted a message asking the participants to inform and adult/parent about their involvement in the research in case they considered it necessary for their safety.

In the *section 6* of the Chapter III we explained through specific methods the validity and reliability of the research.

CHAPTER IV – Research findings

1. Introduction

The last chapter contains the analysis of the data collected in our research being structured in two main sections (3 and 4) for each elements of the online behaviour of children that we investigated and could reveal vulnerabilities which might be exploited by the online offenders for initiating an aggression, including of *online grooming*.

2. Data analysis. Generalities

As data were collected through more instruments, some of which were implemented online, we applied the thematic analysis by combining two types of approaches as Morgan (1988) recommends:

- the ethnographic one by inserting extensive quotations/examples from focus groups;

- the content qualitative one by coding (by paragraphs) which lead to the final categories, determined the main themes of interpretation and allowed the insert of elements of qualitative counting (Morgan, 1988, p. 64).

As we focused on children and adolescents (minors) as the studied subjects and the participants we approached the analysis in stages, by manually working and by turn interpreting the data collected with the three instruments/methods.

3. The online behaviour of children: the general profiles of the minors users of social networking sites

In this stage of the analysis we used the data collected in focus groups with children and adults and from the 80 Facebook profiles of adolescents (40 of boys and 40 of girls) to which we obtained informed consent by implementing the "provoked" observation.

In structuring the data we started from the idea of vulnerability that we associated to the following actions of children on cyberspace (especially on social networking sites) and to the main themes/codes: self-disclosure, self-protection, self-determination, risk awareness and differences between the behaviour in real and in virtual space.

The explanations of each theme/code and the whole strategy of analysis that led to the general profiles of minors users of social networking sites are offered in the thesis. Here we will insist on the main characteristics of each general profile.

The cautious users

Summarily, research's findings indicated as *cautious* those minors users of social networking sites who adopt protective behavior characterized by: the choice not to reveal

sensitive personal data in the profiles that they created in such a network (so that it can not be identified in reality), the maximum protection of the profile when they chose to include some identification data, adapting their actions in a network according to their parents' recommendations, awareness and anticipation of potential risks that a non-protective behavior could attract (by controlling their behaviour in cyberspace) and the promotion of a rational use of Internet and social networking sites.

Broadly, this category is identified with those minors users of social networking sites with a low level of self-disclosure, a high level of self-protection, a low level of self-determination, a high level of online risks awareness and minimal influence of the Internet and social networking sites on their behaviour (acknowledged).

The moderate users

Summarily, research's findings indicated as *moderate* those minors users of social networking sites who disclose personal data in their profile that allow an indirect identification (through correlations between various profile' information), allow the access to their profiles only to those included in their list of friends, with respect to online actions combine personal decisions with the advices and support of adults (parents), are aware of some potential online risks that can be generated by their personal actions and whose behaviour is occasionally influenced by the features of the computer mediated communication (generally in a positive manner).

Broadly, in this category we included those minors users of social networking sites who showed a balance in their online choices and decisions by avoiding extremes in self -disclosure, self-protection, self-determination, and risk awareness levels and who accepted/permitted influences from cyberspace on their behavior. They are those users for whom we identified an average level of intensity for each of the five actions (themes) that we have analyzed.

Imprudent-rebellious users

Broadly, considering the dictionary meaning of the two words and the research's findings, the *imprudent-rebellious* users are those who are acting without caution in cyberspace in terms of the personal information disclosed and level of self-protection, exclude the adults/parents' intervention in their online actions/decisions and adopt a risk-taking behaviour on their attempt to expose a high level of self-determination.

Summarily, this category of minors users of social networking sites is identified through a high self-disclosure level, a low self-protection level, a high self-determination level, a low online risks' awareness level and a high level of differences between the virtual and the real behaviour (generally, negative ones).

Why the combination between the "imprudence" and the "rebelliousness"? We chose this combination of words because we refer to those minors users of social networking sites who are combining the intentional with the unintentional negligence in protecting themselves in cyberspace. This combinations means that they have information about a safe use of the Internet but they do no apply it by negligence (because does not necessarily consider the cyberspace as a dangerous one) or by the impulse of rebelliousness as they might consider that they can cope with all the challenges they confront with in cyberspace (on social networking sites).

