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“If I don’t have Internet it makes me Sad”. An Exploratory Research on the Role of Digital Media in the Lives of Unaccompanied and Separated Children in Southern Italy

ABSTRACT

Through a qualitative research carried out in South-East Italy with twelve Unaccompanied and Separated Children (UASC) this paper attempts to explore their relation with the Internet and digital media. Findings reveal that digital tools facilitate communication and socialization and allow UASC to maintain relationships with social networks in their countries of origin as well as expand their networks in the country of residence within the migrant community. Digital media enhance access to information and leisure activities. Even if UASC recognize some risks of being online similar to those European adolescents face, it emerges that overall the Internet and digital media contribute to their wellbeing. They have the power to boost resilience *vis-à-vis* the challenges UASC face in their lives: being alone, in a new country, often institutionalized and without the support of a trustworthy adult figure.

Keywords:

unaccompanied and separated children, digital media, internet, children’s rights, adolescents, Italy

INTRODUCTION

During the past years, policy makers, civil society and academia have given special attention to Unaccompanied and Separated Children (UASC) because of the par-

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ticular situation of vulnerability they experience³ (see, among others: UN CMW & CRC, 2017a; UN CMW & CRC, 2017b; Council of Europe, 2016; Hunner-Kreisel & Bohne, 2016). Many of these children reach Europe's borders after long and dangerous migration journeys, often characterised by abuse, violence or neglect. While especially their rights to education and protection have been discussed by different stakeholders, there is still a lot to investigate and to reflect upon.

Research and policy regarding children's rights is turning to a crescent focus on the digital environment (see, among others: UNICEF et al., 2018; Council of Europe, 2016; Buckingham et al., 2014), with the certainty that offline and online borders of daily lives are blurry (Boyd, 2007). The mix of rapid technological changes and teenagers' experimentation has brought to a general preoccupation of parents, guardians, educators and institutions when it comes to adolescents' relation with digital media⁴ (Livingstone, 2013, p. 111). This preoccupation does not always include the diversity of children in its worries. While literature on children's rights in the digital environment is growing, there are no exhaustive information on certain groups of children who live in exceptionally vulnerable situations, and UASC are undoubtedly among them (Livingstone et al., 2017, p. 14).

Migrant youth has been the focus of various academic investigations regarding their use of media, including new media such as those connected to the Internet, but the research tends to be limited to those children who migrated with their families or to second generation migrants (Dhoest, 2015; Elias, 2013; International Communication Association, 2010; Leeuw & Rydin, 2007). Literature states that mass media provide young migrants with tools for adaptation, because they work as emotional support and they help socialisation with local peers and exploration of their new identity in formation (De Block and many others in Elias & Lemish, 2009, p. 2). Elias in particular identified *“three principal functions that the internet fulfils for immigrant youth: (1) A source of information about the new society and about the homeland and its culture; (2) a platform for online contacts with co-ethnics and native-born peers; and (3) a tool for preserving one's native language and improving host language skills”* (2013, p. 339). However, the extent to which these

3 According to General Comment n.6 of the United Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) *“Unaccompanied children” (also called unaccompanied minors) are children [...] who have been separated from both parents and other relatives and are not being cared for by an adult who, by law or custom, is responsible for doing so. “Separated children” are children [...] who have been separated from both parents [...] but not necessarily from other relatives. These may, therefore, include children accompanied by other adult family members. [...] “Country of origin” is the country of nationality [...] (2005, p. 6).*

4 “Digital media” designate all the range of activities in which youth engage, including, but not limited to the Internet, mobile phones, or games (Gilliam & Brindis, 2011, p. 1).

findings can be considered valid also when dealing with UASC is unclear. UASC are indeed a specific group of children who cannot count on the social support and networks from their relatives during their adaptation process in the new country. Studies exploring how they use and relate to digital media are currently lacking.

So far, some scholars have argued that those children who find themselves more vulnerable in their daily lives are more prone to risks online too (Livingstone & Helper, 2010 in Third et al., 2014, p. 15; Livingstone et al., 2012 in Livingstone, 2013, p. 116). Research consistently also shows that, for a variety of socio-structural reasons, these children have less opportunities to benefit from the online world and take the advantages that connectivity can provide to other groups of children (Livingstone et al., 2017, p. 14–15).

Within the above-mentioned framework, the authors decided to explore the relation of UASC with digital media. They looked at access to digital devices, online activities and skills, opportunities and risks connected to the use of digital media for this specific group of children. By involving youths in the research, the authors attempted at recognizing their *"own agency, experiences perspectives and priorities rather than imposing an adult agenda or adult values"* (Livingstone, 2013, p. 117). This paper aims to be an exploratory research, looking at UASC in Italy from an online-offline-continuum perspective and settling the ground for additional and larger-scale research in this field, starting from those issues and experiences UASC shared with their own voices.

