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## Article

# Digital literacy among young adults in Romania

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## Digital Literacy Among Young Adults in Romania

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**Abstract.** *The present study has the purpose to analyze the digital behavior and the digital literacy among young adults in Romania. The first part of the paper investigates the literature studies regarding the essay's subject, exposing concepts as reference group, social inclusion, groupthink, social façade, gadget and digital literacy. We are investigating also the perceived risks in the internet usage and the self-perception in handling digital devices. The research included three focus groups applied on young people from the 20-29 years old age cluster, urban residence in Romania. The main results exposed that both social media and technology have a central role in young people's lives, by helping them ease communication, get to information and stay entertained. In choosing the platforms they use, it's important the friendly interface, the range of activities they can do and the user profile in general, age and interest related. Results show that the participants perceive technology as having both positive and negative impact. They report that they do not perceive any major risks in using social media and that this matter wasn't considered an issue when using a digital platform until now. The participants have a positive attitude about their digital skills and are declared open to learn new features. An interesting subject that was brought to attention was the children exposure to inappropriate information in using technology and the concern they raised about the subject.*

**Keywords:** *digital literacy; social media; new technologies.*

### Introduction

The digitalized world is evolving at fast pace and we have to evolve with it. The communication nowadays is continuous; we either give or receive information at any second of our day. You can give a call, share a photo on Facebook or an Insta Story, you are connected all the time. Our connections, our platforms, our likes increase each day, so should our skills. Digital skills should be evolving with the trends; therefore, it's important to be aware of your digital literacy level. The digital literacy theme explores a new field, contemporary and interesting. The topic has been researched in different cultural spaces in the world, but it's still a young subject in Romania, with umpteen insights undiscovered yet.

The first part of the paper investigates the literature studies regarding the essay's theme. Firstly, we expose the main social concepts that guide us through the digital and consumerism era, the effect of the reference group on how we live, think and act and the information redundancy in the "informational era" (Schifirnet, 2004). We

also explore the meaning of fashion and the importance of the “status” objects (Baudrillard, 1970/2008) and the communication biases we experience in today’s world (Meyers, 2014). Secondly, we give an insight into other relevant researches about digital literacy (Cohn, 2016; Sabatino, 2014). Thirdly, we present an induction in social media, about the users and the particularities of each platform analyzed. The last topic of the first chapter is about the digital parameter in Romania and Europe, based on the weekly access rate on target group categories, the weekly access rate evolution in Romania in the last 10 years and digital level skills within target groups in both regions mentioned above.

The second part of the study represents a qualitative research composed of three focus group discussions of 40-50 minutes per session. In this section we explore the young adults’ feelings, attitudes, framework of understanding about digital media use and their skill level. We present the research question and the methodology used, as also the analysis and the discussion of the findings. The analysis section has six main topics, giving insight in matters like perception about technology and social media, the role of social groups in digital presence, consciousness about digital risks and auto-perception of their digital skills. We included here also the research limits, as well as the proposals for future investigations. The final part summarizes the main conclusions draw in the paper, the key findings and learning provided during this investigation.

## **Social behavior in the digital era**

### ***The digital society and social psychology***

In the consumerism society that we live in today, people are not surrounded anymore with other people, but with objects, owning things give us the sense of power and abundance. In the past, objects were meant to last for multiple generations, but nowadays we can see them born, exist and die under our eyes. The objects put on display today have a bigger significance for the consumer as a whole package, than they have as a specific useful tool. The purchase process of an item brings with it the need to buy the next item, as a logical action to be made. The young generations enhanced not only objects, but also the natural right to the abundance. The need perspective is purely based on one simple principle: the principle of happiness. In the consumerism era, the happiness is not real if you cannot measure it in a quantifying way, through all owned objects. The consumption is an active and collective process used as a mean to group inclusion and social control, being a process that is based on learning (Baudrillard, 1970/2008).

The socialization is the basic process of communicating the culture and the social organization from one generation to the next, insuring the extension of the society, in order to be prepared for existing in a social covey. The functionalist view states that the socialization is fundamental to include a person in the society, in order to maintain social balance. The main processes of socialization are the imitation, to assimilate other’s behavior, the social adaptation, to act as your main social status and role, cultural inclusion, the assimilation of the values and symbols of one culture

and the social integration, the relationship between the person and the society in order to reach social equilibrium (Schifirneț, 2004).

In Baudrillard's (1970/2008) view, fashion is a cyclical process that does not change the characteristic of the person, but it makes it mandatory for social inclusion and acceptance. The gadget is not defined by its practical utility, but by its symbolic value, being the emblem of the post-industrial era. Baudrillard (1970/2008) concludes that the gadget is actually defined by its "functional inutility"<sup>1</sup>. The spare time is a break from the production time, being still in the production cycle. The spare time guides itself from the mental concepts of the production time. The leisure is not a function of pleasure, satisfaction and rest, but it is unproductive time consumption. The leisure time is not defined as a singular entity, but it's defined as the absence of work time. The leisure doesn't mean available time, but its display.

The reference group is a covey of which norms and rules are adopted as a reference frame for other individuals from outside the entity. This type of structure is a social unit used in the evaluation and shapes the individual's attitudes, feelings and actions. For example, the immigrant tends to assimilate the cultural model of the country he immigrated to, letting go to the original cultural model of his mother country. The reference groups' functions are the normative one, influencing the way the individual thinks and acts, the comparative function, by evaluating his own actions in comparison with the standards of the reference group, the associative function, which means the change of the members' status in the covey (Schifirneț, 2004).

Groupthink is the tendency to align to the formation ideas and points of view to be socially accepted by the others. Groupthink effect can lead to poor choices and decisions, which are not favorable, but most important; they are not good when it's at stake a country or a nation's fate. This phenomenon may lead to undesirable consequences when you are about to undertake political decisions (Meyers, 2014). The first main symptom of groupthink is overestimation of the group's right, including the illusion of invulnerability or the belief in its morality. The second symptom is constituted of the close-minded members, by defending and justifying each action or has a stereotyped view of the opponent, which happened in the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba, when they thought it was a sure thing and didn't get the time to real figure out the situation of its outcomes. The third main symptom of groupthink is the uniformity of thinking, including the pressure to conform of the members, by using technics as sarcasm to keep other not having a different opinion, self-censorship as the previous effect and the illusion of unanimity, made by the lack of a different opinion. The last symptom is made of mindguards, the people who don't let in the information which may break the consensus in the formation. The preventing factors are the impartiality, the critical evaluation, subdivision in smaller coveys, to welcome critics from outside and call a second chance meeting (Meyers, 2014).