The imprecise (or confused) users

For the *imprecise* we could not realise the analysis on those 5 categories themes/codes that could reveal vulnerabilities of children's online behaviour so that we have outlined only a few general features based on the interpretation of the data collected in focus groups.

Apparently, the imprecise users have information about the self-protection in cyberspace and they partially acknowledge the online risks to which might expose them a high level of self-disclosure but their knowledge are confused, incorrect or incomplete. Hence, compared with the other categories of users, we could not measure exactly their self-protection level because, for example, although the imprecise' s intention is to ensure themselves a high level of self-protection, the applied information is incorrect or incomplete so that their intention might not be meet. Also, the *imprecise* do not have complete information on how much they have to reveal about themselves in order to create an account or a profile on a social networking site, considering that they have to disclose as much as possible from their personal identification data. The opinions of the imprecise were not too explicit some of them avoiding to talk directly about the features of their own behaviour by giving their words a tempt of advices ("we should do.." and not "I did so…").

Discussions. Elements of theory

The results of the first stage of the analysis as the general profiles of minors users of social networking sites reveal types of online behaviour of children, protective or non-protective, that can be differentiated from a complex perspective: personal decision, the agreed or imposed influence of parents/adults on children's online actions of disclosure or protection and the (un)pleasant experiences in this environment.

For the beginning, the findings emphasized that a protective or non-protective behaviour in a social network depends on the amount and on the quality of the information the child has about what is right and what is wrong to reveal about himself.

The differences between the profiles of minors users of social networking sites that we identified in or research underline the necessity of a similar perception on child as a an "expert"

in using the computer and the Internet and also a new speech on his/her vulnerability. The active vulnerabilities in real space are cancelled or minimized in cyberspace considering the anonymity it can provide to users, the lack of parental monitoring and the specificity of the computer mediated communication that is mostly done by text messages or audio while the visual cues are fewer.

For the child as an Internet user we introduce to discussion a new type of vulnerability that we called "aptitude-applied vulnerability" because is being influenced by his/her knowledge about a safer use of the Internet and by the availability to apply it. This type of vulnerability is connected with children's will to use their knowledge and to accept adults assistance/support for a safer use of the Internet. And the general profiles of minors users of social networking sites revealed by our research indicate also different levels of this vulnerability. Thus, the *precautious* users have the knowledge and apply it (the attenuated form of this vulnerability), the *moderates* have less information and apply it (the moderate form of this vulnerability) an the imprudent-rebellious users, regardless of knowledge level, due to overconfidence are minimizing the importance of applying it (the aggravated form of this vulnerability).

The postmodern vision on the child as an active social actor who is able to exercise certain rights, to recognize and to report violations, which is replacing even if only partially and only in some spheres of social life "the traditional image of the innocent and without protection child" (Balahur, Qvarsell, 2008, p 10) must be completed by the image of the child as a guardian of his/her own behaviour in cyberspace.

Our research focuses on the concept of "self-education" and children's ability to shape/develop their behaviour based on their online experiences and not only on the level of information about protection or on parents learning skill about a protective behaviour (through education and/or supervision). The findings showed that an important role in influencing the online behaviour of children has the self-education through negative experience. For example, some minors users of social networking sites (the *precautious*) admitted that they have changed their disclosing behaviour and have increased the level of protection after being the victims of some unpleasant situations because they revealed to much to strangers.

In conclusion, the results of the research showed that we can not refer to a general online behaviour of children in terms of protection level but to types of behaviour with differentiated features. For example, in terms of identity experimentation in cyberspace, the research's results underlined that *precautious* use it as a protection method, the *moderate* to increase self-confidence and to reduce shyness and the imprudent-rebellious users to test different types of behaviours (including negative ones).

4. Children's reactions to the online unknown approaches

Like the analysis that led us to the development of general profiles of minors users of social networking sites, we approached the this part of interpretation in stages, using the data collected by all three methods. First we used the data from the focus groups with children and adults and then the data collected through "provoked" observation. Children's responses about their reactions to the online approaches from strangers revealed three patterns namely positive, negative or neutral so that we created three separate files where we included the fragments of text corresponding to each pattern. After reading all focus groups materials we identified the following categories of reactions for those three patterns:

● *positive*

1. *opened acceptance* - the positive reaction to such an approach.