METHODOLOGY AND ETHICS

The authors adopted a qualitative approach to explore the subjects' perspectives and activities in their temporal and local contexts (Flick, 2006). They conducted three focus group discussions and three one-on-one interviews with twelve adolescents, aged 17–18, who had been living in Apulia, a region in the South East of Italy, for an average of 8 months⁵. The sample was solicited using the strategy of

5 In accordance with the staff managing reception centres for UASC, it was decided to interview older children and young adults to limit the risks of protection of involving vulnerable younger children in the research. This is the reason why it was decided to also interview 18 years old youths who arrived in Italy as UASC and were inserted in the reception system for minors. Including 18 years old youths in the research was an opportunity to understand the experiences of those who transitioned from being UASC to being adults and could therefore shed light on the role digital media play in this phase. Moreover, interviewing young adults reduced the barriers to include individuals in the research, because to interview minors the consent of their legal guardians was needed.

convenience sampling and consisted of six girls and six boys coming from Ghana, Guinea Conakry, Mali, Nigeria, Senegal and Sudan.

After an introductory meeting in which the researchers explained the content and the purpose of the research to the adolescents collectively, the interviews were conducted in the facilities where the participants resided. The focus groups and one-on-one interviews were led by the two researchers simultaneously and were conducted either in French or English. All group discussions were conducted in same-sex groups; each group had between two and four participants, due to linguistic necessities and to grant optimal participation, as recommended by Fraser & Fraser (2000, p. 228).

While carrying out the field work, the authors reflected on the research ethical perspectives and the power imbalances in the relationship between the researchers and the participants. They made sure to follow all the steps to guarantee an ethical interaction with human subjects as recommended by Hopkins (2008) and Alderson & Morrow (2004). The authors thoroughly informed the adolescents about the content and the purpose of the research, about their possibility to refuse to participate, and that the information collected would only be used for research purposes. For all those youths who agreed to participate, informed consent forms were signed by them and their legal guardians. The confidentiality of the interviews and the anonymity of the participants was guaranteed at all stages of the research project.

Semi-structured interview guidelines were adjusted from the Qualitative Research Toolkit developed by the Global Kids Online network (UNICEF et al., 2018). The interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, anonymized and submitted to data analysis following the method of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012). The adolescents' names reported in the article are fictional and do not allow to trace back the original identity of the interviewees.

SOME INSIGHTS ON THE REALITIES LIVED BY THE RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS IN ITALY

In order to better understand the realities lived by the research participants, this paragraph provides some information about their living arrangements and their access to services, such as education and guardianship, in the host country.

All the adolescents interviewed lived in reception facilities for migrants; none of the interviewees lived in foster care or other living arrangements. In particular, some research participants lived in centres dedicated to the reception of UASC and others in centres dedicated to the reception of migrant adults. The majority

of the youths interviewed lived in secondary-line reception facilities within the SPRAR system⁶; a minority of them, those recently arrived, lived in temporary and first-line accommodation structures that only provide basic services in the wait that migrants are transferred to secondary reception facilities.

For what concerns schooling, none of the adolescents interviewed was enrolled in the formal public education system. In Italy compulsory schooling ends when a child turns 16 (Law 27/2006, number 296, art. 1), but there exists an educational duty that obliges children up to 18 years old to participate in formative activities in regular schools, in professional/technical schools or in vocational training (educational duty is regulated by law 144/1999.). UASC are deemed recipients of education and training, including educational duty by article 1.3 of Law Decree 76/2005 and they are guaranteed access to education at any point in the school year (Center for the Study of Democracy, 2012, p. 145). In particular, UASC above 16 years who wish to access education beyond compulsory age can access adult education through centres for the education of adults where they can get certificates for middle and secondary schools. The fact that none of the interviewees was enrolled in any form of training or education at the time data collection was carried out shows the delays with which access to services is provided to these adolescents and highlights the potential of accessing alternative means to engage in learning activities and socialization.