The fundamental attribution error occurs when we try to explain other people behaviors. When we are referring to ourselves, we are inclined to blame the situation, but when talking about others we are blaming their traits and attitudes.

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<sup>1</sup> Translated from Romanian: "Inutilitate funcțională"

For people the reality is what they can perceive. If a person is smiling and is happy, then this person has a good energy and we think she's happy in her day life also. We neglect to consider the situation she is put into or other external factors. The main point of the concept is that for other people, a person is the way she appears to be (Meyers, 2014).

A social façade tends to be formed because of the stereotypical expectations, becoming a collective representation and a fact within all given rights. On the social scene, when an actor takes over his stage, he finds out that his façade has already been assigned to him, playing because he has given this task or because he wants to cultivate the assigned façade, he has to do both. When an individual presents himself to the others, his performance tends to illustrate the values officially known of the society, more than his behavior does. This is looked at an expressive reaffirmation of the values shared within a community (Goffman, 1959/2007). The informational society is the space where people have the ability to use the informational technology, as an outcome to the rapid development of electronics and telecommunication. In the beginning of the informational society the optimism related to what this society can offer was high, because it meant the development of self-learning and intellectual emancipation. Like any other phenomenon, the informational society has its downfall, like the redundancy phenomenon and the excess of information, which lead to saturation phenomenon (Schifirneț, 2004). Dominick (2009) also studies the social implications of new media, finding the following: the lack of gatekeepers to filter the undesired messages, the overload with data, the absence of the interpretation founded in classical media, confidentiality problems and the legal regulatory need.

### ***Digital literacy***

Rahmah (2015) in the journey to better understand digital literacy, researched in order to create a system, which has the purpose to help better learn to use gadgets based on the Indonesian culture and context. The digital knowledge can be transferred through specific informal initiatives, having parents and family as a main role model for using correctly the technology. Other option to become digital literate is communicating through religious beliefs specific rules of acting. Another system includes self-learning by establishing a set of steps of comprehension and understanding levels, until you become fully aware of the correct ways to use digital methods. To empower digital media users, you have to learn by three dimensions, technical, cognitive and socio-emotional. The technical is related to the actual use of the technologies, the cognitive dimension is meant as a filter to handle useful information when using technology and socio-emotional is referring to the purpose of using technologies, like learning and creating social connection.

In Sabatino's (2014) vision, digital literacy is composed of "the public nature of writing, social networking through technological mediums, communicating with others through a social medium, and deciphering multi-modes at one time". As Bawden (2008) describes, the main competencies of digital literacy are the internet searching and navigating in the purpose of find necessary information, the hypertext navigation, the knowledge gathering with using online tools and the evaluation of the

data and content existing in cyberspace. The digital literacy has extended its meaning from the capacity to read and write on digital channels, to the ability to decode information no matter the presentation mode, written, visual etc.

Ferrari (2003) describes digital competencies as the knowledge, skills and attitudes one has in a digitalized environment. The author's purpose is to find out how to fill the digital competence gap by better understanding the concept. She classified the 21 competence in five categories. The main categories of digital literacy are information, communication, content-creation, safety and problem solving. The information related to digital literacy is meant to be identified, stored and analyzed based on the how relevant it is. The communication area refers to how to share resources and how to collaborate using technological means, creating networks and "cross-cultural awareness". The third area refers to the creation of content as text, image or video and produce media outputs as intellect property. The safety matter is concerned with personal information protection and digital safety and security. The last category is the problem-solving, which comprises the identification of the needs and the capability of taking decision about technical problem-solving means and the creative use of digital society.

Cohn (2016) makes an investigation on 75 digital literate college students in regard with the implication of technology in day to day life. She discovered that 35 participants prefer embodied communication, 15 have ambivalent choice and 25 students prefer digital communication. From the 35 people who prefer face to face communication the author observes that half of them used the words related to "addiction", in various forms and some "distraction". Overall the most frequent words encountered were "technology", "computer", "Facebook", "school", "friends" and "online".

### ***Particularities of social media***

Social media is created to facilitate the communication among social groups, expressing your self-image and promoting your self-promotion. Facebook is used for self-presentation, while LinkedIn is more focused on the professional enhancement and promotion of each individual. Instagram is lifestyle focused, its primary use being for pictures and short videos, whereas Facebook, besides photos is mostly use for communication within the crew or private. The Instagram photo's purpose is not to present an activity, but is actually about how the photo looks like, how fun, how glamorous, how dangerous, how artistic, that is why also the pictures can be edited to have a more dramatic design.

Investigating the reason behind using social media platforms through college students in India, Tiwari (2017) finds out from his research that the use happens for the following reasons: sharing pictures and videos with their friends (6.4%) and making of new acquaintances (5.8%) have the biggest part in using social media. Other reasons in using the social platforms are socializing (4.14%), finding new information (3.16%), entertainment (2.24%) and being connected with family and friends (1.28%). In the same research we find out that 80% of young people use the social media since their teenage years, 68% of them using two or more than two

platforms, 62% of them being connected with more than 200 people on the online environment. Most of them didn't perceive any negative input on their personal lives.

Facebook came to life in 2004 as a service being for use for college students, having in the present over 1.7 billion users. Nowadays, the official figures of Facebook reported a decrease of the active users in the young target. The main characteristic of Facebook is interactivity, becoming a leading website that is in this domain. Trying to find out the activity rate within the young people target population from Madrid, studying 250 profiles for two weeks, Martinez discovered that young people are open to sharing information about themselves in the online medium, however their main activity being the observation. The researcher inspects the pictures uploaded, the status, and the interaction on the page, like comments, likes, shares links and friends added. The findings showed that young people are willing to post their age or hometown; however, they are skeptical to post data as telephone number, email addresses, sexual orientation and relationship status. It is noticed that the young people integrate also other platforms with Facebook, as Instagram or Spotify. The main leisure categories liked in Facebook are music, movies and television. The theme photos that were identified on Facebook were with their own person 20% and with their friends 23.5% of the total posted photos (Martinez, 2016).