2. *conditioned acceptance* – the positive reaction to such an approach that is generally conditioned by the obtaining of some minimum information about the stranger who approached them and by other criteria in selecting strangers' friendships requests.

● *neutral*

3. *transfer of the decision to the parents* – the avoidance of a personal decision, the consultation of a parent (adult) an the adoption and the implementation of his/her recommendation.

● *negative*

4. *rejection* – negative reaction to such an approach by refusing friend' s requests from strangers or attempts of unknown person to initiate discussions with them on the Internet.

5. *ignoring* – negative reaction, non-response.

The analysis revealed an extra category, reflecting a different side of a vulnerable online behaviour of children, that could be deepen through a separate study, namely: the category of children who have their own initiative in approaching strangers on the Internet.

For this part of the data interpretation we applied also a thematic analysis being interested on types of children' s reactions to unknown approaches on Facebook (observed through those six fictitious profiles used exclusively for the research). For a unitary interpretation with the data from focus groups, for the "provoked" observation we looked for the same patterns and types of reactions and we could record only two types of reactions: positive (open acceptance) and negative (ignoring).

Discussions. Elements of theory

Generally, through "approach" we referred to friend request in a social networking site from unknown persons (that we could also deepen through the "provoked" observation).

We can associate children's attitudes towards the unknown online approaches to social capital theory as our research revealed that a positive reaction is determined by the potential benefits it could bring: a larger list of "friends", a change, to overcome boredom, the approach is on an interesting topic, they could obtain some useful information from that person etc.

So, related to cyberspace and especially to social networking sites the list of friends (or its dimension) could be interpreted as an expression of "social capital" that young people hunger for or intend to acquire in this environment.

However, uncontrolled adding of unknown "friends" might remove the concept of "social capital" from its general sense of "information and emotional benefits that young people could get from these relationships" which are called by Steinfield et al. (2008, p 435) "weak links" and associate it with the following sense: "benefits of imagine".

The human behaviour is shaped through socialization and interaction with others especially for children and adolescents. Generally, the socialization through/on a social networking site could be interpreted as the process of "assuming, as a member, of an objective social construction and of adopting social knowledge and skills, full of emotions, which allow to everyone to become an individual who is gifted with subjectivity" (Dubar, in Borlandi *et al.,* 2009, p. 746). However, the results of our research has revealed that it is possible that at least some children and adolescents to perceive or to experience socialization in other forms or to assign it new dimensions. Under the influence of new information and communication technologies and of the Internet, many social/sociological concepts have been reinterpreted in order to be adapted to the new conditions of the virtual communication and socialization environment. We are not referring to a redefinition of the sociological concepts as a result of the technological influence but to the addition of new meanings for one of them.

For example, we are bringing into attention the concept of "null socialization". One role of the social networking sites is to transfer from the real space some relations and the interaction with them (the transferred or extended socialization). Other role is to initiate socialization with new acquaintances who were created in cyberspace. But for children the utility of such a network could be also the "non-socialization". In fact, it is about a "null socialization" because children are accepting connections with people they have no intention to have a minimum communication or exchange of ideas. Thus, some participants in the research, children, have admitted that they added strangers to their lists of friends without a strong justification (or specific selection criteria). Also, the results of the "provoked" observation have confirmed this idea considering that 33 profiles of participants accepted "unknown" friend requests (send through the six fictitious profiles which were created exclusively for the research) and none of them tried to

interact with the "unknown" persons who approached them even through a simple question like "who are you and why did you send me friend request?".

Through "null socialization" we refer to the socialization which will never happen when children extend their friend list from a social networking site without the intention of a concrete interaction but only as a sign of popularity. On the other hand, through "reserve (or postponed) socialization" we refer to those situations when children consider the future possibility to interact to that person maybe after they obtain some information about her/him and have no sign of putting themselves to risk through the online interaction with the stranger who approached them.