It is also paramount to notice that not all the adolescents interviewed were yet assigned a legal guardian, i.e. an individual with the mandate to legally represent the child, accompany the child in its process of upbringing and ensure that all actors involved in the child's protection system work considering the child's best interest and views. Furthermore, those who were assigned guardians did not have an intimate relationship with them. Indeed, given the high number of UASC arrived in Italy in the last decade, trained adults available to become guardian lack. Hence, the judicial authority ended up appointing mainly "institutional guardians", such as the mayor, council members, social services or their delegates, or "professional guardians", such as lawyers (Defence for Children, 2018, p. 11). Institutional or professional guardianship tends to be exercised solely in a formal and bureaucratic manner, limited to the fulfilment of urgent legal practices and procedures, often in a standardized fashion for all those UASC assigned to the same guardian and without developing personalized paths (*ibid.*). Therefore, the important aspect of guardianship that concerns building a relationship of trust between the guardian

6 SPRAR means "Sistema di Protezione per Richiedenti Asilo e Rifugiati" (i.e. "System of Protection for Asylum Seekers and Refugees"). Reception facilities in the SPRAR system are second-line reception centres funded by the Ministry of Interior in Italy with the mandate of providing services that allow the inclusion and integration of their beneficiaries in the host society.

and its ward and supporting the adolescents in their process of adaptation and integration in the host community is absent.

Being institutionalized, not attending formal public schools and lacking a guardian with a substantial role in their lives, all have negative implications in UASC's ability to familiarize with the host community, access a wider social network and build relationships of trust and friendship in the place where they reside. The realities lived by the young interviewees are somehow worrisome and emphasize the critical role that digital media may have in fulfilling some of their needs otherwise unmet.

DIGITAL ACCESS AND ONLINE ACTIVITIES

The following paragraphs describe digital access and online activities as explained by the interviewees. Mobile phones are the only device they use, even if the access to the Internet connection varies quite a lot, on the basis of the different policies in place in the homes where they are staying. Being connected is important in Italy, but was not a priority during the migration journey, especially considering living conditions in Libya. Digital devices are mainly a tool for leisure time and communication, sometimes also an instrument to learn and to get information on issues that interest them, often through the filter of Social Network Sites (SNSs).

DEVICES AND INTERNET CONNECTION

All the adolescents interviewed own a mobile phone and, exactly like their European peers (Livingstone et al. 2011, p. 12), they go online on personal and mobile devices. Only Kalifa (boy, 17) told the researchers his phone broke as soon as he arrived in Apulia from Sicily; hence, at the time of the interview, he did not have one. None of the participants owns a laptop and majority of them explicitly stated that they do not know how to use one. Charity (girl, 18) said she would need a laptop only later, when she will have *"something important to do"*. Claudia (girl, 17) instead feels the limits of her device, stating that she would like to have a laptop to store information because *"there are things the laptop can carry that my phone can't carry"*. Yalla also complains about his phone and the Wi-Fi connection:

"You know me I would like to do a lot of things, but my phone is a small one, it is not a big one, it is not like yours, it is a small Samsung. If you want to look at many things, if there are a lot of people, the connection doesn't work." (boy, 17)

When it comes to the Internet connection, ten out of twelve interviewees connect exclusively through Wi-Fi. Four girls have free Wi-Fi in their homes and can

connect also from their rooms. In the temporary accommodation where three of the interviewees are staying, the Wi-Fi connection is only accessible in the common area, giving them the possibility of being online solely for some hours per day. On the other hand, two of the girls interviewed do not have Wi-Fi connection in their home and buy phone credit with their own money to recharge their phones and be online. From this picture it is clear that digital access largely depends on the home of residence and, consequently, on the public or private organisation managing it.

Using digital devices and being online are an important part of the "Italian lives" of the research participants; on the contrary, not all of them owned a mobile phone in their countries of origin and, for those who did, it was not always a smartphone. For those who had a device, keeping it safely during the migration journey, especially during the permanence in Libya, was a challenge. Yalla (boy, 17) managed to hide it and used his own money to pay for a data plan. Kokuloco (boy, 17) had his phone stolen. Owning a mobile phone was mentioned as not being a concern at all in Libya:

"You don't have time to think about phone. At times you are suffering...you are not thinking about the phone. I just want to go. I just want to go. That's all you think" (Crystal, girl, 17)

LEISURE, COMMUNICATION AND INFORMATION

The research participants are online often and for a variety of reasons. Certainly, online activities constitute leisure time for them. They use their mobile phones to watch movies and football, listen to or download music, play videogames, even watch African theatre. Some of them told us they used to watch television in their countries of origin, but now they use their mobile phones as their own TV. YouTube is indeed one software application (hereinafter "app") they all use. Two girls also mentioned Viki, a Korean app to watch mainly Indian, Korean and Filipino films with English subtitles.

Mobile devices are also a fundamental tool for communication. All the interviewees have WhatsApp, Facebook, Imu and Google Translate as apps in their phones. Some of them also use Instagram and WeChat. Some of the girls used the application ToGo when they lived in Nigeria, but not in Italy. When it comes to acquiring information and learning instead, apart from some specific apps to learn Italian language, information of all sorts is filtered by social networks (Facebook and Instagram) or watched on YouTube.