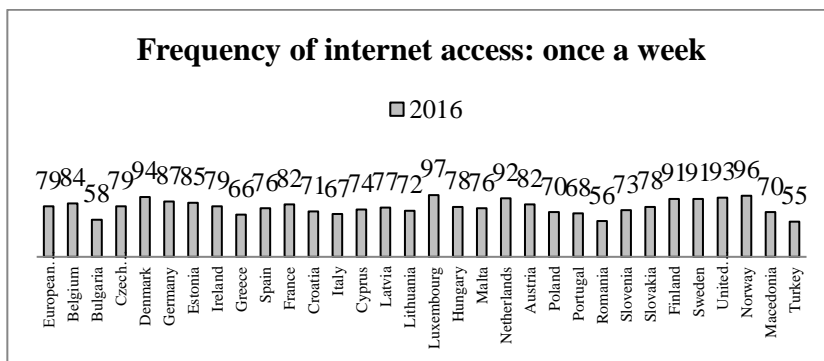
According to Facebrands, on 10 January 2017 in Romania were 9.6 million Facebook users, meaning 44.44% of the total population of the country and 85.44% of the internet users. The spread of users between women and men is equal, half of them being women, half of them men. The adoption rate of users on ages cluster are 15-24 years old, 93% having the biggest absorption in the population, followed by the cluster age 25-49 years old with 67%. The social media platforms develop by day adding new platforms, new activities you can make or options you can use. Instagram was launched in October 2010, having the option to upload photos into the platform, while also retouching them through different filter to hide the face imperfections or give a brighter color to the landscapes. In 2013 this platform had 150 million active users and more de 16 billion photos were shared. The pictures posted by people are mostly self-portraits with 24.2% and pictures with friends 22.4% (Hu, Manikonda, & Kambhampati, 2014).

LinkedIn facilitates the connections between employers and specialists, having over 130 million users worldwide, being the largest platform of this type of communication. The launching date is 2013; LinkedIn updates his profile on a regular basis. LinkedIn encourages users to highlight some skills that are their strengths, together with the recommendations from the people who have worked with them, to confirm that specific skills. These options are meant to increase your professional value on the market and your image at your current working place (Van Dijck, 2013).

### ***Romania and Europe - digital parameters***

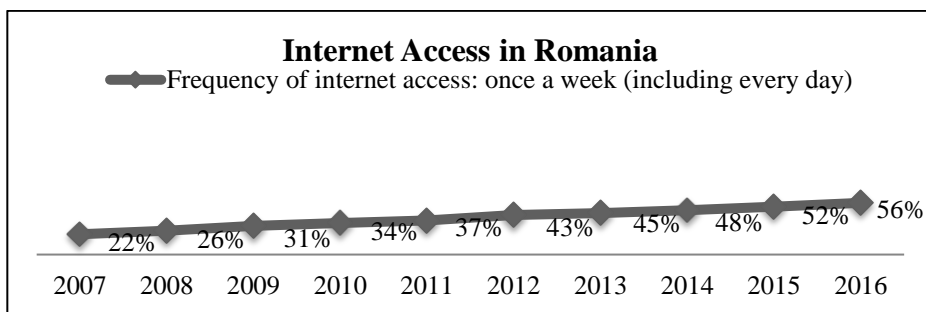
Having a general perspective of the internet utilization in 2016 in Europe, assessing 31 countries, we can deduct that the lowest utilization rate is in Turkey with only half of the population having a frequency of once per week internet access with 55%

of total population. On the other side, the highest number of people who are accessing the internet is encountered in Luxembourg, where almost everyone accesses the internet at least once per week, with 97%, followed by Norway with 96%. The average of internet usage in Europe is 78%, whereas in European Union (EU) is slightly higher with 79%. Examining the statistics noted, Romania has the second lowest internet access rate after Turkey, where only 56% of the population accesses the digital environment at least once per week.



**Figure 1. Frequency of internet access: once a week (including every day) in Europe in 2016, percentage (Eurostat, 2017)**

Investigating the data offered by EUROSTAT, the frequency of Internet weekly use in Romania have increased in the last 10 years, from 22% of individuals in all age categories to 56%. The weekly use includes also everyday use. The increase was constant during the last years, having 3-5% increase each year. The biggest increase overcoming the average happened in 2013 in comparison with the previous year with 6%.

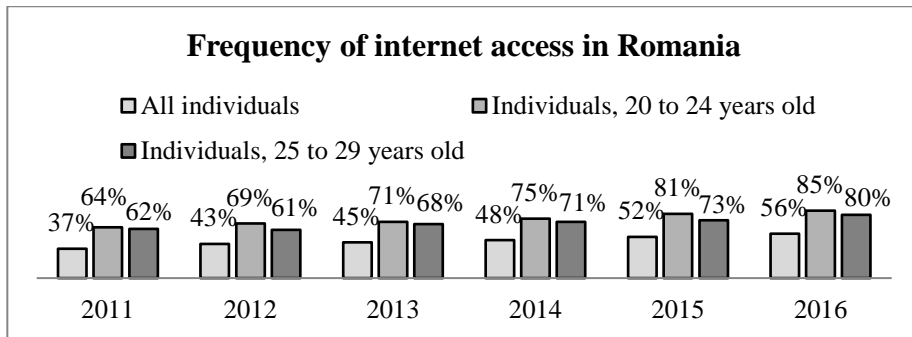


**Figure 2. Frequency of internet access: once a week (including every day) in Romania 2007-2016 (Eurostat, 2017)**

Analyzing our target cluster 20-24 years old, the digital use increase keeps the same trend as the whole population, experiencing a regular increase from year to year. In this cluster the increase year on year is bigger with 1% than the reference group, having a 4-6% increase each year. The exception to the trend happens in 2013 in comparison with 2012, where the increase of use of digital literacy is the smallest in