We have documented that when a "reserve socialization" is activated by the child an online offender who was accepted in the list of friends can freely act to look after potential victims and to gather information about them in order to prepare the strategy for grooming.

CONCLUSIONS

● *Which is the contribution of the research to knowledge?*

Based on the results of our research, which are themselves new, we submit to attention new elements of theory. Children's availability to accept strangers in their friends' lists from social networking sites revealed new forms of socialization that we called "null socialization" and "reserve (or postponed) socialization". These forms favour the potential aggressors which gain access to the virtual world of children where they can navigate freely (using the status of "friend") and they can build strategies to abuse them. The research also highlights the role of education in its both perspectives – self-education (through experimentation) and learning (from others) – in the application of the safety rules on cyberspace and the acceptance by some children of the role of their own guardians in this environment. Thus, for the question raised by Yar (2005) "are there capable guardians in cyberspace?" our research generated the following answer: in general, children experience the cyberspace as an area that belongs to them, so they must be regarded and treated more and more as their own guardians.

Another important aspect highlighted by the research's findings is the different nature of the vulnerability of children in cyberspace compared with the real life. In real life the physical vulnerability is specific to all children while cyberspace reduces its influence on the overall level of vulnerability and risk exposure as provides anonymity and makes possible the identity experimentation and self-image manipulation.

When we consider children as users of the Internet and of social networking sites we could begin to think of new kinds of vulnerability that complement those from real life and identified by Meyer (2007) as: physical or biological vulnerability, social vulnerability and structural vulnerability. For the child as Internet user we could talk about what we called

"aptitude-applied vulnerability" because is being influenced by his/her knowledge about a safer use of the Internet and by the availability to apply it. And the general profiles of minors users of social networking sites revealed by our research indicate also different levels of this vulnerability.

● *Which is the practical applicability of the findings?*

For the social actors which are involved in prevention. Practically, the research's findings can be used in developing preventive strategies for both the youngest users of the Internet and social networking sites and for adults. The general profiles resulted from our analysis and their features reveal the need to elaborate diversified strategies for conceiving and implementing this kind of information campaigns. The levels of risks' awareness and information of online self-protection should be approached in the same way: differently.

If we do not take into account these differences and we gather in a conference room 200 children and we will present a general lecture on self-protection in cyberspace some will get bored because their level of knowledge may exceed that of the exposure and many others will not understand because the information they have so far are reduced.

Considering the latest European regulations that are giving to member states a period of two years to implement in the national legislation the provisions concerning the criminalization of the online grooming, research's findings could be used along with others in shaping the profile of the potential victims.

For parents. The main utility for them would be the acknowledge of the role of education in shaping a more secure behaviour of children on the Internet at the early stages through constant surveillance of their activities in cyberspace. The findings of our research emphasize, the preventive role of the early education and the power of parents example for their children. From an early age children are imitating parents habits in using the computer and the Internet. In focus groups adults accepted their own limits in terms of knowledge and use of new information and communication technologies. Many of them, who are now parents of children younger than 10 have chosen to postpone the concerns about their education for a safer use of the Internet because for the moment they do not have prepared solutions in this respect. Considering this reality we ask ourselves: why they cannot be also the recipients of some specific informative campaigns?

For children. By emphasizing on online grooming we bring into children's attention the real level of risks to which might conduct the vulnerabilities of their own online behaviour reported to the disclosure of personal data and positive reaction to an unknown approach. Children could be the main recipients of the research's findings through information campaigns

that should also emphasize more on educating the child as self-guardian of his behaviour in cyberspace.

● *Perspectives of further research*

Beyond the own contribution to knowledge, the findings of our research are revealing issues and new questions that might be deepen in new studies such as: a different side of the online behaviour of children namely their tendency/initiative to approach unknown person on social networking sites; a new perception on child's vulnerability as user of the Internet and of the social networking sites (in terms of their vision of this new form which we called "applied aptitudes" vulnerability); interviews in the same family, in the mirror, parent - child, to establish more clearly the influence of the adult monitoring on the online behaviour of the child and on his/her decisions while using the Internet and social networking; the nature of the "socialization" of children with strangers over the Internet etc.

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