According to the research project "Net Children Go Mobile", Italian children and adolescents between 9 and 16 years old go online especially to access Social Network Sites (SNSs), listen to music and watch videos (Mascheroni and Ólafsson)

son, 2015, p. 11). Like them, UASC, even if a little older, use the Internet above all as a tool for fun, socialisation and communication. For all these children and adolescents, digital media activities take place mainly in a private space conceived for adults and owned by big companies (Childwise, 2011 in Livingstone, 2013).

The interviewees know how to play videogames with others online, download films and music and share content via SNSs or webcam. In a sort of “ladder of opportunities” highlighting what are the digital competences of European children, UASC seem to reach what EU Kids Online defines as “Step 4 out of 5”, in line with 56% of their European peers (Livingstone et al., 2011, p. 12). Step 5, the highest on the “ladder” of digital opportunities, comprises “visiting chatrooms, file-sharing, blogging and spending time in a virtual world”, collaborative and creative online activities that most children and adolescents, UASC included, do not engage with (Livingstone et al., 2011, p. 15).

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The analysis of the interviews and group discussions brought up different phenomena and themes. The following paragraphs elaborate on those that are more representative of the experiences, opinions and needs of all the UASC who participated in the research: (i) engagement with digital media to communicate and socialise; (ii) use of online connection to access different types of information; and (iii) online situations that make UASC feel uncomfortable and expose them to risks.

COMMUNICATION AND SOCIALISATION

Several scholars acknowledge the importance of digital media in facilitating communication and socialization for migrant communities after diaspora. The tendency of migrants to maintain contacts with the homeland, “*bonding social capital*”, and to familiarize and participate in the host society, “*bridging social capital*”, has been first theorised by Putnam (2000) and widely used in the literature about media and migration (in Peeters and d’Haenens, 2005, pp. 201-202). Research findings show that the Internet and social media play a role in enhancing communication and socialization for migrant children too. They reinforce ties with families and friends in the countries of origin and enhance connections with peers in the host community, thus contributing to both “bonding” and “bridging” (Elias, 2013, p. 340).

The bonding effect of digital media is relevant for migrant communities given the ability of the Internet to transcend temporal and geographical boundaries. It is considered particularly useful for migrant children as it can provide emotional and

moral support after a sudden decrease in communication and socialisation resources due to migration (Elias, 2013, p. 339). Previous research showed that being able to maintain relationships with loved ones notwithstanding the geographical distance increases the mental health of children (Kim et al., 2009; Fogt and Sandvik, 2008; Yang et al., 2004), making digital media powerful tools in contributing to migrant children's wellbeing. These considerations have been developed when analysing the use of digital media by migrant children who migrated with their families or accompanied by a caregiver, but the present research findings underline the importance of digital media in "bonding social capital" for UASC as well.

Most of the research participants use apps to communicate and socialize with family and friends in their country of origin by calling them or chatting with them. They also incur in socialisation through SNSs by looking at pictures of their friends and by posting their own pictures to show how they are doing. However, not all UASC interviewed talk with family or friends. This is the case for some Nigerian girls, for whom having contacts with their country of origin could perhaps be dangerous, and for one boy whose family members live in rural areas and do not have any access to the Internet.

Many of the interviewees say they communicate online with friends living in Italy or Europe that they met in person before or during the migration journey or after their arrival in Italy. Others socialize online with people that they have never met offline and currently reside in the same regional area. As it is mostly the case for the Nigerian girls, they connect with people who share their nationality because it gives them some sense of security. *"There are different people from different countries, different places. I don't know them. I don't accept them. I don't know them very well. But my friends from Nigeria, I know them, I know where they come from"* says Daniela talking about her online friendships (girl, 18). Elias (2013, p. 340) confirms this trend: migrant children use digital media to connect with peers of the same nationality in the host country and this can foster young people's emotional and social support⁷. Furthermore, from the analysis of the interviews, it emerged that, thorough digital media, UASC are in contact with others also to provide them help and support in case of need.