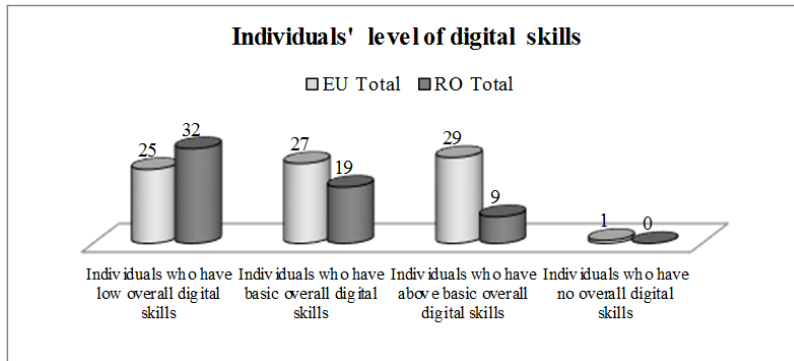
all years, with only 2%, from 69% to 71%. Considering the target cluster 25-29 years old, the digital evolution trend is the most irregular from all three reference groups. If the other two clusters had a constant evolution, the 25-29 years old cluster doesn't have a regular evolution. From the year 2011-2012, we noticed a decrease of internet use of 1%, which follows the year after with a big increase of 7%.



**Figure 3. Frequency of internet access: once a week (including every day) based on age category in Romania (Eurostat, 2017)**

To sum up, the internet usage increased in Romania in the last 10 years, from 22% to 56%, which has a constant year on year growth. The increase factors could be the following: more people have bought digital devices, the internet infrastructure has developed in the areas where there was no access to internet, the availability of the gadgets on the Romania market has increased, the end of the financial crisis, the overall financial situation of the country has improved, the minimum wage salary has increased from January 2007 when it was 390 lei to 1.450 lei in 2017, having an major increase of 372% (Guvernul României, 2017). Considering the usage of internet based on category batches, the 20-24 years old cluster and the all individuals cluster have a constant increase trend year on year, whereas the 25-29 years old cluster has an irregular evolution with decreases and irregular increases from 2% to 7%. The highest frequency of usage of internet once per week is given by 20-24 years old cluster. In Eurostat 2017 *Report of Level of Digital Skills* in European Union versus Romania, the highest levels of digital literacy indicator through digital skill use are the basic and above basic overall skills. The target array selected is 16-74 years old on which the research was made, classified in four areas of interest: information, communication, problem solving and content creation. It is assumed that individuals having performed certain activities have the corresponding skills; therefore, the indicator can be recognized as a proxy of the digital competences and skills of individuals (Eurostat, 2017).

Investigating the individual's digital skills level in 2016 in European Union and Romania, we can clearly observe that the Romanians are less skilled to use digital mediums than the EU average. The Romanian who has basic knowledge about how to use digital medium is 19% in comparison with the EU average 27%. Inspecting the above basic digital skills, Romania has the capacity of only 9% of the population. Considering the low overall skills, our percentage is higher than EU having 32% of the population.



**Figure 4. Individuals' level of digital skills in European Union versus Romania in 2016 (Eurostat, 2017)**

Considering the 20-24 years old target cluster, the people who have basic knowledge overcome the European average with 6%. Although this happens, the people who are more experienced in using technology in EU are with 33% over the Romanian average, also the people in Romania who have low digital skill are more numerous than in Europe with 18%. Having in sight the 25-29 years old cluster, the Romanian average of digital skills is much lower than the European average, the people who are low digitalized are more than half over the Europeans, following the trend of the total population. To sum up, the most skilled between the three age clusters inspected, both in European Union and Romania are the 20-24 years old group. Although this happens, the Romanian average is substantially lower than the European average. When Europe has most young people having above average skills, the Romanians are mostly in the category basic skills, even the 20-24 years old cluster. Overall, the difference between the European Union average and Romania average when talking about digital literacy is significantly lower on all age levels.

## Methodology

### Research questions

- Q1. What are the advantages of social media?
- Q2. What are the disadvantages of social media?
- Q3. How do your social groups influence the social media channels usage?
- Q4. How the technology does today influence their lives?
- Q5. What are the perceived risks in using the internet?
- Q6. What is the auto-perception in using gadgets?

### Research method

The research method used in this study is the focus group interviews, the qualitative research. The aim of this type of research is to know what people think about a certain object and also the reasons, how they feel, why they think this and what generated that type of feelings. This type of research aims for the participants to talk

freely about the topic, exchanging ideas and experiences and commenting their own and other's approaches. The collective in-depth interviews are meant to highlight the participants' feelings, attitudes, framework of understanding, being encouraged to generate their own questions on common experiences, to identify covey's cultural values, to provide insight into a social gathering (Kitzinger, 1995). The focus group was face to face and the period of time estimated is 40-50 minutes.

### ***Sample***

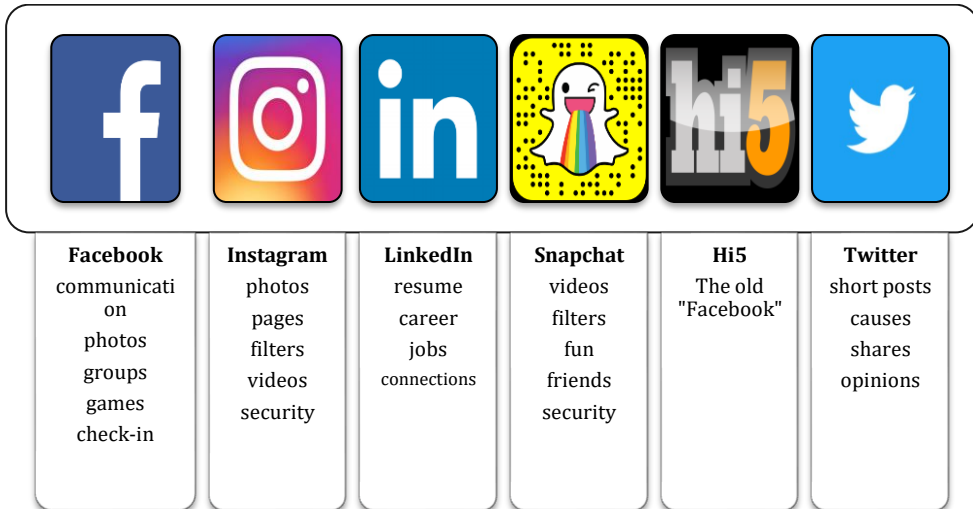
The current research has included three focus groups with participants with ages between 20-30 years old, from urban residence, with medium income, including both men and women, using internet at least once per week (including also daily use). The Focus Group 1 was an extended focus group with 30 participants with only 10 actives constantly during the interview, during the Qualitative Research module during Project Management MSC. The Focus Group 2 had 8 participants and the Focus Group 3 included 6 participants. All the participants have at least one social media account and one technological device with access on the Internet. Most of the participants are students and/or have a long-term work place in both public and private sector.

### **Data analysis**

#### ***The advantages of social media***

Our research showed that social media has a very important impact in the young adults' lives, being connected through the digital environment most of the time. The central reasons for using digital medium are mostly the same, in different methods or application, looking to satisfy the same needs: information, communication and entertainment. The targeted users can rationalize very clearly the advantages and disadvantages of social media nowadays, even when using them; they can differentiate the reality from the "improved reality" that social media can promote nowadays, according to them. Giving the age, they are not blinded by the virtual world, because they had a prior life without the digital medium, as children, so they can compare and always relate to that sense of reality that their experience gives them. The digital environment isn't their whole life, but the digital medium makes their life easier and more entertaining as a tool, the real things that life has to offer being for them in the offline world, like people, moments and feelings.

The social media mentioned during the study were Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Snapchat, Hi5 and Twitter. The most debated were Facebook and Instagram, very briefly LinkedIn and Snapchat, Twitter was only mentioned and Hi5 was mentioned to point out the transition of new media, stating its success and its fall when Facebook appeared in Romania, considering Facebook will have the same fate with the insertion of all new social media applications.



**Figure 5. Social media in Romania**

The young adults are very connected to the digital environment, recognizing its advantages, but also its disadvantages. The choice of using one application or the other is not related to the fact that they are not informed about this, but about the fact that the new application doesn't bring a plus to their lives by using it. The participants are very aware of the development of new social media platforms or technical applications, but they will use them if they feel like they have something to win from this. If they feel like the new application doesn't have such a big impact on their lives, they will stay with the current one. One participant is talking about not using Instagram in the favor of Facebook, saying that the development of all the new applications doesn't have an impact about how she uses social media, because the time to access them is very limited and there is no reason for her to migrate from Facebook to Instagram or Snapchat:

*I would not have time to use all the possible applications, so I'm trying to filter them somehow. (Flori, 23, FG 1)*

The first reason in using social media is the possibility given of *communication and interaction* with other people. For the communication point of view, the participants prefer Facebook and WhatsApp because of its capacity to create chats, to create cliques and small communities, it makes it easier to share information. The main associations the young adults talk to are the friends, family, faculty colleagues and work colleagues. The using of Facebook is so necessary in the daily lives of the participants, one of them saying the following:

*I do not see it as an application anymore; it seems to be a phone feature. (Cătălin, 24, FG 2)*

Most of the respondents said that the renewal of the connection with old friends and family is a great advantage of social media, that you cannot do living only in the offline environment. The surprise element that new media offers is a great deal because they can bring close old friends or give you the opportunity to see them grow up and

grow old the acquaintances that are leaving in a different country or different city than theirs, developing the “being close while being apart” element. To illustrate that, please see below some examples:

*Three years ago, I found my childhood friend I had not seen since I was 4 years old and it was very cool to see him again and it was a surprising thing that I couldn't do otherwise. He and his parents are in another city, we are in Bucharest, that is, it was very difficult, and so the parents reconnected. (Georgiana, 24, FG 2)*

When talking about the impact of the video call applications, most of the participants found it a really helpful resource because they can see their loved ones who are in a different city or to improve team work, as one of the participant states. The second important element in using new media is the need to stay up-to-date with all social, political, economic events or with the professional or personal trends. Most of the participants noted as a main reason of using new media is the need of *information*. Some of them are researching local news, some of them international conflicts, others just the fashion industry trends. To illustrate this argument, see below some examples for using social media to get the information about.

The third finding in relation with the advantages of using social media is the *entertainment* capacity of the new applications. Most of the participants mentioned about taking a short time to scroll through Facebook or follow the Instagram to take a break from the work or study process or as recreational method. The participants revealed that they follow health and sports influencers who can give insight to a healthier life, models and fashion designers or influencers who can give tips and tricks about what's in trend using Instagram and they play games for recreational purposes. The participants also use them to upload picture of themselves or their travels or achievements. For Instagram the fact that you can edit them is a plus.

*I like for example that you can make a virtual album of yourself and edit your pictures with different filters and what I follow are pages or profiles for fashion, sports, about what passions I have, it's a source of inspiration, let's say. (Maria, 24, FG 2)*

*On Instagram people post many pictures of their objects, with what they have in their hand, or what they use, or wear, clothing. More fashion. (Georgi, 24, FG 3)*

In relation we our study, the researcher Ferrari (2013) discovers that the main categories of digital literacy are information, communication, content-creation, safety and problem solving, most of them being revealed also in our study. Also, at the same time, Sabatino (2014) considers the digital literacy as the writing skills, composing social networks using digital medium, creating correspondence with other people using social media and translating the digital information as reading it. Both authors findings help strengthen our research outline and demonstrate these capacities in young adults with ages between 20 and 30 years old in Romania. For our participants the most important roles and advantage of social media is in communicating with the others from specific social formations, getting information about their interests, both personal and professional and get the time to entertain themselves by playing games or following different pages of interest.

### ***The disadvantages of social media***

The main characteristics of the new media are the freedom of information and the freedom of the expression rights. One of the disadvantages of social media expressed by the participants are too many information exposed, non-filtered, which can make it harder for the user to really get to the information that he is interested in. That is one of the reasons that people migrate from using one application to using another, where the advertising is less and the shared information is more relevant for the other users. For example, having such a crowded platform of people, Facebook started to make a business out of it, by the ads they are promoting. Businesses have to benefit from that specification, but the users are not so happy with it. The ads block the real information they are interested in and make them become frustrated.