In the light of all the above, it seems true that for UASC, as for migrants in general, digital media play a role in keeping active ties and contacts with family and friends but also weaker ties, within geographically dispersed networks of

⁷ The case of Nigerian girls is quite peculiar and would require in-depth research since they are often victims of trafficking or at risk of being trafficked. Having contact online with Nigerians they do not know offline may pose them at risk of being trapped in the hands of traffickers once again.

individuals (Dekker & Engbersen, 2013, p. 406). However, UASC do not seem to use the Internet and social media to communicate with Italians; they rather speak in person with the Italians they know, who are often only educators and people working in the reception centres. None of the UASC interviewed goes to regular schools and they only attend Italian language lessons for migrants. In the absence of opportunities to meet Italian peers in the offline world, it seems very difficult for them to use digital media to engage in conversations and socialization with native peers in the host community, especially considering that chatting in Italian is difficult since they do not feel comfortable with the language.

Therefore, in the experiences of UASC recently arrived in Italy the “bridging” effect of digital media and the phenomenon of “cross-cultural adaptation” through digital media seem inexistent. It could be argued that digital media alone cannot facilitate interpersonal encounters for adolescents who come from different cultural and social backgrounds. However, they could act as a multiplier effect: once the opportunities to meet native peers exist in the offline world, digital media can support the strengthening of these ties. In the absence of these opportunities, migrant children continue to build communities on the basis of their interest, a phenomenon that is possible thanks to the open structure offered by social media (Boyd and Ellison, 2008, p. 219).

INTERNET AS A SOURCE OF INFORMATION AND A LEARNING TOOL

In her literature review on migrant children and media, Elias underlines that digital media situate migrant adolescents in a “*transnational circuit of news and ideas, where they are exposed to diverse political narratives, social expectations, cultural values, and societal experiences*” and help them shaping their new “*hybrid identity*” made of perspectives coming from both their country of origin and the new hosting one (Elias, 2013, p. 339). In a similar fashion, the research participants use the Internet to acquire information on the reality close to them but also to keep up with the cultural world they feel they belong to.

News on what is happening in their country of origin often comes via social networks and the same could be said for information on events in Italy: “*Me I like it [Facebook] for another thing. Because I once saw on Facebook that there was an accident on train in Milan. If I don’t have Internet I won’t be able to get that information as fast as possible. So I saw it with my own two eyes*” (Daniela, girl, 18).

Some of the interviewees also listen to radio programmes and watch TV channels to keep updated on events of all sorts. In this case, language is an important variable, because, not knowing Italian yet, the adolescents look for information only in their mother tongue. Kokuloco sometimes watches “*Ghana news, radio*

station or TV station" (boy, 17). Mba (boy, 18) looks for information on countries where they speak Bambara and French languages. Yalla has an interest in Western foreign politics, watching Channel France 24 on YouTube: *"Yes, this interests me, people speak a good French. Me too, I would like to always talk, listen to newspapers, to information, learn"* (boy, 17). Some of the girls use Instagram to keep updated on their favourite actors and actresses and check the last news about them in English: *"I just go to Instagram to see actors, actresses, all these celebrities. There I can just check the name of the drama they acted recently. Then I can go to You Tube and check for the drama and watch it. Or I will just wait for the drama to be out to watch it"* (Miracle, girl, 17).

For UASC, digital media could also be an instrument to get information on their specific situation as minors in a foreign country and help them cope with the challenges they face in their daily lives. However, the words of the interviewees do not show this is actually happening, if not in a limited manner. Charity (girl, 18) explains she sometimes uses Google Maps to check where a place is, how far it is from her home, but none of the other interviewees does that. Google Translate is an app they all use to be able to communicate with people around them, but digital media do not help all of them learning the new language. Three boys showed a series of different apps they installed on their phones to learn Italian (Abc Italiano, Italian fun easy learn, Italian Phrasebook, Italian for easy learn), but others said they do not use any online resource to improve their language skills, they just installed apps to translate words during Italian classes.

Language is indeed a huge problem for UASC and lack of knowledge of Italian also limits their understanding of their legal situation: *"For me I just enter...polizia... Polizia di Stato. I enter to see documents, often there are information, for papers. Often the problem is that I do not understand well because everything is in Italian"* (Mba, boy, 18). Daniela (girl, 18), as soon as she arrived in Italy, tried to look for information on *"how the government can help"* in English, but she could not find anything. However, she added, she was not disappointed because the educators and social workers explained her face to face all she needed to know. All the other interviewees also found valuable the information they received face to face by people working in the migration sector and they never thought about looking for information online.

The same could be said when referring to UASC's experience before starting the migration journey or during it. Digital media and online resources did not play an important role during the migration process and, especially in Libya, their use was very limited due to restrained living conditions. Some of the interviewees never looked for information online before coming to Italy, especially because they had limited Internet access in their countries of origin. Kalifa (boy, 17) sometimes used

a mobile phone with his friends. Together, they wrote to or called people they knew were travelling through the same route and asked for information. Yalla looked for information while in Libya to understand if it was possible to attempt the journey through the Mediterranean: *“Of course I did this. I always look how [...] I cross, because I hear people who say that the crossing stopped [...] there are a lot of things. But me I...I always look, always look [...] then I tried, and I arrived”* (boy, 17).