*This thing is also on Facebook if you saw those ads "Buy a necklace with your name" and it appears to me all the time with Andreea or it always appears to me "the girls born in February are princesses" (Andreea C., 23, FG 2)*

*To stop the function to give Check-In (Maria, 24, FG 2)*

Another disadvantage related to the freedom of expression that they encountered is that low educated people are commenting or posting, giving opinions about some matters that they don't really understand. This makes the respondents feel that they are not using the right platform, they are not addressing to people on the same cultural level as them. Also, they find some posts annoying and irritating, so that this will make them not use some of the application as much as before.

*I would like not to see shared pictures like "Share this if you also believe in this" (Georgiana, 24, FG 2)*

Another disadvantage mentioned by the participants is the exposure of children to inappropriate news and pictures, as pornography, violence and uncensored images. The participants show a real concern on the subject of the children development through the world of social media, that they can have information that they are not ready to understand yet or should not understand at an early age. These kinds of materials will affect how they develop and turn into adults, how treat some aspects of their lives. Their concern is firstly on digital environment, because the censorship is so low, but also other mediums as television, movies, news. They think if the kids are seeing violence on a repeated note they will grow up thinking being violent it's normal.

*I consider that Facebook is allowing all sorts of pornographic material with an erotic message, and today children from the age of 7-8 get to use Facebook and I think they should live their childhood differently (Sergiu, 23, FG 2)*

*I saw an article about women giving birth to children and making pictures in the act they were giving birth. It was a very violent picture, that is, I was shocked as I am not even a mother yet. (Georgi, 24, FG 3)*

To conclude the second research question, the most important disadvantages perceived of our participants to focus group are the mass of information that is not always relevant to what they are interested in, the users' profile in some platforms as Facebook, where everyone can join no matter the credentials. Some people are not on the same level of education with them and it generates redundancy of posts that

provoke irritation. The third disadvantage seen is that the “taboo” information is not hidden anymore; it is there for everyone to see it. Giving the fact that many children are using the platforms, they are exposed to pornographic messages, rough images and violence, which can influence their development as people of society.

### ***The role of social groups***

In our data the role of social groups is very important in the decision to adopt one social media and not the other. Most of the participants declared that the coveys they belong to are important in using one technology, but mostly in the sense of utility and not social pressure as expected. Every member of their clique has, for instance, Facebook. The exchange of information is done more easily on Facebook because, if they post something or want some data, they can reach their target 90%. This makes the communication easier than writing to each member the same question. Even so, they know their audience and they are careful to what information they post to match how much they want to reveal to that public. Most of the participants mentioned about the groups you can create on Facebook, where you can get information about faculty, about exams, grades, online courses and others. This is one of the principal actions in using Facebook.

*For me lately is heavily used for college, even the professors made groups there.*

*(Maria, 24, FG 2)*

*(I use Facebook) to see the news, especially for college because we have a college group where we see the shared news. (Andreea, 22, FC 3)*

The migration from one application to another one, for example some participants are talking about the slow migration from Facebook to Instagram is wanted and more than that needed, because offers a fresh perspective of the communication and leisure mode. This migration happens because of the need of something new, not so commercialized with brands advertisement and unskilled users’ posts. From their perspective the users of the new adopted media are at least as skilled and have at least their social statute or even a much higher one. Having so many users, Facebook covers a lot of types, ages, levels of education people, so the participants feel that the Facebook users are not in their appurtenance or reference group anymore.

*I feel like Instagram doesn’t have so many spams (in comparison to Facebook).*

*(Maria, 24, FG 2)*

In the contrary of the assumption that the social gatherings influence you to use some technologies, some participants declared that they don’t like to use what everyone uses and they don’t want to migrate from Facebook to Instagram from example, because everyone is doing that; also, the reason for using Facebook is that they were the first in their clique to use it when it was launched in Romania and they liked that status of initiator.

*I joined Facebook because I was among the first to have it from my clique. I mean, I did it to communicate with people outside who told me that we can communicate better with Facebook and I have it since 2008. (Andreea, 24, FG 2)*

The reference groups have an important reason the participants identify themselves in using a certain social media, like Instagram and LinkedIn. On Instagram people are posting pictures from their luxurious trips abroad, their worry-free lifestyle and their luxurious owned objects, as a very expensive watch, car, clothing and others. When setting an objective in life you have to have a benchmark, I'm here and I want to go there. These reference groups help them see how their lives can turn out to be, if sticking with the plan. On LinkedIn people are showing off their work positions, their professional achievements and their successful and awarded projects.

*(People who use Instagram) I think there are two types of people: there are teens watching and trying to imitate, and then there are people with a lot of money who show off their accessories and their clothes and their luxury life. And these are very followed by millions of people. (Georgi, 24, FG 3)*

When debating what makes a social platform be so successful or not, the respondents tend to compare Facebook with Hi5, another important platform that died after Facebook appeared around 2010. They find as a reason the plurality of people using it and a specific crowd, that is searching for a more private platform, without any children or elderly, is not happy anymore with using it. When a platform becomes too popular, that represents the beginning's end. The platforms that have very targeted audience tend to have a longer lifetime, as LinkedIn for example. Nowadays, Facebook is becoming for some young adults too crowded, unfiltered, advertised and they are migrating to something simpler with audience of their type, for example from Facebook to Instagram.

*Facebook was very clean in the beginning, meaning it was not full of advertisements, invitations to games, all sorts of newsletters of this kind that are not part of my reading range, so to speak. Now HI5 is closed and Facebook has just begun to be slowly for everyone and everyone moves on Instagram, Twitter and others. (Andreea, 24, FG 2)*

Considering the third research question we can conclude that the social groups have influence in choosing what social media technologies the young adults use, firstly because of the utility and pragmatic reason, like transferring and getting information absolutely necessary for their daily activities and communicating more easily with the others. The second reason of using certain social platforms is that they feel integrated and that they talk to the right audience or that they get the news from the correct crew they want to follow. The third finding is that the participants they want to feel special when using an application, they like to feel they are the first when using a technology. The forth outline is that the participants want to be in touch with their reference groups, like fashion icons, travelers, sports and lifestyle gurus, big companies' CEOs and others. These are the main findings in relation to how the social groups influence young adults lives in using social media and the new technologies.

### ***The influence of technology***

The technology is meant to ease our lives. The participants revealed through technology they can pay online, order from online shops different products that they need, not wait on so long queues; they can find out easier about some social events that interest them and others. Talking about technology the participants think that



when using too much the technology, you forget how to live in the real world. They think the heavy usage of technology make other components of your life get smaller, the capacity to talk or express feelings gets lowered, your self-esteem can go down when seeing that other people have a “better” image than yours and you get frustrated by not being so wealthy as the next person. They reveal that seeing a skinnier person or a richer one doesn’t influence their self-esteem because they can see what is the reality and where the reality is “fixed”. The respondents say about themselves that they have the capacity to know that each person has its own strengths and weaknesses and how you perceive social media depends on your education and experiences in life. They say all of us are different and beautiful in our own way and we should use what we see to grown ourselves, not make ourselves little by comparison. They are very aware of the fact that what is shown on social media is controlled by us, so in an obvious matter, all the posted things will be positive, because the accounts are like our life story or resume and we want to share with others only the good things about ourselves.

*I do not compare myself to others, for example, why would I compare. It depends on you how you grow, your evolution, your experiences, how much you understand that we are different and it is not beneficial to compare with others, each one has his identity, his strengths, his weak points, we are human. We all have good parts and bad parts. (Maria, 24, FG 2)*

A recurrent theme in the discussion of how our lives are influenced by the exposure of technology is about how the children are influenced of the new media nowadays. Each of us has a brother, sister, cousin, nephew or we will have our own children in the future. For the young adults this subject seems to bring some strong opinions among the respondents. One of the important sectors in which the excessive usage of social media affects is the ability to communicate in real life, to express your feelings and your concerns, to be in touch with reality. They find as a good way to prevent this primary education made by family and school, to teach them what is good and wrong.

Also, as mentioned before, another concern is the exposure to violence, erotic content, inappropriate games, violent images or videos, death and others. In this moment a very popular trend with Blue Whale game is happening. Kids enter the game and they have some challenges to accomplish in the game. The first dares are anything out of the common, but when the game is advancing, the challenges are exposing them to hurting themselves, even put their lives in danger. Several children have died when playing this game which is a real worry.

*I do not know how to say that in my case the situation is positive because I have my 14-year-old sister who really has access to much information. But intervening, I try making her not to be disoriented or something. I explain it so she can understand what she sees there. (Georgi, 24, FG 3)*

*I don’t know the term “bullied” in Romanian. There are many studies done saying that many kids can play games with others on Facebook, post things that are not true to make viral videos and this to affect them. Even that game, The Blue Whale, for which very many children have died, was also on the news the other day. (Georgiana, 24, FG 2)*

To conclude the fourth research question, the technology has in the opinion of the respondents both a positive and negative impact on our lives, depending on how each of us perceives it. The technology has the aim to help us make our daily lives easier to communicate, buy objects and find out news. On the other hand, this access to people's lives can lower the self-esteem and create demotivation for some people. This depends on each person's attitude in regards with what they are observing. The second negative outcome for the technology development is that the children cannot be protected from the information they are exposed to and they are not developing the social skills they should in the offline medium, also being manipulated through some of the applications that can lead to even their death.

### ***The risks perception***

The risks that our participants found are identity stealing, when someone can take your credentials and use your identity. Not all the participants see it as a risk, considering our data is not very private, using our credentials everywhere, when you go to the doctor or the bank has your identification code, given when making an account.

*Think about it, we offer our personal credential at any corner, when you want to make a credit, when you want to make a contract with a supplier of any type.*  
(Cătălin, 24, FG 2)

Only one participant from all collective interviews confirmed that she took the time to secure her Facebook page, making it private to whom can find her profile and what information are exposed to the public or her friends. Another risk that they find is exposing themselves through different pictures and posts to have a bad impact on their professional image in the future. Yet again, other respondents think that if you are honest with your past mistakes, this is not such a tragic risk. A risk mentioned in the research is the information security; hackers can find out your bank account and draw money from it, another participant gives a feedback that through her experience it never happens to her, one of her tasks is the online payment. The health risk was also mentioned, that the digital devices emanate radiation, for which is not safe to have the around while sleeping. The opinion about this risk was not shared by everyone, some of the participants saying they have no sleeping problems so far while the phone is next to them. Also, the lack of intimacy and privacy is mentioned by the participants, stating that the possibility to make a post viral diminished the intimacy. On the other hand, other participants don't agree with this statement, saying that you have to assume what you decide to post online.

*I see high privacy risks* (Doinița, 27, FG 1)

*Yes, we don't have privacy anymore. Once you post something on the Internet, even if you just post it for your friends, everybody can see it.* (George, 29, FG 1)

*But it's your choice if you want to share it or not to share it.* (Irina, 24, FG 1)

Overall, the attendants to the collective interviews didn't consider that there are such drastic risks in using technology in our daily lives. They mentioned some possible risks, but not being convinced that those are real or could happen easily for them. The question was like a surprise because they didn't take the time prior to analyze

these situations that may occur, they don't know anyone closed to them exposed to that risks so I don't think they are really aware what the cyberspace can trigger.

My assessment is that not communicating enough about risks through media, not being exposed to this kind of situations, made the participants never think of them. When first asked the question, they tend to say they see no risks, but inspecting more the subject they were able to name some, which makes me consider they didn't think about this subject previously. Even though some of the participants found some things they seem risky to them, not all of them shared this opinion. One of the members had a revelation during the investigation, confirming my conclusion, that they are not enough informed about the risks and never considered them:

*Maybe we are not aware that we are at risk. (George, 28, FG 3)*

### ***Digital literacy auto-perception***

When using a digital device, the respondents look for it to have the needed characteristics, so that their usage to be flawless and to make their lives easier. They are looking for their device to be relatively new, but they don't actually care if it's the newest, the most expensive or the best brand. They are basing their options on what feels right for them and what makes their life improve. Even faced with the situation of not knowing how to perform some actions using a certain gadget, they are not ashamed or frustrated, but willing to learn and develop their skills. They think that the technology is very accessible to everyone in their crew, so having a gadget is not an anomaly, no matter what type of gadget it is. Even having the most loved brand, for example Apple, even this doesn't make them feel special because a big part of their community has one.