Dekker and Engbersen state that in migrant networks information on laws, job opportunities, or illegal ways of crossing borders spread very quickly, affecting migration strategies, and that social media not only might help people migrating, but could also fuel their wish to do it, since they *“provide users with unrealistic or even false information”* (2014, p. 401). However, the present analysis does not fully confirm this theory when it comes to UASC. Digital media did not play an important role before or during the migration journeys of the research participants. Some of the interviewees were forced to migrate, some are probably victims of trafficking, others did it quite impulsively; certainly, only few of them planned their journey, and not with information acquired via digital media, but mainly through word of mouth. Digital media constituted, when possible, just a limited instrument to acquire safety-related information to survive a very dangerous irregular migration route⁸.

UNCOMFORTABLE FEELINGS AND INAPPROPRIATE CONTENT

The research findings highlight large use of social networks by UASC, with a preference for video content, in line with the online activities of adolescents all over the world. Social networks are characterised by User Generated Content (UGC)⁹ and the interviewees sharply criticise some of it. The research project EU Kids Online highlights that children and adolescents who use SNSs are more exposed to inappropriate content and potentially risky experiences than those who do not use SNSs (Livingstone et al. 2011, p. 19). In Italy, 18% of children and adolescents has seen potentially harmful UGC (Livingstone et al., 2011, p. 29). Indeed, also UASC discuss their uncomfortable online experiences within the framework of UGC in SNSs, Facebook in particular. The research participants explain they often come across videos depicting racist and violent scenes and

8 These results apply to the UASC that were interviewed who were inserted in the system of reception for migrants and were not planning to further migrate to other EU countries. However, it may be different for those UASC who escape the reception system in Italy and undertake a migration journey within the EU, as digital media may very well be a source of information.

9 “UGC takes many forms: text/comments, videos, pictures, software applications, etc. Often UGC is monitored by website administrators to avoid offensive content or language and copyright infringement issues, or simply to be sure content posted is relevant to the site’s topic. There are usually no fees for uploading UGC” (Levine, 2011, p. 22).

pornographic or sexist contents, besides those showing migrants drowning trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea. They label them as extremely disturbing and inappropriate contents for a social network: *"this social media is not for this"* (Claudia, girl, 17). Dia's statement perfectly outlines what makes the interviewees feel uncomfortable:

"For example racism. Personally it hurts me a lot. When I watch these videos, when I see these videos I do not even want to watch. And what I just said, people who die in the Mediterranean, because it makes me sad that. I cannot watch. And then there are also people that insult, with bullshit videos or pornography on the Internet, and yet that's not their place there. Precisely on Facebook that, if you want there is another site where you can go there to watch, but on Facebook it's not its place there. But there are people, they do anything on Facebook" (boy, 18).

One third of the interviewees complain about racism on the basis of their skin-colour and on hate content towards migrants – things that they experience both online and in their daily lives. If compared to data collected by EU Kids Online, stating that one out of five 15-16 year olds have been exposed to hate sites (Livingstone et al., 2011, p. 28), UASC seem to perceive this problem more than their European peers.

Furthermore, one fourth of the interviewees expressed concern about people filming them without their consent, manipulating content and spreading it online. One of the interviewees also experienced online identity theft on SNSs, more or less in line with EU Kids Online data stating that 7% of European children had somebody else use their password or access their online information (Livingstone et al., 2011, p. 28).

During most of the interviews, sexual explicit content is mentioned as disturbing and distressing. All the Nigerian girls talked about and showed one video displaying black men playing with white sex dolls. The sexist and stereotypical content of the video disturbed the girls. Erotic or sexually explicit UGC by some Facebook friends was also mentioned in various interviews, with the girls talking about it much more than the boys. They recalled cases of sexting¹⁰ and revenge-porn¹¹ where people they knew were involved, as well as online stalking. The boys instead did not elaborate too much on *"nonsense girls"* and it is difficult to state if

10 The act of taking and sending (and receiving) nude or semi-nude pictures in sexually provocative poses with digital devices (mobile phone, computers, tablets, etc.), generating a sort of self-produced media product (Kopecky, 2015; Mitchell et al., 2012; Chalfen, 2009, p. 258).

11 "Revealing of sexually explicit images or videos of a person posted on the Internet, typically by a former sexual partner, without the consent of the subject and in order to cause them distress or embarrassment" (en.oxforddictionaries.com).

they felt disturbed by actual sexually explicit content or if they expressed moral judgment on the clothing and style of some female Facebook friends.