*Yes, I have it, ok, I want it to be as modern as possible, to meet the requirements, but I never exaggerate. And if anyone says "Don't you know? Do not you have that application?", I say yes, and I learn, that is not a mistake, it's not a shame to learn new things. (Georgiana, 24, FG 2)*

*That's I say everyone has access to a good phone like iPhone. (Georgi, 24, FG 3)*

## **Discussion**

Our preliminary finding suggests social media play an important role in young people's daily lives for communication within appurtenance crew, being and staying informed with respect to professional matters, daily news or personal passions and for leisure and spare time, while following influences or pages to help develop their hobbies or playing games. Moreover, with regard to the disadvantages social media has in their lives, the participants mentioned the unfiltered information with commercials, announcements, ads that are not in their area of interest which fill their profiles while navigating. Another disadvantage they see is the target audience of some social media networks, like Facebook for example, are not complying with the target they would like to communicate to, being more different as the network extends. In addition, they feel like the content is not censored, so that this would affect the readers, especially the children who are not supposed to see pornographic message or violence.

Furthermore, our data showed that the young adults are influenced when using a certain type of technology or social media platform. The main reason in using it is the practical reason, to communicate more efficiently or to share data more easily, because they like some features of the platforms, for example to apply filters to the photos or to create group conversations. Another one is the fact that they can fall apart of a crew and they can share to the adequate audience the content they create. Another important outcome is that they keep a continuous connection with their reference groups like fashion, travel, sport and other interests they may have.

With respect to the influence of the technology in the participants' everyday lives, they expressed both positive and negative impact. They found a great plus the capacity of communicating and reaching out to people anytime, anywhere and the fact that some daily errands are easier through the existing of technology. You can do things online that were not possible otherwise, like paying bills or buying gadgets, clothing, food or finding the news in a second from its happening. A negative impact the participants to the study consider to be the decrease of self-esteem when comparing us to others, by how they look like on social media, this comparison presumably being incorrect, because now you can edit your features, erase the imperfections and filter the images. Another downside is that they don't have the correct information and they cannot be protected by what is posted on the Internet or get addicted to some application, to the detriment of real life communication and relationships.

In regards to the perceived risks, the study didn't show any trend, each participant having a different idea about what are the risks that we are exposing to when using digital environment. There was not "one voice" on the risks matter, concluding that the young adults have not been part of any negative process when using technologies and never had a deeply thought or understanding about what the potential risks can be and how they can be counteracted. When one of the participants said he doesn't see any risks for himself, another had a revelation saying that maybe they are, but they are not aware of actually being at risk. This subject was not very approached on the media used by young adults and never being exposed to these types of cases. When talking about the auto-perception in using gadgets, the participants state that the usage of technical objects is mostly based on their practical capacity and being as much as possible in the trends. They don't worry if someone can perceive them as not so experienced in using gadgets, having an open attitude towards the subject, being willing to learn how to be more experienced and taking the change to develop their digital skills whenever it's possible.

A very recurrent subject, which was not firstly meant to be explored, was the reference to how children develop in the digitalized world. It was talked about how the social media influences us today, what are the risks and also what do you think when people see you using technology. For the young adults this was a poignant interest, having it repeating in all focus-groups, and on multiple of the questions. They see a danger for the less experienced users to perceive in a positive manner all that technology has to offer and to filter the information. Most of the participants were in direct connection to a child or adolescent, but even the ones who were not seemed very affected about the lack of security of information, maybe thinking about

them as future parents of a child born in the digital era. They consider that their childhood was lived in the real world, so now they have the sense of what's real and how to handle the virtual because of it.

Based on the findings, it can be concluded that most participants evaluate themselves as being digital literate and using technology for its utility, even if we talk about the gadget, the browsers or the platforms. They are not in the stage of doing something to look cool to others, but being practical, time efficient and developing themselves and their digital skills. Most of their reasoning for using a certain technology is to be informed, to communicate more efficient and to entertain themselves. The participants see themselves as having the reality sense even when using the new media, the last one being used to improve their lives, not to be their lives, not to live in it. For them there are really important what's happening in the real life and the connections, expressing emotions and communicating face-to-face.

### ***Research limits***

The approached type of research, qualitative, is very helpful giving insight about the phenomenon of digital literacy among the young adults. Even so, the results cannot be considered as valid for the whole targeted population, but it can provide quality information about the theme. Also, the environmental noises could limit their answer rate of some questions. Another limit is that they may not say all their thinking from fear to be judged by the others, being a group discussion. Even if this is a potential limit, the participants were very strongly opinionated and didn't fear to have counter-arguments to the debated subjects. The groups were homogenous, the participants having the same level of education, age and income in order to reduce the biases, so everyone can feel they can talk freely and they are not inferior or less experienced than the other.

### **Conclusions**

The research results showed that social media and technology play an important role in the participant's lives, using it to increase communication efficiency, to stay informed or for entertainment reasons. The argument in choosing the social media platforms are based on necessity, on the special features of the platforms and also the typology of users. The participants consider that technology has a positive impact, as well as a negative one. The participants consider new media not to have significant risks on their personal or professional lives, when using a platform assuming all the consequences of using it, acknowledging the fact that they didn't have an introspection about this matter before. The participants auto-perceive themselves as being experienced in using technology, having the same skill level as they peer and showed an open attitude towards learning new things and not being embarrassed of using some features improperly. An interesting finding was the concern of the social media and other media's impact on children's lives and growth into adults, the exposure to improper content and the unfiltered messages they have contact with.

Talking about future directions, I consider that the subject has a broad range of areas that can be analyzed in the digital literacy field. This study was meant to have an insight about how young adults perceive themselves in the digitalized environment and how skilled they perceive to be. For the future, I would continue with an experiment to compare their perception and their actual skill level. Another direction I would consider is to analyze how the self-esteem influences their perception about their digital skills, through experimental method, with the testing of the skill level and the self-esteem level. Moreover, the research can be extended on how young parents perceive the new media effects on their children's development or how adolescents perceive the social media effects in their lives, conducting also a qualitative study through focus groups or in-depth interviews.

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