An interesting finding of the present research is that, in countertrend with their Italian peers who worry and suffer because of cyber-bullying¹² more than any other uncomfortable online experience (Mascheroni and Ólafsson, 2015, p. 33), UASC do not fear it and cyberbullying does not emerge from their words as an issue. EU Kids Online states that 56% of cyber-bullies also bullied people face-to-face, and 55% of the victims said they have also been bullied face-to-face (Livingstone et al., 2011, p. 24). Considering bullying takes place online and offline, it could be assumed that, since UASC do not have a strong network of “offline” peers, especially because they do not attend school, they are less exposed to bullying as well, and this reflects on their online preoccupations which are more inclined towards inappropriate content, cyber-stalking, revenge-porn and identity theft.

No matter which kind of videos or pictures the research participants find disturbing and offensive on social networks, they do absolutely nothing about it: *“I just go my way and that’s all good”* (Kokuloku, boy, 17); *“Sometimes if I don’t like it I would just swipe it out, I would just leave the page”* (Charity, girl, 18); *“Yes, just scroll”* (Miracle, girl, 17) were some of their answers when asked what do they usually do when they come across a content they find inappropriate. This behaviour is also in line with the reaction of their European peers, who show difficulty in responding to inappropriate material that has been produced by their friends or peers and usually prefer to let it go away (Livingstone et al., 2011, p. 20).

However, these reactions cannot be labelled as disinterest or lack of engagement. When talking about issues of sexism, violence or racism online both the boys and girls were very vocal and looked for some sort of answers and solutions from adults. Miracle (girl, 17) kept asking *“Why do people use fake names on Facebook?”* or *“Why do they put sex dolls?”*, while Dia posed an ethical question: *“I would like to know from you, as researchers, as I have just said, videos that are found on the Internet like this, for example serious accidents, whether it’s a car, or in the water, or racism between blacks and Europeans...if something like that is necessary on the Internet or not? That’s what I want to know, if it’s good or if it’s not good. Because I honestly do not like it at all.”* (boy, 17)

12 Cyberbullying is when a child, preteen or teen is tormented, threatened, harassed, humiliated, embarrassed or otherwise targeted by another child, preteen or teen using the Internet, interactive and digital technologies or mobile phones. It has to have a minor on both sides, or at least have been instigated by a minor against another minor. Once adults become involved, it is plain and simple cyber-harassment or cyber-stalking (stopcyberbullying.org).

During the interviews, the researchers felt like pausing to talk to the boys about racism, briefly reflecting with them on ignorance and on how people are afraid of differences, suggesting them to try to be patient and focus on the positive side of things. They chatted with the girls and checked together how they could avoid on their Facebook wall some unpleasant content posted by their friends, without "unfriending" them. "Active mediation", meaning "actively talking to or sitting with children or sharing online activities" is the most effective way to empower them to cope with online risks without neglecting digital opportunities (Livingstone et al., 2011, p. 26); however, the interviewees do not seem to engage with such mediation with the adults around them.

As other boys and girls of their age, UASC express concern at seeing adult content, especially violence and pornography, and often call for adult support in strengthening their own coping strategies (Byrne et al., 2016 in Livingstone et al., 2017, p. 25; Third et al., 2014; Livingstone, et al., 2011). Like all adolescents, they would like to be guided to experience a positive online world, to be empowered and learn how to protect themselves offline as much as online.

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS AND LIMITS

In general terms, the present research highlights some digital divide¹³ between UASC and their EU native peers, both in terms of access and digital literacy¹⁴. Since some UASC reside in institutions, they have less access to the Internet in a private environment than their Italian 15–16 year-old peers, whose 82% go online from their own room (Mascheroni & Ólafsson, 2015, p. 6). Furthermore, even among those who stay in home-care facilities, not all have Wi-fi available there. UASC's possibilities of being online are indeed connected to their socio-economic status, but, notwithstanding that, they engage in similar online activities as most European adolescents. Probably, the main difference resides in the fact that UASC miss a large amount of digital educational opportunities that are offered by family and school environments to European and Italian teenagers. At times, they arrive in Italy without knowing how to use WhatsApp and Facebook, tools widely adopted by their European counterparts, and they are only introduced to them by the edu-

13 The digital divide refers to the different abilities that people have to use the Internet and social media for their purposes (Hargittai 2007).

14 "Digital literacy is about the equipment, autonomy, skill, support and range of use among people who are already online." (Dekker & Engbersen, 2013, p. 412).

cators in the reception facilities; however, the present research does not show any evidence of an “active mediation” by educators in relation to digital media.

For UASC recently arrived in Italy, who live in a new environment alone and far from their families, the smartphone emerges as a tool to escape the physical boundaries of their lives and allows them to maintain old relationships and build new ones, be informed about the situation in their regions of origin and occupy their free time, especially watching videos and navigating SNSs. Previous research shows that for migrant adolescents “*virtual life*” can counterbalance the difficulties arising from relocation and resettlement in a new environment (Elias & Lemish, 2009, p. 4). Moreover, online activities facilitate access to information and contact with pre-existing support networks, and by doing so improve children’s wellbeing (Livingstone et al., 2017, p. 15). The present research results are in line with these findings. The Internet and digital media allow communication and socialization with families and friends in UASC’s countries of origin, as well as favour interactions and the extension of social networks in Italy, mostly with other individuals with a migration background. They are also extraordinary tools when it comes to accessing news, information and activities for the leisure time. Moreover, digital media offer great emotional support to UASC, allowing them to feel better and accompanying them in dealing with the challenging conditions of their present lives.

In relation to online risks, the present research findings highlight that exposure to racist and sexist or sexually explicit content, together with identity theft, are among the uncomfortable online experiences of UASC, as well as their European peers (Livingstone et al., 2017, p. 23). Cyber-bullying instead has not emerged as a critical issue for the interviewees. These results would need additional investigations because they are potentially worrying in terms of UASC’s integration in the host countries. For example, in their study regarding racism in the digital era, TaeHyuk Keum and Miller explain that for people of colour online racism could be a major chronic stressor with respect to “offline” racism since it is more pervasive, not bounded to a discrete point of time and not static (2017, p. 311). Racist messages, videos and pictures are constantly being shared and easily available for UASC to encounter on SNSs, even months after they have been initially produced; furthermore, the digital landscape allows for a continuous modification and reinvention of such contents, creating a “*never-ending pipeline*” (Ibid.) of stressful online experiences for migrant children and adolescents.

Hence the interviewees expressed their interest and curiosity in learning how to protect themselves online and posed ethical questions about the appropriateness of certain UGC. It seems clear that these young people would like to receive support from adults to strengthen their coping strategies, since they never mention

avoiding using smartphones or digital media as a solution to their online negative experiences. Instead, not having a phone in their words is often associated with not sleeping, feeling lonely, isolated or bored.

As a matter of fact, in the context of the lives of UASC recently arrived in Italy, the Internet and digital media seem to be a protective factor contributing to resilience; they make them better off and boost their capacity to have positive outcomes in the new environment. However, the Internet and digital media only contribute to resilience whenever they are accompanied by other protective factors. When the minimum standards of living and human dignity are not ensured, as in the participants' narrations of the time spent in Libya, the role of phones and digital media becomes irrelevant. Moreover, literature shows that children's inner resources and competencies are essential but not enough to mediate between risk and resilience; interpersonal relationships are another fundamental aspect needed to achieve positive outcomes (Boyden & Mann, 2005, p. 7).

European parents and teachers play a fundamental role in keeping children safe on the Internet and they can also empower children to gain digital skills, while 44% of EU children say that peers are their most reliable source of information and support when it comes to the online world (Livingstone et al., 2011, pp. 34-36/41). Without the close support of their families and with no access to school, the social safety net UASC can rely on is very restrained, and this has consequences in the way online risks can affect them. For these reasons, interventions that have the objective to promote inclusion and integration of these adolescents in the local community are strongly recommended to enhance both their offline and online wellbeing.

While the strength of the present article lies in the fact that the voices, experiences and perspectives of UASC are included in the research, unfortunately the sample is small and heterogeneous in terms of gender, migration paths and countries of origin. For example, 50% of sample is composed of female UASC from Nigeria. On the positive side, female UASC are under-represented in research (Trujillo, 2017, p. 12) and their inclusion makes this a valuable attempt to understand their experiences, too often unheard; even if, in the analysis of the interviews, the authors only discuss those themes in common among all different research participants. Many themes related to online gender relationship, including sexting, revenge-porn and cyber-stalking emerged during the focus groups with the Nigerian girls but were not exhaustively included in the analysis.

Moreover, the research focuses rather on the current relation that UASC have with digital media. It could be interesting to deepen the aspects of UASC's use of digital media before and during migration. Dekker and Engbersen argue that social media have the potential to transform migration networks and facilitate

migration (2013, p. 401). The present research does not support these findings. The use of the Internet and digital media before and during migration seem very limited. Additional research in this field could provide more robust insights and themes to reflect upon.

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